

REPATRIATING FTFs FROM SYRIA

LEARNING FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

Four countries in the Western Balkan region (Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Montenegro) are in the top ten countries with the most foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) per capita. The political will to repatriate FTFs remains strong, at least in the Western Balkans, despite delays in 2020 due to COVID-19. In other parts of the world, especially high-income countries, political will to repatriate is considerably lower. COVID-19 has further constrained nations in their efforts to repatriate law-abiding citizens, which is less controversial than FTF families. The Western Balkans have recently resumed repatriations. Groups of nineteen, eleven, and 23 citizens have returned to Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, respectively, illustrating how repatriation can be done. Their commitment, leadership, and experience are valuable for governments around the world. These governments pursued repatriations largely out of moral obligation to bring back suffering women and children and were aided by donor support from the global west. Men have also been repatriated, and some returned voluntarily, however, the process typically involves judicial proceeding and incarceration.

This policy note provides operational recommendations to move forward with repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of returnees based building on lessons from repatriations in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

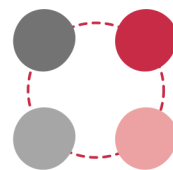
For more, see: Chiara Dedeken and Kevin Osborne, [*Repatriating FTFs from Syria: Learning from the Western Balkans*](#). RESOLVE Network, 2021.



In the Western Balkans, Kosovo has been leading in repatriating and reintegrating FTFs. It is the first Western Balkan country to put in place the legal and institutional requirements to address repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration, resulting in the repatriation of 110 FTFs.



Recently, Albania and North Macedonia have also started the repatriation process. It is estimated that 86 Kosovars, 50 Albanians, 130 Bosnians, and 17 North Macedonians remain in Syrian camps.



With minimal differences, the repatriation process in the Western Balkan countries has consisted of four phases: 1) preparation; 2) logistics; 3) rehabilitation; 4) reintegration and resocialization.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For national governments

- **Repatriate FTFs, their families, and children from camps in northeast Syria.** The Kosovo example illustrates that repatriation has not led to an increase in violent extremism and returnees can successfully reintegrate. Western Balkan governments have proven experience in the returns and the RRR process and are on call to share.
- **The importance of preparing an enabling environment cannot be overstated.** Invest in preparing receiving communities, frontline workers, and processes through well-developed action plans, SOPs, and training.
- **Centralize coordination of different stakeholders to avoid overlap and** foster sustainable programming.
- **Identify opportunities to work with local CSOs that have the resources,** expertise, knowledge, and access to local communities. Include CSOs in the RRR process of returnees. Our experience in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia illustrates that Memorandums of Understanding between governments and CSOs can improve cooperation in all phases of RRR programs.

For donors and policymakers

- **Shift funding from hard security to RRR and prevention.**
- **Fund capacity strengthening of national and local government** institutions through local CSOs.
- **Coordinate with national and local government institutions to assess** the needs of returning FTFs and their families.
- **Provide long-term funding: more than 60 months.**
- **Provide equal support and opportunities to returning FTFs and** receiving communities to prevent stigmatization.

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