

THE REINTEGRATION IMPERATIVE

CHILD RETURNEES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Since 2012, 1,070 nationals of Western Balkan countries traveled to live and fight in territories controlled by terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. Of those, about 200 were minors at the time of departure. Over the years, many more children were born to Western Balkans nationals in the Syrian and Iraqi conflict theater. As of end-2019, some 485 individuals had returned home, making the Western Balkans the region with the highest concentration of returnees from Syria and Iraq in Europe. Hundreds more, mostly minors, remain trapped in precarious conditions in Syria, with uncertain prospects of repatriation. Numerous countries are grappling with what to do with nationals that traveled to live and fight in the so-called Islamic State (IS) "caliphate." However, experience in and understanding of what facilitates effective engagement with returnees from Syria, particularly child returnees, is at its early stages. This Policy Note provides recommendations on ways to approach the rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of child returnees in the Western Balkans, combining emerging good practices with the guiding principles of conventions, treaties, and protocols focused on the rights of children.

For more, see: Adrian. Shtuni, [*The Reintegration Imperative: Child Returnees in the Western Balkans*](#), *The RESOLVE Network*, 2020.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



Adopt a proactive and inclusive multi-agency approach, committing to a long-term R&R strategy. Government authorities should proactively invest in multi-agency partnerships and programs that are flexible, adequately funded, and inclusive, integrating civil society early in the process. International donors and specialized agencies should provide additional funding and capacity development efforts to address resource and expertise shortages.



Design engagement protocols tailored to returning minors, make them public and decentralize the implementation process wherever possible. An engagement approach designed around the particular needs of minors is likely to facilitate a more effective psychosocial recovery and accelerated reintegration of child returnees. The publication of these guidelines would bring added transparency, accountability, and support to the process.



Frame and approach R&R of child returnees through an education lens.

Due to national security considerations, some aspects of the repatriation and R&R of returnees, especially for adults, are inevitably tied to law enforcement and criminal justice. However, for children, education and vocational training are some of the most important R&R aspects, offering a path to a new future, as in reintegration programs for child soldiers.



Support measures that prioritize child returnees' best interest and fastest

reasonable R&R into mainstream society. Judicial institutions should act in compliance with international law and applicable juvenile justice standards. In cases when prosecution of children under 18 years of age is warranted, alternatives to pretrial detention and incarceration should be considered in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.



Perform risk and needs assessments to evaluate child returnee's mental

well-being and level of trauma before providing psychosocial support tailored to individual needs. Child returnees have been exposed to acts of extreme violence and, in some cases, may have suffered extreme violence firsthand. In other cases, they may have participated in the commission of violent extremist acts. Agencies in charge of public health should administer thorough and recurring assessments to evaluate each case separately.



Administer psychometric tests to evaluate child returnees' intellectual

development to ensure accurate placement in the educational system and provide academic assistance as needed. These efforts will likely be more effective if the children are not institutionalized but receive academic training and psychological assistance at home, possibly by mobile teams of experts. This can help avoid feelings of inadequacy, stigma, and potential marginalization until returnees are more comfortable with the new social environment.

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