

THE REINTEGRATION IMPERATIVE CHILD RETURNEES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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“Emerging research and programming on returnees from Syria and Iraq are only beginning to address the challenge of minor returnees.”

FAST FACTS

- Overall, an estimated 500 foreign fighters and family members from the Western Balkans remain in Syria and Iraq.
- Alleged male fighters comprise about one-third of individuals from the Western Balkans remaining in Syria. Children comprise about two-thirds and women a small minority.
- The current youthful demographic of foreigners linked to the Syrian conflict demands proactive action, special consideration of age and gender, and due adjustments to policy responses in anticipation of their repatriation.

Context

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.¹ Hundreds more, mostly minors, remain trapped in precarious

¹ NOTE: For more data and a detailed assessment of the current state of the Western Balkans contingent of foreign fighters and their family members, see: Adrian Shtuni, “Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications, Combating Terrorism,” *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 7 (August 13, 2019):18-24, <https://ctc.usma.edu/western-balkans-foreign-fighters-homegrown-jihadis-trends-implications/>.

conditions in Syria, with uncertain prospects of repatriation.² 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.

Detention Camps, Initial Repatriations, & Ongoing Challenges

Following the collapse of IS’s physical “caliphate,” tens of thousands of surrendering fighters and family members are being held in overcrowded Kurdish detention facilities and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. The Al-Hol camp, the largest holding family members of IS fighters, sheltered 68,823 persons in August 2019³—it was originally designed to accommodate about seven times less people.⁴ A recent United Nations Human Rights Council report described the conditions in Al-Hol as “deplorable and inhumane.”⁵ Of the total Al-Hol population, about 7,000 are foreign minors and about 3,000 are foreign women from about 50 countries⁶—including hundreds from the Western Balkans.

Overall, an estimated 500 foreign fighters and family members from the Western Balkans remain in Syria and Iraq. Alleged male fighters comprise about one-third of this Western Balkans contingent, while children comprise about two-thirds and women a small minority. Many of these fighters and family members want to return to their home countries.

So far, many governments have been reluctant to repatriate their citizens due to technical and legal difficulties, political considerations, and security concerns.⁷ European countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Belgium have opted to repatriate—almost exclusively—only a few orphaned children of their nationals who joined IS. Kosovo is one of a few countries in Europe, thus far, to have accepted the group repatriation of 110 nationals, over two-thirds (74) of whom are children, including those born to at least one of its citizens in Syria and Iraq.⁸ In late

2 Ibid.

3 “Syrian Arab Republic: North East Syria: Al Hol Camp,” OCHA, August 1, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Al-Hol-Snapshot-SitRip-040819.pdf>.

4 Keerthana Annamaneni, “For ISIS Children, Returning Home to Europe Meets Resistance,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/15/world/europe/isis-children-belgium.html>.

5 United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria, *Escalating Violence and Waves of Displacement Continue to Torment Civilians during Eighth Year of Syrian Conflict* (Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=24972&LangID=E>.

6 Ibid.

7 Michael Birnbaum, “Months after the Fall of ISIS, Europe Has Done Little to Take Back Its Fighters,” *The Washington Post*, June 20, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/after-caliphate-collapsed-europe-has-done-little-to-take-back-those-who-joined-isis/2019/06/20/4bab9cc2-8bc4-11e9-b6f4-033356502dce_story.html.

8 Fatos Bytyci, “Kosovo Brings Back Fighters, Families of Jihadists from Syria,” *Reuters*, April 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-syria/kosovo-brings-back-fighters-families-of-jihadists-from-syria-idUSKCN1RW003>.

December 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina also repatriated 25 of its citizens, 12 of whom were children.⁹ While 25 repatriated Bosnian citizens account for only one-tenth of the total number of Bosnian nationals in Syrian camps—estimated to be 260 according to official sources¹⁰—their repatriation is of significant importance. The willingness of Kosovo and Bosnia, two otherwise small and modestly-resourced countries, to facilitate the return of their citizens, especially the children, signals that political will to address this thorny issue in the Western Balkans can be mustered, despite numerous objective difficulties.

Nevertheless, other countries in the region have largely shown reluctance or lack plans to take back their nationals. So far, no other Western Balkans country has made public any repatriation plan or timeline. A clear strategy to address this complex challenge remains elusive. The Kurdish makeshift camps and prisons will not provide a long-term solution to this pressing issue, especially considering that the contingent of foreigners held there is dominated by vulnerable minors subjected to hardships conducive to radicalization.¹¹ The current youthful demographic of foreigners linked to the Syrian conflict demands proactive action, special consideration of age and gender, and due adjustments to policy responses in anticipation of their repatriation. This is particularly so in the Western Balkans, which has a higher number of returnees or those likely to be repatriated, and much less in terms of resources, capacities, and expertise available to deal with them effectively compared to most other European states.

Recommendations

Emerging research and programming on returnees from Syria and Iraq are only beginning to address the challenge of minor returnees. Tailored programs with attention to age and gender factors remain rare. Although the experience of effective engagement with child returnees from Syria and Iraq is at its early stages, initial good practices from R&R efforts are gradually emerging.¹² Useful research and good practices from rehabilitation work with child soldiers or minors exposed to war-related trauma can also inform effective policy responses to address the R&R of child returnees in the Western Balkans, in accordance with guiding conventions, treaties, and protocols that delineate the rights of children.

Proactive, transparent, & inclusive policy making

- **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

9 “Authorities Say 25 Bosnians Sent Home from Camps in Syria,” *AP News*, December 19, 2019, <https://apnews.com/850b5ffb-b045c65f1dfbbce52c9ff182>.

10 “Bosnia: Citizens Who Fought for IS in Syria Can Return,” *AP News*, November 11, 2019, <https://apnews.com/818776caf4a44b6f97d8eb5c285ace00>.

11 United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/42/51 (New York: United Nations General Assembly, 2019), https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_hrc_42_51.pdf.

12 For more, see the “Suggested Further Reading, by topic” at the end of this Policy Note.

provide additional funding and capacity development efforts to address resource and expertise shortages. With over 400 children and 150 women repatriated from Syria and Iraq¹³ to date, Kazakhstan's efforts may provide insights on such an approach. By the end of 2019 it had set up 17 regional reception and rehabilitation centers¹⁴ to house returnees for unrestricted periods of time, depending on individual needs and de-radicalization progress.¹⁵ The centers provide not only housing services but also medical and psychological treatment, education, legal assistance, art therapy, and job training.¹⁶ The curriculum was designed with the participation of a group of NGOs, while social workers and government agencies coordinate the program implementation.¹⁷

- **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. A decentralized implementation approach led by local authorities and NGOs is likely to foster increased engagement and ownership of the R&R process at the community level. Despite having repatriated only 17 minors¹⁸, mainly orphans, as of early 2020, France designed and published detailed guidelines and modalities for treating repatriated French and foreign minors returning from Syria and Iraq in early 2017.¹⁹ The strategic document emphasizes the leading role of local authorities and regional offices and is inclusive of a scheme for coordination and information sharing among agencies responsible for its implementation.

- **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.²⁰

13 "Zhusan Operation: 595 Kazakhstanis Repatriated from Syria," *Kazinform International News Agency*, February 6, 2020, https://www.inform.kz/en/zhusan-operation-595-kazakhstanis-repatriated-from-syria_a3611674.

14 Stevan Weine "Rehabilitating the Islamic State's Women and Children Returnees in Kazakhstan," *Just Security*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.justsecurity.org/67694/rehabilitating-the-islamic-states-women-and-children-returnees-in-kazakhstan/>.

15 "39 Families Have Been Returned Back from Syria to Kazakhstan," *Kazakhstan Today*, November 18, 2019, https://www.kt.kz/eng/international_affair/39_families_have_been_returned_back_from_syria_to_kazakhstan_1153667282.html.

16 Ksenia Bondal, "Kazakhstan Rehabilitating Children Recently Returned from Syria, Iraq," *Caravanserai*, January 8, 2019, http://central.asia-ews.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/01/08/feature-01.

17 Andrew E. Kramer, "Kazakhstan Welcomes Women Back from the Islamic State, Warily," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/world/europe/kazakhstan-women-islamic-state-deradicalization.html>.

18 Benjamin Sportouch and Charles Deluermoz, "Enfants de jihadistes : 'Nous en avons rapatrié 17' en France, annonce Le Drian sur RTL," *RTL*, February 2, 2020, <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/politique/enfants-de-jihadistes-nous-en-avons-rapatrie-17-en-france-annonce-le-drian-sur-rtl-7800014980>.

19 Prime Minister's Office of the Government of France, *Instruction relative à la prise en charge des mineurs à leur retour de zone irako-syrienne*, Circular No. 5923/SG (Paris: Government of France, March 2017), http://circulaires.legifrance.gouv.fr/pdf/2017/03/cir_41965.pdf.

20 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers* (New York: United Nations Secretariat, 2018), <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/>

Given this, the respective Ministries of Education of each Western Balkan country, for example, may be better positioned and more suitable than the Ministries of Interior Affairs when it comes to leading and coordinating the rehabilitation of children involved in violent extremist conflict. The choice of ministry is important as it reflects and communicates to the public the government's overall engagement mindset. In Kazakhstan, the government decided to place the Ministry of Education in charge of the R&R program. Their experience may provide some useful insights in this regard.²¹

Protect & support the child

- **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.²² The General Assembly resolution 70/291, on the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review, addresses this particular matter, and should be consulted when designing appropriate legal mechanisms.²³
- **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.²⁴ As some of the older child returnees have likely been subjected to violent extremist indoctrination and training while in Syria and Iraq, authorities should assess their potential risk and provide specialized care to address their indoctrination and training before transitioning them into the public educational environment. In late April 2019, Kosovo repatriated 74 minors from Syria. By September, all school-aged children among those returnees were

[Reintegration-brochure-layout.pdf](#); Skënder Perteshi and Ramadan Ilazi, *Unpacking Kosovo's Response to Returnees from the War Zones in Syria and Iraq* (Pristina: Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, 2020), http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/violent-extremism-eng_978757.pdf.

21 Weine, "Rehabilitating the Islamic State's Women and Children Returnees in Kazakhstan."

22 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (New York: United Nations General Assembly, 1989), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>; United Nations Office of Counter-terrorism (UNCCT), *Children Affected by the Foreign-fighter Phenomenon: Ensuring a Child Rights-based Approach* (New York: UNCCT, 2019), https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/ftf_handbook_web_reduced.pdf.

23 United Nations General Assembly, 70th Session, "Resolution 70/291 [The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review]" (A/RES/70/291) 1 July 2016, <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/news/document/a-res-70-291-the-united-nations-global-counter-terrorism-strategy-review/>.

24 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Non-custodial Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism A Guidebook for Policymakers and Practitioners in South-Eastern Europe* (Vienna, OSCE, 2020), <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/444838?download=true>.

ready to start school.²⁵ Given that their effective inclusion into mainstream society is the end goal of reintegration efforts, enrollment of child returnees is a positive step. Yet, it is unclear how much tailored psychological and academic support they received before enrolling in public schools a few months after their return.

- **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. In France, for example, after the prosecutor and juvenile judge assess the case of any child returnee, the minors receive somatic and psychological examination under social services care. Decisions on schooling are made in consultation between the Academic Director of the National Education Services, educational institutions, and practitioners implementing and monitoring R&R efforts.²⁶

Conclusion

Ultimately the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of child returnees will require the adoption of a holistic psychosocial support strategy, addressing all aspects of their social interaction and reintegration in the home, school, and community setting. As such, each child returnee's progress in the R&R path will be heavily affected by the worldview and attitude of the parents and relatives living with them. Thus, programs should provide wider support to address issues of radicalization to violence and of trauma within the whole family. Also, teachers and other practitioners involved in child returnees' education and rehabilitation process should receive trauma-awareness training and information on the process of radicalization, including on how to respond to signs of concerning behavior and where to request further support. With improved knowledge, skills, and tools to address the concerns of receiving communities and realities of returnee experiences, Western Balkan states can facilitate a smoother and safer transition of returnees into mainstream society.

25 Taulant Qenaj, "Fëmijët e Kthyer Nga Siria, Sërish Në Shkollë," *Radio Evropa e Lirë*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/femijet-e-kthyer-nga-siria-shkollim-/30130050.html>.

26 The Prime Minister's Office of the Government of France, *Instruction relative à la prise en charge des mineurs à leur retour de zone irako-syrienne*, Circular No. 5923/SG.

Suggested Further Readings, by topic

On Child Recruitment and Exploitation by Terrorists

Bloom, Mia, with John Horgan. *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System*. Vienna: UNODC, 2017. https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf.

On Children Associated with Terrorist Organizations in Syria and Iraq

Cook, Joana, and Gina Valle. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate." *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (July 2019): 30-45. (Jul 2019) <https://ctc.usma.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>.

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Meines, Marije, Merel Molenkamp, Omar Ramadan, and Magnus Ranstorp. *RAN Manual: Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their Families*. Amsterdam: Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Centre of Excellence, 2017. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf.

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On Challenges Faced by Practitioners Working with Child Returnees

Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). *Child Returnees from Conflict Zones*. Amsterdam: RAN Centre of Excellence, 2016. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_child_returnees_from_conflict_zones_112016_en.pdf

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