

REPATRIATING FTFS FROM SYRIA: LEARNING FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

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WESTERN BALKANS SERIES

“Failing to repatriate nationals is not only a moral and human rights issue but also fuels resentment of FTFS toward their home country.”

FAST FACTS

- At the national level, ensuring that policies and legal procedures are in place is key to the return process.
- Our consultations with stakeholders suggest that FTFS and their family members were misinformed about treatment upon return, were scared by recruiters, or did not want to face prison.
- A lack of capacity and experience has been a significant challenge in rehabilitation, reintegration, and resocialization (RRR) programing.
- Focusing on an enabling environment for reintegration is an area where the credibility of local organizations has been instrumental to address challenges around stigmatization of returnees, their families, and the communities boys, girls, women, and men are reintegrated into.

Context

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.¹ 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

¹ Richard Florida, “The Geography of Foreign ISIS Fighters,” Bloomberg CityLab, August 10, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-08-10/the-geography-of-foreign-isis-fighters>.

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.² Men have also been repatriated, and some returned voluntarily, however, the process typically involves judicial proceeding and incarceration.

Based on discussions with government officials and security officers in the Western Balkans as well as international experts and donors, 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. It urges governments globally to double down on repatriation efforts and to call on experience from governments in the Balkans to bring back their FTFs now. The recommendations in this policy note are relevant to any country where political will to repatriate FTFs can be generated.

Relevance to policy and practice

The need for speedy repatriation

Arguments against repatriation have often pointed to security risks associated with rehabilitating and reintegrating FTFs and their family members. Experts, however, have highlighted the larger security risk of countries failing to repatriate nationals.³ The current situation in Afghanistan and the knowledge that many FTFs become career foreign fighters⁴ underlines this point. Camps are a bastion for radicalization to violence, providing opportunities for recruiters of different conflicts and causes to recruit highly skilled fighters. Failing to repatriate nationals is not only a moral and human rights issue but also fuels resentment of FTFs toward their home country.⁵

Despite calls by the United Nations to repatriate nationals, affected countries have not adopted a unified response.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸

2 See, for example: Liesbeth Van Der Heide and Audrey Alexander, “Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors” *Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point*, June, 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Homecoming.pdf>.

3 See, for example: Teuta Avdimetaj and Julie Coleman, “What EU Member States can learn from Kosovo’s experience in repatriating former foreign fighters and their families,” Clingendael Institute, May 2020, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Policy_Brief_Kosovo_experience_repatriating_former_foreign_fighters_May_2020.pdf.

4 Chelsea Daymon, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, and David Malet, *Career Foreign Fighters: Expertise Transmission Across Insurgencies* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.37805/ogrr2020.1.cff>.

5 Ibid

6 United Nations, “Key principles for the protection, repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children with links to united nations listed terrorist groups,” April 2019, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/key_principles-april_2019.pdf.

7 Republic of Kosovo Ministry of Justice, “Minster Tahiri: A second chance for life for children- suspects shall face justice,” April 20, 2019, <https://md.rks-gov.net/page.aspx?id=2,15,2000>.

8 Based on GCERF’s updated Regional Needs Assessment in June 2021 conducted by Atlantic Initiative and additional returns reported in July 2021.

The repatriation process: challenges and opportunities⁹

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.

→ **Preparation.** At the national level, ensuring that policies and legal procedures are in place is key to the return process. As a starting point of coordination, the government mandates a national focal point on Rehabilitation and Reintegration (R&R) and adopts national strategies and action plans.¹⁰ Despite strong coordination efforts, managing the many stakeholders in the repatriation process—including national and local institutions, international organizations, and civil society organizations (CSOs)—has proven challenging. Repatriations in Kosovo and Albania, for example, have shown the importance of establishing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for different stages to outline roles, responsibilities, and deliverables of the actors involved. SOPs should be developed in coordination with front line workers and relevant stakeholders well in advance of returns taking place; SOPs should be shared with relevant parties together with providing trainings.

Repatriation Process: Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Families in the WB

Preparation

Preparation prior to arrival of returnees included:

- Establishing judicial and legal procedures
- Adopting national R&R, CT, or P/CVE strategies and action plans
- Locating nationals in the camps
- Negotiating the return with camp authorities
- Establishing R&R coordination focal point
- Creation of Standard Operating Procedures

Logistics

Logistics of repatriation included:

- Moving returnees from the Al Hol camp to Al Roj
- Informing returnees of the repatriation process
- Repatriation to home country

Rehabilitation

Support to RFTFs and families in emergency reception centres and prisons included:

- Medical and psycho-social examinations
- Identifying needs and initiation of case management
- Judicial proceedings
- Initial medical and psycho-social support in emergency reception centres and prisons

Reintegration

& Resocialisation

Support in the community to RFTFs, their families and receiving communities:

- Direct support to returnees in their home communities
- Support to host communities

⁹ The information in this section is based on discussions with national coordinators and security officials in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia as well as local donors and international experts.

¹⁰ Between 2014 and 2015, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia made joining foreign conflicts punishable by law by updating criminal codes and adopting legislation. Kosovo was the first to put in place strategies and action plans to guide the repatriation and reintegration of RFTFs followed by Albania and North Macedonia. Kosovo has been adopting strategies since 2013, starting with “National Strategy for Reintegration of Repatriated Persons in Kosovo”. More information on this and following strategies is available at: <https://kryeministri-ks.net/en/>. In 2015 Albania adopted the “Albanian National Strategy: Countering Violent Extremism”. All information on Albania’s approach to the prevention and countering of violent extremism is available at: <https://cve.gov.al/?lang=en>. In 2018, North Macedonia adopted the “National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism” (2018-2022) and the “National Counterterrorism Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia” (2018-2022). In June 2020, North Macedonia also passed the National Plan to Reintegrate, Re-socialize, and Rehabilitate Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Associated Family Members after forming a national reintegration working group. More information is available at: <https://vlada.mk/>.

Preparation at the detention and emergency reception centers—or equivalent first points of arrival for returnees—include considerations of facilities and staff as well as planning the process following the return of FTFs and families. Government agencies found that selecting qualified staff for reception centers is challenging. Staff often lack the requisite language skills in Arabic and local dialects to engage with returnees, particularly children. Due to an absence of experienced professionals in civil service positions, staff at reception centers are often junior professionals who need considerable training and support. The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) provides grants to local organizations to train and mentor civil servants on case management, psychosocial support, social work, trauma- and violence-informed care, and post-traumatic stress disorder.¹¹

To initiate the return process, governments need to locate their nationals in the camps and identify them with support from families and camp authorities. Subsequently, negotiations start with camp authorities to discuss which citizens are ready and willing for repatriation. International partners such as the International Crescent of the Red Cross are involved in the negotiations to ensure that human rights are observed and repatriations are voluntarily. In most cases, women and children are prioritized, although the Western Balkan governments have shown willingness to repatriate all citizens.

- **Logistics.** The logistics phase covers the actual repatriation, often from Al Hol first to the Al Roj camp, then to the home country. Governments either rely on international partners or send their own security staff to facilitate repatriation. Returnees usually receive 24 to 48 hours of notice before they return home. The information that FTFs and their families receive at this stage varies. It is clear to most FTFs and their families that while returnees will be taken to emergency reception centers, men are likely to be prosecuted and serve prison time. A challenge in this stage has been convincing FTFs and their families to return.

Our consultations with stakeholders suggest that FTFs and their family members were misinformed about treatment upon return, were scared by recruiters, or did not want to face prison. This is partially why governments are now investing more time and energy in conferring with the families of FTFs back home to strengthen confidence and provide reassurance on how the process will be handled.

Other returnees felt that coming home was counter to their beliefs as they still supported the initial cause for travelling to Syria. One way that countries can deal with such challenges includes negotiating first the return of high profile FTFs and ensure the process is well organized and children are cared for.

- **Rehabilitation.** Upon arrival, returnees are usually held at detention centers for around 72 hours for medical and psychosocial examinations, identifying needs, and in some cases initiating judicial proceeding. Subsequently, the rehabilitation phase at the reception center starts with programs tailored to each individual case. Government entities responsible for the rehabilitation process initiate case management to assess and plan the support that returnees will need in the days, weeks, and months ahead. Several challenges arise at this stage.

¹¹ More information is available at the website of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund www.gcerf.org.

A lack of capacity and experience has been a significant challenge in rehabilitation, reintegration, and resocialization (RRR) programming. The teams in charge of reception centers and the reintegration phase—usually including psychologists, social workers, medical staff, teachers, cleaners, and caretakers—often receive basic training on violent extremism, usually provided by international or local experts (psychologists, academics, theologians, etc.). However, they often lack experience and expertise in dealing with returning FTFs and families. The time demands on frontline workers has been overwhelming, requiring regular work on weekends and after hours. In Kosovo and Albania, support from local CSOs has been crucial in addressing these challenges.

The needs of returnees upon arrival, both physical and psychological, were difficult to anticipate knowing little of their experience while in the camps. Stakeholders involved in the RRR programs were often ill-prepared for the needs and challenges of the next phases.

→ **Reintegration and resocialization.** The final phase is reintegration and resocialization into society. As with previous steps, consultation with the family of the returnee is crucial to assess the existing support system for reintegration. Returnees and the receiving communities often benefit from the support of CSOs with credibility and access in local communities. For instance, CSOs funded by GCERF build capacity of local government institutions and frontline workers, provide direct support to returnees and their families, and work to promote an enabling environment for reintegration in communities of origin. Direct support to returnees and their community members may include, but is not limited to, psychosocial support, religious counselling, vocational training, employment opportunities, educational support, and recreational activities for children. Focusing on an enabling environment for reintegration is an area where the credibility of local organizations has been instrumental to address challenges around stigmatization of returnees, their families, and the communities boys, girls, women, and men are reintegrated into.¹²

Recommendations

In conclusion, this policy note urges the local and international stakeholders to implement the following 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,

¹² For more information, see: www.gcerf.org.

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.

Suggested further reading

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About the Note

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