

Framing the Counterterrorism and Countering Violence Extremism Debate in Light of Current and Future Waves of Returnees from the Syrian Camps



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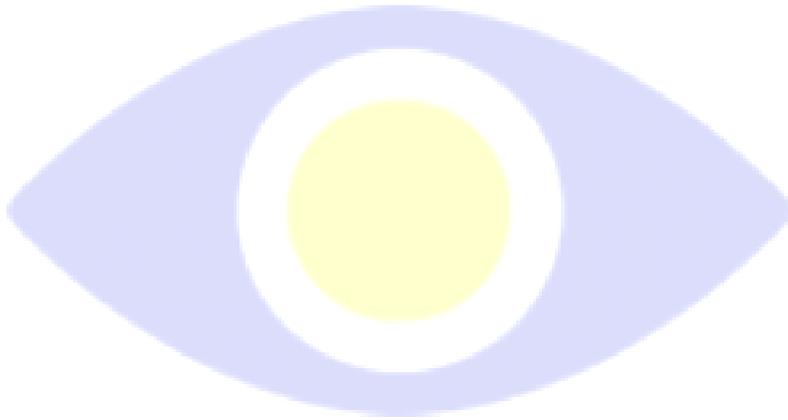
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European
Eye on
Radicalization

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Introduction

Many governments are striving to introduce timely, consistent, and coherent responses following the return and potential return of thousands of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) and their family members from the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria, where many of them joined jihadist groups, notably the Islamic State (ISIS).

Between December 2019 and June 2021, the authors conducted interviews with French, Dutch, Swedish, Bosnian, Albanian, and Kosovar prosecutors and judges to gather information on the difficulties associated with information-sharing and the prosecution of FTFs and women returnees. Interviews with Preventing- or Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) practitioners and with former ISIS fighters were also conducted to discern current trends in FTF rehabilitation, reintegration, and repatriation.

This report also draws on field research conducted by two of the authors in February 2020 in Mogadishu, Somalia. The authors interviewed leaders of Somalia's Defector Rehabilitation Program (DRP) Directorate within the Ministry of Internal Security, as well as counterterrorism and P/CVE representatives from the President's and Mayor's office, representatives of the National Intelligence Security Agency (NISA), female defectors from Al-Qaeda's Somali branch Al-Shabaab, elders, community leaders, religious leaders, academics, judges, lawyers, lawmakers, human rights activists, members of civil society organizations, and other P/CVE practitioners.

Despite the many distinguishing features of disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs in active, ongoing conflict environments, Somalia included, the research insights gained from the field research serve to inform key elements for successful implementation of such programs.

Violent Extremist Prisoner Release and Recidivism Prevention Debate

According to Europol’s Counter Terrorism Centre, over 100 convicted jihadists are set to be released from various federal prisons in the United States by 2023.¹ With their anticipated release approaching, many counterterrorism and law enforcement officials are concerned about the release, reintegration, and likelihood of recidivism among these individuals.²

Recent research suggests that fears over recidivism among terrorism-related offenders may be unfounded. In researching legal files of 557 jihadi convicts in Belgium since the 1990s, some authors found that only “a small number of die-hards will remain active across successive waves of jihadi militancy and remain a key concern for police and intelligence services. To some extent, the low rates of recidivism found may be indicating a success on the part of the Belgian security services.”³

While P/CVE practitioners must pay a close attention to recidivism rate, as an important indicator of program success, they must also acknowledge prevalent misconceptions about the use and utility of recidivism as a threat measurement in drawing general conclusions.

For instance, many offenders—of all kinds—could potentially be better at masquerading their actions the second time around, namely upon release. Also, many crimes get committed without detection, and criminologists and practitioners are yet to find effective ways to determine commission of a crime. Another variable is that concerns over recidivism may be more prevalent in some countries as against others. In many European countries, concerns may be more elevated given that certain jihadist networks are more developed there—itsself a potential risk factor in releasing convicted terrorists—which is not necessarily true in the case of the United States.⁴

One must also acknowledge law enforcement and counter-terrorism policy dimensions of recidivism argument. One proposed solution—arbitrary, indefinite detentions—help elucidate a plethora of questions on how recidivism and its impact ought to be defined, understood, or conceptualized, but such a policy is not possible in democratic countries.

A key issue is simply how the efficacy of a de-radicalization or demobilization program is assessed. A high recidivism rate would suggest the program has failed, but the converse is not

¹ Lorenzo Vidino and Bennett Clifford, “A Review of Transatlantic Best Practices for Countering Radicalisation in Prisons and Terrorist Recidivism”, *EUROPOL*, April 2019,

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/ECTC%20Transatlantic%20Practices.pdf>

² “Worldwide hundreds of convicted terrorists to be released from prison by 2023,” *Counterterrorism News: For and About The Balkans*, May 2020.

³ Thomas Renard. (2020). “Overblown: Exploring the gap between the fear of recidivism and the evidence,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, <https://ctc.usma.edu/overblown-exploring-the-gap-between-the-fear-of-terrorist-recidivism-and-the-evidence/>

⁴ First author discussion with a Belgian law enforcement officer. May 2020.

necessarily true: it would be wrong to argue that low recidivism rates indicate success. For instance, rehabilitation efforts aimed at “low-risk” individuals are expected to lead to low recidivism rates—irrespective of the program offered.⁵

A Balkan correctional officer fleshed out why labelling some programs with low recidivism rates as successes can be misleading:

“The prison rehabilitation program was successful in the case of ‘low-risk’ inmates; that is, the ones with weak religious and ideological [ISIS] convictions. They volunteered in the program. I am not sure if they needed it [the program]. In the case of ‘high-risk’ inmates, it is difficult to say, as some have reverted to supporting terrorist groups [like ISIS] upon release.”⁶

In short, some programs are utilized by individuals who have in all practical senses given up extremism already; their participation in the program is a consequence, not a cause, of their disengagement from extremism.

Equally important is the rather obvious issue of deception. This has come to the fore recently after cases like that of Usman Khan, the ISIS loyalist who stabbed to death two of his CVE handlers actually at a ceremony celebrating his deradicalization. Even in cases where the individuals themselves do not return to violent activity, recidivism rates could become misleadingly deflated if individuals are engaged undetected following their required reporting period in, for example, playing logistical roles in an extremist group.⁷

⁵ First and fourth author interview with Mohamed Ali, DRP Program Director, Mogadishu, Somalia. February 2020

⁶ Ref

⁷ Ibid.

Disengagement, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DRR) Debate

Questions over whether programming should prioritize disengagement over deradicalization form much of the crux of the current FTF debate.⁸ The notion that governments need to choose between the two—or that they should not aim to achieve both by default—can be problematic. Research shows that behavioral change can take place without a change in attitude. Conversely, attitudinal change can occur without behavioral change.

Accounts of individuals who were prevented from leaving extremist groups or who disagreed with violent methods used by a terrorist group may serve to explain those who change behavior without changing belief. For example, a woman returnee from Al-Shabaab-controlled territory shared with the authors instances of men and women being threatened with death or actually beaten to death after trying to escape the group. While this deterred people in a practical-behavioral sense from leaving, such events were trigger points for attitudinal shifts against Al-Shabaab and its ideology.⁹

Changes in belief without changes in behavior can be seen in burnt-out terrorists, who know no other way of existence.

Long-term disengagement and deradicalization engagements are also needed to avoid the potential risk of re-engagement.¹⁰ In the case of Indonesia, for instance, research indicates examples of individuals who have re-engaged in violent extremist activity years after their initial engagement in the [conflict in Afghanistan](#) in the 1970s and 80s.¹¹

FTF returnee roles as catalysts for recidivism, or potential risk factors for re-engagement, was also stressed by law enforcement officers in the Balkans. A Bosnian counter-terrorism official noted the danger associated with potential contact between a released prisoner and those who have traveled to Iraq and Syria but managed to evade security services upon return.

Even in those instances where individuals do not join terrorist groups due to their ideological or religious convictions, a combination of disengagement (e.g., education, psychological treatment, etc.) and deradicalization (e.g., religious lectures by imams, civic engagement, etc.) measures must be considered. Disengagement and defection techniques must also be embedded within the rehabilitation process to aid the individual in abandoning previous

⁸ As cited in Alastair Reed, Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdwijn and Edwin Baker. (2015). “Pathways of foreign fighters: Policy options and their (un)intended consequences,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)*, [http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Reed-De-Roy-Van-Zuijdwijn-Bakker-Pathways-Of-Foreign-Fighters-Policy-Options-And-Their-Un-Intended-Consequences-April2015\(I\).pdf](http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Reed-De-Roy-Van-Zuijdwijn-Bakker-Pathways-Of-Foreign-Fighters-Policy-Options-And-Their-Un-Intended-Consequences-April2015(I).pdf)

⁹ First and fourth author focus group interview with Al-Shabaab women defector. Samadon Institute, Mogadishu, Somalia. February 2020.

¹⁰ Sylvene Sec. (2018). “Returning foreign terrorist fighters: A catalyst for recidivism among disengaged terrorists,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 10 (6), 7-15. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26435161?seq=9#metadata_info_tab_contents

¹¹ Ibid.

triggers and toxic relationships that are associated with their extremist lifestyle.¹² Maximizing disengagement efforts is critical for these individuals to adopt a new way of life. Interacting with past influences will likely pull them back into their extremist tendencies, but leaving behind an entire social infrastructure is a wrenching experience. Assistance has to be given in creating a new life where they are less vulnerable to slipping back into their old relationships and habits.

To this end, some countries have shifted their focus toward crafting restorative probationary services that monitor the convicted terrorist, and more importantly try to address the push and pull factors associated with their violent extremist tendencies. The Netherlands, for example, relies on their existing Dutch Probation Service program that strives to promote a safer society following the release of terrorists. The entity is comprised of a specialized team known as TER (terrorists, extremists, and radicals). The goal of this unit is to supervise sanctions imposed by the courts, as well as provide alternative reintegration and rehabilitation options for convicted terrorists upon release.¹³

Probation and release programs recognize the importance of an effective and customized rehabilitation plan that seeks to alleviate the vulnerabilities that caused the individual to turn to extremism in the first place. A one-size-fits-all approach is not conducive to success and this is beginning to filter through, with many programs beginning to shy away from a standardized template for rehabilitation. Convicted terrorists require specialized attention and mentorship that works toward identifying the root causes and triggers of prior behavior. Various mitigation and coping strategies are cultivated and eventually implemented as part of their treatment plan.¹⁴ Providing these individuals with effective and actionable coping strategies is critical to promote long term success following the probationary period. Without intense and rigorous treatment, the convicted terrorist is much more likely to resort back to their old ways, as the underlying issues may not be adequately resolved.

The reintegration process may be overwhelming for some terrorists, as oftentimes they have spent several years, or even decades, in incarceration and have grown accustomed to living a life behind bars. Many advancements in technology and society are likely to manifest during this timeframe, many of which, if misused, can provide former extremists with additional resources to revert back to prior tendencies.¹⁵ Considering the implications of societal advancements as part of sentencing and probationary guidelines is critical to ensure these new resources are not further exploited upon release. The courts must consider various elements

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Worldwide hundreds of convicted terrorists to be released from prison by 2023,” Counterterrorism News: For and About The Balkans, May 2020.

¹⁵ “Worldwide hundreds of convicted terrorists to be released from prison by 2023,” Counterterrorism News: For and About The Balkans, May 2020.

about reintegration, including probation capabilities designed to mitigate and monitor the release of the individual.

Some countries seem to pursue rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives that strike a right balance in the way of identifying unique psychological traits of each individual, avoiding too much focus on ideology and religion (e.g., providing mainstream interpretation of Islam), and offering employment opportunities to ensure smooth social transition and reintegration. In some cases, government psychologists and reintegration and rehabilitation specialists have recognized spousal agency in treating extremism. Women who continue to exhibit extremist or violent extremist tendencies following their return from Syria and Iraq, in some cases more so than their spouses, are given special attention by directly appealing to their desire for agency and action in their families and communities. The key has been to identify the right venue for such women to channel risky behavior and invite exploration of constructive outcomes on their end. Given the fact that women are driven by the same motivations as men when it comes to seeking agency, P/CVE practitioners are working with women to provide for economic opportunities for their families, help with their child care, improve their sense of inclusivity and social tolerance among the members of the community, and find ways to mobilize their faith (e.g., religious, personal, familial, etc.) to help guide their life.¹⁶

Representatives from the Kosovo's Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Individuals within Ministry of Interior pointed to some cases of individuals who continue to exhibit pro-ISIS sentiments or support for rebellion against the government, mostly on social media platforms. Though skeptical about their "complete" deradicalization, which is not necessarily the aim, psychologists dealing with such cases regard such behavior on the grounds of psychological tendency to crave attention and the language of rebellion as an exaggerated statement of displeasure with the government (e.g., for failing to meet demands economically or when they feel neglected). Willingness on the part of such individuals to work with mainstream religious figures and entities (e.g., the Islamic Community of Kosovo) in the country, given their reluctance to do so in their past, are interpreted as promising signs towards recovery and rehabilitation by the authorities, even if their rhetoric remains extreme. Authorities in the Balkans also recommended against direct interactions with such individuals to avoid any interference with the reintegration and rehabilitation efforts. They partially blame media, researchers, and journalists for, as they often described, exploiting personal vulnerabilities of individuals for the purpose of sensationalizing ISIS threat, or gaining a follower base for their writings.

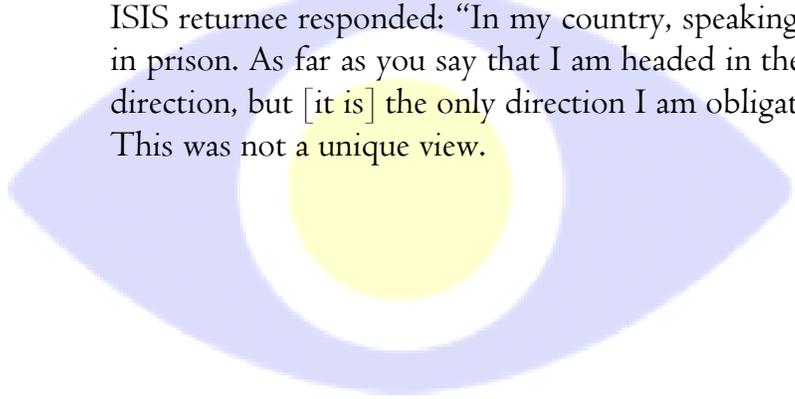
¹⁶ First author interview with the Head of Kosovo's Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Individuals and a psychologist staff member within the Ministry of Interior, August 2020, Prishtina, Kosovo.

The coronavirus epidemic made meeting with ISIS returnees in person difficult, and necessarily limits interpretive capacity—facial cues, tones of voice, and so on were not available. That said, of those interviewed, some seemed not to have been ideologically reformed and rather to express indifference or resignation when it came to their rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes since their return from Syria.

One ISIS returnee in the Balkans said:

“I have changed a lot as far as his past. I want to forget my past, as soon as possible. As far as how the government officials treat us when it comes to the issue of rehabilitation, I leave it to them to tell you. I won’t praise nor condemn their work. When I spoke to people like you in the past [researchers and the media], I only damaged my family. I won’t let that happen anymore.”¹⁷

In response to praise for their efforts and continued success in the way of rehabilitation, one ISIS returnee responded: “In my country, speaking freely and argumentatively will land you in prison. As far as you say that I am headed in the right direction, maybe it is not the right direction, but [it is] the only direction I am obligated to follow if I want peace in my life.”¹⁸ This was not a unique view.



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¹⁷ First author interview ISIS returnee the Balkans, August 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Repatriation and Women Travelers to ISIS: The Prosecution Debate

Following the collapse of the ISIS caliphate, the Balkan countries have grappled with how to strategically recover, prosecute, and reintegrate their citizens back into the community. In April 2019, four men, 32 women, and 72 children were repatriated from Syria.¹⁹ All four male foreign fighters were detained after arriving in Kosovo and three have been convicted, receiving a maximum sentence of 5.5 years.²⁰ Recently, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania have either committed to, or repatriated, more women and children from Syria's camps.²¹

While prosecution is a critical component of the repatriation process, some Balkan countries place a greater emphasis on the rehabilitation and reintegration of these individuals. In Kosovo, for instance, the women and children that were recovered tended not to endure interrogation and prosecution as a matter of routine as with their male counterparts, perhaps due to varying degrees of culpability. However, they were placed under house arrest and eventually indicted on terrorism charges. The children are primarily viewed as victims who will require more intense rehabilitation to address trauma and alienation.²²

Kosovo's authorities have cited difficulties in locating and identifying women and children inside the Syrian camps as an obstacle to further repatriations of Kosovar citizens.²³ Nonetheless, in Prishtina's willingness to accept responsibility for its citizens' actions and frame a more proactive approach, it greatly diverges from much of the rest of Europe's viewpoint. Many countries do not want to accept the responsibility of recovering citizens that present national security risks. Indeed, some European countries have revoked citizenship from FTFs to prevent them returning home and/or allowed for their prosecution by local authorities where the FTFs are held, even when those authorities are non-state actors.

In addition to Kosovo, the other countries engaged in active repatriation are Chechnya, Macedonia, Russia, and Bosnia.²⁴ Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have also begun to actively repatriate foreign fighters, which represents a monumental shift for the Central Asian

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ See for example: "Albania to repatriate women and children from Syria's Al Hol camp", *Associated Press*, 1 August 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/syria/2021/08/01/albania-to-repatriate-women-and-children-from-syrias-al-hol-camp/>; and, "Kosovo repatriates 11 of its citizens from Syria", *Associated Press*, 18 July 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/kosovo-repatriates-11-citizens-syria-78915694>

²² Ibid; First author interviews with P/CVE professionals in the Balkans, July-August 2020.

²³ First author interview with the Head of Kosovo's Prevention and Rehabilitation Department within the Internal Affairs, August 2020, Prishtina, Kosovo.

²⁴ Hoffman A., & Furlan, M. (2020, March). "Challenges posed by returning foreign fighters." *Program on Extremism – The George Washington University*. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Challenges%20Posed%20by%20Returning%20Foreign%20Fighters.pdf>

region, which has traditionally relied on a punitive framework comprised of strict laws and criminal prosecution for those who are involved in terrorism.

Some countries have chosen what one might call a middle way: they acknowledge the right to return of foreign fighters, but have not engaged in active repatriation efforts, leaving the responsibility to get home in the hands of the foreign fighters themselves.

Difficulties associated with prosecution have become especially apparent in the case of women travelers to Iraq and Syria. They are often described as *the followers*, without an agency in decision-making, and therefore could not be held guilty of their intentions, only actions that have been committed. While the issue of women's agency remains a matter of contentious debate, the lack of evidence and the narrative of victimization in combination represent prosecutorial challenges when it comes to women returnees.²⁵

As one Balkan prosecutor put it:

“The admission of guilt was taken as a mitigating circumstance during the sentencing. The fact that N.D. was repentant and took the blame, the fact that N.D. was a first-time offender and without a prior criminal record, the fact that she deeply regretted breaking the law by committing the criminal offense, and the fact that that she was a widow, from an economically deprived background, and a parent of a minor child, was also considered.

As an aggravating circumstance, we considered the fact that N.D. had voluntarily joined the group officially declared terrorist. While N.D. knew and admitted that her actions (i.e., travel) would have an impact in the outside world [Syria], she stated she was not informed of the situation in Syria at the time of her travel and she did not want to be separated from her husband. Once in Syria, she had tried to return, but she could not, and when she was given the opportunity to surrender [to Kurdish forces], she did surrender.

N.D. received a conditional, long-term sentence of two years, which will not be executed provided she does not commit any criminal offense in the next three years. She was also ordered to psychologist or other counselor treatment for a period of two years and six months.”²⁶

Several other Balkan prosecutors raised ongoing challenges to prosecution that have been complicated by a lack of prosecutable evidence, citing a need for better information-sharing

²⁵ Anne Speckhard and Ardian Shajkovi, “Beware the women of ISIS: There are many, and may be more dangerous than the men,” *The Daily Beast*, 12 September 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/beware-the-women-of-isis-there-are-many-and-they-may-be-more-dangerous-than-the-men>

²⁶ Kosovo prosecutor interview in charge of the case. May 2020.

and guidance to maximize investigative and prosecutorial powers with regards to FTFs and women travelers to Syria and Iraq. Some of the unique barriers for investigating and prosecuting such cases are highlighted below:

1. “Difficulties securing necessary evidence, i.e., what role they played, if any, in ISIS.
2. Prosecutors and investigative authorities having to rely on evidence from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to determine possible role and the tasks inside ISIS.
3. Women, following their return, were mothers of minor children ... [and in many cases] during their stay in the territories controlled by ISIS, have been married two or three times and consequently have had two or three pairs of children. This fact often influences the prosecutor’s decision to request measures to just ensure the presence of the defendant in criminal proceedings, which is easier than detention.
4. House arrest is preferred for women, given there are no [specialized] institutions for the care of minor children. In the absence of institutional care, the practice is for children to have one parent with them. The measure of house arrest is often requested, accepted, and imposed by the court.
5. The acquired evidence usually pointing to women only joining their husbands and not having played an active role inside ISIS military structures and [administrative] establishment, representing a judicial impasse in the sense of not knowing with what criminal offense to charge them.
6. Once indictments in the court are filed, and during the trial, women have pleaded guilty, which is considered a mitigating circumstance during the sentencing stage.”²⁷

As such, many states are reluctant to intervene and actively repatriate women given the challenges and limitations faced during prosecution.²⁸

While suggesting gender-specific treatment for ISIS returnees may be considered sexist, practitioners often argue that such an approach is necessary given the varying roles that men and women served within the ISIS insurgency. However, this is often difficult to implement, as there is a lack of readily available data that showcases the variances in a generalizable way between men and women who joined ISIS.²⁹ Evidence is difficult enough to get at for men who engaged in fighting within ISIS; what women did under ISIS rule remains shrouded in mystery, since the group kept this information highly confidential, meaning there is little if any documentary proof.

²⁷ Kosovo and Bosnian prosecutor interview. July 2020. Kosovo and Bosnia (Zoom call).

²⁸ “CTED analytical brief: the prosecution of ISIL-associated women.” (n.d.). *Counterterrorism Committee Executive Directorate* (CTED), https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CTED_Analytical_Brief_The_Prosecution_of_ISIL-associated_Women.pdf

²⁹ Ibid.

If trials of women who *have* returned are difficult, the prosecution of women who have *not* returned are even more troubling, with serious questions about due process, fair treatment, and effective representation. If the member state is seeking prosecution, they should have a duty to ensure repatriation so that the individual can attend a just hearing. However, the point of trials in absentia is often strategic—to strip the individual of citizenship so they *cannot* return. In this context, the scope of the term “membership” must be revisited: the loose parameters at the present time allow courts to convict women simply for being related to alleged ISIS fighters and performing household duties, and these statutes tend not to take into account coercion.³⁰ Another track for prosecution is charges against women who entered the caliphate with their children for neglecting their duty of care. It can be assumed that women who took children to a warzone did not fulfil their duty of care to a maximum, but the concrete evidence of parental failure is lacking in most instances. Moreover, fathers are generally not prosecuted for similar crimes. This suggests a possible gender bias, which needs to be evaluated.

Sentencing practices should be tailored to each individual and reviewed on a case-by-case basis as the level of involvement greatly varies among men and women. Many women can be a first-time offender, not directly involved in any act of violence, rather having been solely responsible for the household duties. Their level of risk should also be evaluated based on their track record, current involvement, and the circumstances surrounding their journey to the caliphate. Women within ISIS are not always participating out of their own free will and may be forced to stay because of their husband’s demands or sheer entrapment. While prosecution of female travelers to ISIS has been limited, access to readily available rehabilitation and reintegration programs has also been restrained. Although prosecution rates may be low, such women are just as deserving and just as in need of rehabilitation services to lower their recidivism rate and heighten their chances of becoming successful members of society following their adjustment period. More attention should be allocated to the issues and restrictions that accompany female travelers to ISIS, as it extends beyond active repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration. There is an overarching need for a more transitional justice approach within communities that allows for a tailored indictment and prosecution, as well as reclamation services.³¹

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Children Repatriation Debate

Despite recent active repatriation efforts, children remain especially vulnerable.

The child population of the Syrian camps should be disaggregated, since it includes several categories:

- Children who were taken as infants to ISIS territory by their parents.
- Children who were born in the caliphate out of the marriages between women and ISIS fighters.
- Older children who have lived through the war and had some awareness of it and perhaps jihadist indoctrination.

This list is not exhaustive.

Despite the international appeal to attend to the issue,³² these children remain in camps like Al-Hol in northern Syria, most of them having had little formal education and now having little access to any. They are vulnerable to abuse and religious indoctrination in a social situation dominated by violent ISIS supporters.³³ The camps are not well run: children even of parents who are not ISIS loyalists or who have ceased to be may easily roam from one section of the camp to another, potentially leading to cross-pollination of extremist ideas.

Recent reports suggest that ISIS is deliberately trying to radicalize these children by smuggling them out of the camps to ISIS training locations in the eastern Syrian desert.³⁴ Other reports point to grooming by ISIS—and other jihadists—within the camps.³⁵ It is very difficult to ascertain the truth of these reports, but they are plausible and if they are not true yet they soon could be.

Equally important, children continue to be exploited in many cases by their own mothers. For instance, countries often fail to locate children inside the camps, despite intelligence and the registration lists of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Mothers often hide their children in hopes of maximizing the prospect of their own repatriation.

³² See U.S. veto on FTF repatriation, prosecution: “US vetoes UN resolution on foreign terrorists, citing lack of repatriation language”, *Al-Monitor*, 1 September 2020 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/09/us-veto-unsc-resolution-foreign-terrorists-repatriation.html>

³³ Louisa Loveluck, “Syrian detention camp rocked by dozens of killings blamed on Islamic State women”, *The Washington Post*, 19 September 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/19/syria-isis-al-hol-camp/>

³⁴ Jeff Seldin, “Islamic State group smuggling boys to desert training camps”, *Voice of America* (VOA), 3 August 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/islamic-state-group-smuggling-boys-desert-training-camps>

³⁵ First author accounts in the Syrian camps; first author interview with the Head of Kosovo’s Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Individuals within the Ministry of Interior, August 2020, Prishtina, Kosovo.

Conclusion

Many governments are striving to introduce timely, consistent, and coherent responses following the return and potential return of thousands of FTFs and their family members from the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria. Even where such processes are working, they are about to be stressed by the release of many convicted extremist offenders over the next half-decade.

The issue of women and children repatriation remains particularly pressing. Government responses to the aforementioned challenges remain mixed and varied. In Europe, in particular, the potential threat posed by the returnees, including upon release, represents the crux of the security debate, with the discourse on rehabilitation and reintegration, aside from individual expert exertions and a few functional programs, receiving far less attention. Criminalization and prosecutions, as integral parts of “comprehensive responses to returnees,”³⁶ are being considered in conjunction with other reintegration and rehabilitation efforts.

Despite repeated pressure to cater to the issue, the repatriation process of ISIS suspects by a majority of Western countries has stalled due to the difficulties in domestic prosecution. A lack of national terrorism laws; gaps in, and inadequate implementation of, national terrorism laws; and a lack of legal cooperation between governments with the SDF³⁷—all these lead to fears that the ISIS returnees will be sentenced too lightly, or not be sentenced at all, and will then be on the territory of their home countries, posing a security risk.

The Balkans states have taken a lead in active repatriation, especially in recent months of women and children. It is possible, if their rehabilitative and reintegrative efforts go well, and practitioners can help publics see it, that this will create a cascading effect in other European countries, and lead to solutions to the FTF issue that are more consistent and coordinated.

³⁶ “The Return of Foreign Fighters to EU Soil,” *European Parliament*, 15 May 2018, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/621811/EPRS_STU\(2018\)621811_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/621811/EPRS_STU(2018)621811_EN.pdf)

³⁷ Ardian Shajkovci and Allison McDowell-Smith, “The Prosecution Challenges of Travelers to the Islamic State”, *IPI Global Observatory*, 14 June 2021, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2021/06/the-prosecution-challenges-of-travelers-to-the-islamic-state/>