RAN MANUAL

Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families

RAN MANUAL

Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families

Acronyms

CVE	Countering violent extremism
ERC22+	Extreme Risk Guidelines 22 – Risk assessment tool of the UK government
ESCN	European Strategic Communications Network
FTF	Foreign terrorist fighters
HCR-20	Risk assessment tool (Historical, Clinical, Risk Management)
HTS	Hay'at Tharir al-Sham
IR46	Risk assessment tool used by the Dutch police
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RAN	Radicalisation Awareness Network
RAN CoE	Radicalisation Awareness Network Centre of Excellence
RAN H&SC	Radicalisation Awareness Network Health and Social Care (Working Group)
RAN POL	Radicalisation Awareness Network Police and Law Enforcement (Working Group)
RAN P&P	Radicalisation Awareness Network Prison and Probation (Working Group)
TRAP-18	Risk assessment tool
VEO	Violent extremist offender
VERA-2	Risk assessment tool

Practitioners' Recommendations for Member States

This list of practitioners' recommendations takes stock of practitioner experience and reflects the measures practitioners feel could facilitate their counterparts' work. It is intended to give national authorities extra insight into practitioners' needs and ideas as they review existing approaches and strategies in light of challenges related to returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families.

Practitioners' recommendations on risk assessment and multi-agency cooperation

1) To tailor assessments to the specifics of returnees, consider using *RAN CoE Returnee 45*, a tool for investigating the motivation, commitment and risks posed by returnees, to:

   a) check whether risk assessments currently used can profit from this RAN tool, or;

   b) adapt the RAN tool, which includes 45 indicators, to local circumstances if there is no structured risk assessment tool in place.

2) As Daesh and possibly other terrorist organisations produce personnel files on the skillsets of recruits, consider feeding information on these files into the design of responses to individual returnees.

3) As a first step in tailoring responses to individual returnees, it might be beneficial to consider two generations, although a strict differentiation is not appropriate:

   a) the first generation of returnees was predominantly men, and comprised those who had been motivated to leave for humanitarian reasons and / or fighting the Assad regime — with some notable exceptions — more prone to disillusionment, arguably less violent and relatively free to leave the terrorist-held territory;

   b) the current, second generation of returnees is more battle-hardened and ideologically committed, had to evade pervasive surveillance by Daesh to escape and may have come back with violent motives: to harm EU citizens.

4) As (local) police officers are often involved in an early phase, consider specific action points for police officers dealing with returnees, including:

   a) participating in multi-agency case management and opening case files on anyone who has left, rather than wait until they return;

   b) being aware of child protection procedures and how to deal with child abuse;

   c) testing the protocols for sharing information with partners in returnee scenarios;

   d) establishing a police specialist who can be consulted by other first-line practitioners;

   e) cooperating with family workers when engaging with families, especially during home visits, and doing so as soon as someone leaves as that facilitates partnering when he / she returns.

5) Consider the creation of a designated point of contact or taskforce at the national level, or if appropriate, a returnee coordinator, to ensure coherence of policies and measures across government agencies and to facilitate cooperation and information exchange with the local multi-agency coordinators.

6) Review and — where appropriate — adapt the programmes, methods and interventions currently in place to reintegrate radicalised individuals, rather than develop new methods for returnees only; tailoring interventions which have proven to be effective in comparable settings will have swift added value compared to completely new programmes.

Practitioners' recommendations on prosecution and imprisonment

7) Invest in the resocialisation of convicted returnees while they are still in detention to decrease the risk of recidivism to violent extremism.

8) Preferably, resocialisation interventions should start pre-trial, either in detention or in a local environment. However, cooperation from FTF returnees on resocialisation interventions pre-trial will be challenging as cooperation might be seen as implying guilt.

9) To avoid the long-term negative effects of high-security imprisonment for low risk returnees, tailored decisions and measures are needed on placement and rehabilitation, taking into account the different profiles of returnees and the offences at stake.

10) Consider placing returnees in specific prisons — in line with the findings of the specialised risk assessment — based on:

   a) the capacity of the prison to deliver a variety of interventions needed for the returnee's rehabilitation;

b) the extent to which multi-agency cooperation between the prison and other organisations is possible;

c) the prisoner-prison population dynamics (e.g. if the returnee has a hero-like status or is bullied, this may interfere with the rehabilitation process and transfer should be considered).

11) Consider setting up an information-sharing structure for returnee cases that enables prison and probation services to obtain sufficient background information on the circumstances in which the returnee has lived and the potential safety and security risks this may pose for the prison population and staff, as well as the wider community, should the returnee be released on probation. This information can also serve the implementation of improved rehabilitation programmes.

12) Review religious support services in prison and probation, as many returnees wish to live religiously. This should be harnessed in a positive way for rehabilitation, and calls for sufficient capacity and resources in terms of capable, trained and trustworthy chaplains, religious materials and courses.

13) Facilitate the development of training modules for staff working (directly) with returnees to support judicial, prison and probation services addressing:

a) information about the situations to which returnees have been exposed;

b) information about specialised risk assessments, how to interpret these and how they translate into everyday practice;

c) trauma awareness and how to balance the need to obtain information with the need to keep the returnee offender emotionally and mentally stable;

d) information about the legal frameworks and information-sharing structures applicable to returnees.

Practitioners' recommendations on the resocialisation of returnees in society

14) Inform local authorities and involve them in preparing for the return of FTFs to a local setting. Also, when communities have large numbers of FTFs, consider relocating returnees, either within or even across municipalities and regions, as clustering returnees within (small) communities hinders their rehabilitation.

15) Consider complementing criminal justice policies with resocialisation efforts for returnees for whom prosecution is not an option (e.g. due to a lack of evidence on criminal activities or of criminal liability).

16) If including all relevant actors in a comprehensive effort to re-socialise and reintegrate returnees as recommended, local and regional authorities seem best placed to coordinate this multi-agency approach.

17) Involve mental health practitioners in both swift screening following return as well as any treatment needed. It should be acknowledged that returnees might not only be perpetrators of violence, but also victims, including through rape, beatings and torture. In addition to PTSD, a sense of betrayal and disillusionment should be expected.

18) Identify whether children accompanied returning adults or — if the children stayed in the EU — whether they will be affected by the return of one or even both of their parents.

19) Be aware that many returnees — even if not engaged in criminal behaviour — may still strongly support ideologies opposing apostates, other religions, so-called infidels, women's rights and even EU societies as such. Most have been subject to severe indoctrination. Consider dialogue, mentoring and other techniques for returnees with such strong beliefs.

20) Consider whether the reintegration of returnees should include assistance for practical issues such as education, employment and housing, as this might foster rehabilitation.

21) Assess whether families of FTFs could be partners in the reintegration of relatives, ideally before they return. Provided that families do not themselves support extremist ideologies, they are very valuable in integration efforts.

22) Taking into account the fact that the families and direct social network of returnees will also be strongly affected by events, structures such as peer groups, psychological support and ideological or theological support for these families should be considered. This support has the objective of developing a resilient family environment to prevent future involvement with extremism and terrorist groups.

Practitioners' recommendations on child returnees

Taking into account the necessity of both immediate care and support as well as a long-term approach to ensuring rehabilitation and reintegration of child returnees in EU societies,

23) Consider giving practitioners legal guidance on dealing with child returnees. Particularly when there are concerns that the child has been involved in criminal activities abroad, specific attention should be paid to the victim-perpetrator dilemma, the sharing of information on child returnee cases, the application of juvenile and adult legislation in these cases and the use of alternative sentencing through rehabilitative / restorative programmes.

24) Consider conducting an overview of the expertise in place for the rehabilitation of child returnees. This should include at least expertise on: children from conflict / war zones, radicalisation and extremism, trauma treatment, legal matters related to children, child protection services, child development.

25) To help develop a coherent and effective response to child returnees, a specialised risk and needs assessment tool for child returnees could be considered; the tool could be applicable to a wider target group of children who are radicalised or vulnerable to radicalisation. Any assessment tool developed must take into account a child's stages of development. Adapting an assessment tool that was originally designed for adults is therefore unlikely to be appropriate.

26) Examine how existing multi-agency structures could deal with child returnees. Organisations with expertise on supporting vulnerable children could be included to provide in-depth guidance.

27) Ensure sufficient training for practitioners dealing with child returnees. These modules can be part of existing awareness or expertise training on preventing and countering radicalisation. At least two levels of training are available:

a) Basic awareness training for practitioners in (direct) contact with child returnees (e.g. school teachers, social workers, members of leisure organisations). This basic training could cover, as a minimum requirement:

i) information about the situation in Syria / Iraq to which these children have been exposed;

ii) basic trauma awareness and response exercises when a child returnee shows particular behaviour;

iii) Information on how to report signs of concern and where to request additional support.

b) In-depth training and shared learning sessions for practitioners directly and closely involved in cases of child returnees (e.g. child protection services, family support professionals, local police officers, psychologists). This in-depth training could include lessons on foster care and reintegration into schools.

Practitioners' recommendations on cross-cutting issues (gender and communication)

28) Consider complementing reintegration responses for male returnees — taking into account criminal background, low impulse control and propensity for violence — with specialised responses for female returnees. Many women were recruited to fulfil duties different to those assigned to men (e.g. wife or mother), but may have been engaged in different forms of violence (e.g. enforcing behaviour according to the strict rules of the terrorist group in the so called 'Khansaa Brigade'). Such tailoring increases the effectiveness of risk assessments and of reintegration.

29) Acknowledge that the reintegration of mothers who have succeeded in returning with small children is heavily dependent upon their fear of losing their children due to child protection measures. Therefore, consider cooperation with reintegration to be a precondition for custody.

30) To counter the terrorist narrative that returnees will receive exceptionally bad treatment in EU countries, including imprisonment without a fair trial, excessive interrogation and the prospect of never being accepted (again) in society, consider highlighting the rule of law, health care and education, which will all apply to them. Since most returnees contact their family before returning, family members are well placed to communicate this. Consider informing family support professionals about current legal and rehabilitative practice and consequences for returnees so they can provide families with the correct information.

31) Expect distrust, hostility, stigmatisation and isolation to complicate the reintegration of returnees, and consider addressing these challenges by communicating about response strategies.

32) Expect (social) media reports to impact upon societies' openness to the reintegration of returnees. Therefore, look into preparing a (local) communications strategy, ideally ahead of the arrival of returnees within the local community.

33) When communicating with returnees, their families as well as the receiving societies, follow a strategy that is realistic and transparent on the consequences and situations the returnee will face when coming back, including prosecution, monitoring, imprisonment and child protection interventions.

Returnees:

Foreign terrorist fighters and their families

FTFs in numbers

42 000+ Foreign terrorist fighters from **120+** countries joined terrorist organisations between **2011** and **2016**, of which **+/–5 000** came from Europe. Departures peaked in **2015** and have decreased since then.

Who are the returnees?

Different nationalities, ethnicities, ages and genders
All have some level of trauma and emotional / psychological issues

Men

Higher risk of combat experience and skills

Often involved in and exposed to war atrocities

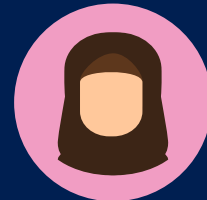Variety of roles within the terrorist-held territories

Women

Family role and mother to future soldiers

Driven by sense of empowerment and their role in building the 'caliphate'

Involved in recruitment, indoctrination of children and others

Children

Intense ideological indoctrination through education and socialisation

Recruited for combat and other violent activities from age 9

Severely traumatised

Why are they coming back?

Disillusioned / remorseful

Still driven by ideology, want better living conditions (opportunistic)

Sent to carry out an attack (or feel they can do more for the cause in Europe than in Syria/Iraq)

Captured and returned unwillingly

Key actions to consider
Overall approach

A tailored approach for each returnee

Establish coordination mechanisms across government agencies

RAN

Returnee 45

Immediate risk assessment

Multi-agency case management

(Local) Communication strategy

Intervention action plan

Scenarios

Prosecution

a. Prioritise resocialisation & reintegration during prison / probation
b. Train specialised staff
c. Tailored prison placement & transfer options

Non-prosecution / resocialisation

a. Build relationship & support returnee's family if possible
b. Information and / or training for everyone in contact with returnees
c. Holistic approach to mentoring, (mental health) treatment & practical support

Children

a. Focus on normalisation and resocialisation as soon as possible
b. Develop an overview of expertise focused on child trauma & indoctrination
c. Train first-line practitioners working with returnee children

Adults

Table of Contents

1 Introduction to this manual

This manual outlines responses to foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families, returning or planning to return to their home countries within the European Union, from terrorist conflict zones such as Syria and Iraq.[1] When the term 'returnees' is used in this manual, it refers to FTFs and their families (women and children).

The responses are presented from a **practitioner's perspective**, and should be considered as part of the broader set of responses to returning foreign terrorist fighters (including measures with a security focus such as criminal justice or administrative measures).

When dealing with returning FTFs and their families, safeguarding security is a prerequisite. The different proposed interventions therefore include a clear security aspect (e.g. as part of multi-agency teams). Risk assessments are the appropriate tool to appraise security risks and develop the most appropriate mitigating measures. Furthermore, close cooperation between grass root practitioners and the relevant public actors, including law enforcement, should ensure that security risks are communicated through the appropriate channels.

This manual sets out general approaches to be adapted to the relevant specific situation in individual EU Member States while taking into account that competences and structures within national, regional and local governments differ.

European citizens who travelled to Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones where terrorist groups have taken control, are now coming back. In recent months, Daesh has been under increasing military pressure in Syria and Iraq, causing the group to lose ground, leaders, manpower and supply routes. If the Daesh 'caliphate' is defeated militarily or collapses, the number of FTFs returning to Europe (especially Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom) may rise. Although it is difficult to predict how the situation will evolve, most affected EU Member States expect a slow but gradual rise of returnees, rather than large numbers at the same time. These people will have different backgrounds, and a large section of the returnees will be women and children.

Dealing with these returnees is complex and high on the agenda for many governments and local authorities. While the legislative framework and policy options may vary per Member State, there are common challenges when it comes to returnees, and common ways to deal with them effectively. These will be shared in this manual.

During the RAN High Level Conference (HLC) on 9 November 2016, the challenges related to FTF returnees were addressed by the Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship — Dimitris Avramopoulos, and Commissioner for the Security Union — Sir Julian King. They underlined the need for European practitioners, policy-makers and researchers to design and share suitable responses to this challenge.

> **Further reading: RAN HLC paper**
>
> This _ex post paper_ contains additional information on the discussions during the RAN HLC, which addressed FTF returnees, and in particular child returnees and polarisation.

Since November 2016, the RAN Centre of Excellence has held over a dozen meetings with first-line practitioners on the topic of FTF returnees. During RAN working group meetings, the subject has been discussed from multiple perspectives and areas of expertise: police, local authorities, education, prison and probation, youth, family and communities, exit and health and social care. Challenges and responses have also been discussed from different EU Member State perspectives within the Network of National Prevent Policy Makers[2] and the RAN CoE Steering Committee[3]. The European Strategic Communication Network (ESCN)[4] has provided input and shared expertise on strategic communication and communication strategies. First-line practitioners from the most affected EU Member States have shared details of

---

1   Many of the responses in this manual can also apply when dealing with other former foreign (terrorist) fighters.

2   The Network of National Prevent Policy Makers is a network of national policy-makers specialised in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism of the 28 EU Member States. The network is facilitated by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME).

3   The RAN Steering Committee comprises the co-chairs of the RAN Working Groups and DG HOME.

4   The European Strategic Communications Network (ESCN) is a network of 26 countries that collaborate to share analysis, good practice and ideas on the use of strategic communications in countering violent extremism (CVE).

their returnee cases and lessons learned from them; these cases are used to give context to the tips and guidelines within this manual. Finally, multiple national, European and international sources have been used and referenced in the preparation of this manual. This document is a culmination of these efforts and findings.

1.1   Manual for practitioners, practitioners' recommendations for policy-makers

This manual is intended primarily for first-line practitioners such as social workers, health professionals, teachers or police and prisons officers who need to deal with returnees one-on-one and at the local level. It sets out guiding principles, some step-by-step descriptions, methods and interventions which can be used to respond to returnees. Practitioners reading this manual can also refer to:

- **Case studies:** Practitioners from EU countries have shared concrete experiences and lessons learned from dealing with returnees. RAN has used this information to create case studies that illustrate the statements contained in the manual and provide specific insight into the (often more nuanced and complex) reality when dealing with returnees on a daily basis.

- **Practice in action:** examples of concrete practices being used throughout the EU are highlighted, accompanied by references to more information about these practices. Many are also part of the RAN Collection of Practices that serves to inspire practitioners in their daily work.

- **Further reading:** Extensive research, reporting and analysis has been carried out on the topics and issues addressed in this manual, both within the RAN CoE as well as by other international and national organisations. References to this additional material are integrated in the text for practitioners who are looking for more in-depth, detailed information on specific issues.

This manual is intended to give national authorities extra insight into practitioners' needs and ideas as they review existing approaches and strategies in light of challenges related to FTFs. **A list of practitioners' recommendations for Member States** is included at the beginning of the manual.

1.2   Structure of the manual

The manual comprises eight chapters, preceded by the Checklist of Recommendations for Member States.

- Practitioners' Recommendations for Member States

- Chapter 1 Introduction to this manual

- Chapter 2 FTF returnees: facts, figures and profiles

- Chapter 3 Investigation and risk assessment

- Chapter 4 Multi agency agreement on intervention

- Chapter 5 Prosecution

- Chapter 6 Non – prosecution / resocialisation

- Chapter 7 Children returnees

- Chapter 8 Cross cutting issues: gender and communication

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the scope of the FTF issue across different EU Member States, brief insights into what motivates foreign fighters to leave and the context in which FTF returnees are returning.

Chapters 3 to 6 describe the different scenarios when dealing with a returning FTF. For the sake of clarity, a logical order has been used. In reality, some steps will occur simultaneously.

When a returnee arrives, national and / or local government will either be expecting him / her due to information received via the police or security and intelligence agencies, other governments or diplomatic information routes, or will be informed shortly after the FTF returns via local authorities, practitioners in the field, family members or the FTF themselves. Intelligence assessments and police investigations are pre-requisites to determining potential risk and whether prosecution should take place (**Chapter 3**).

Parallel to this, coordination at a national and local level is needed to support the multi-agency intervention plan for the returnee's reintegration within society (either immediately or after serving a sentence), thus minimising the potential risk the returnee may pose. A local multi-agency team from the returnee's home town should also be informed and start preparing its response (**Chapter 4**).

The returnee may be prosecuted, imprisoned and released (on probation) or receive a community sentence (on probation) **(Chapter 5)**. Alternatively, he / she will not be prosecuted and resocialisation should start immediately **(Chapter 6).**

When children are involved, they require special attention. In most cases, they will join their returnee parents but will be in need of specific care (**Chapter 7**).

Finally, in **Chapter 8,** brief information and tips are provided on the cross-cutting issues of gender and communications around FTF returnees.

The structure of the Returnee Manual is best visualised as follows (see next page):

Member State Checklist

Chapter 1
Introduction to the manual

Chapter 2
Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) Returnees: Facts, figures and profiles

Chapter 3
Investigation and risk assessment
- Investigation and role of police
- Risk Assessment tools
- RAN CoE Returnee 45 investigative tool

Chapter 4
Multi-agency approach to interventions
- Information sharing protocols
- Cooperation models and stakeholder involvement
- Development of action plans

Chapter 5
Prosecution route Imprisonment:
- Safety and security measures
- Deradicalisation
- Reintegration/resocialisation (connection with families)
- Trauma intervention
- Psychological support
- Mentoring

Release:
- Reintegration/resocialisation
- Family support
- Trauma intervention
- Psychological support
- Mentoring
- Practical issues (housing, education)

Chapter 6
Non- Prosecution route:
- Deradicalisation
- Reintegration/resocialisation
- Family support
- Trauma intervention
- Psychological support
- Mentoring
- Practical issues (housing, education)
- Counselling

Chapter 7
Children returnees
- Legal matters - Child protection - Role of schools
- Placement and living conditions - Trauma informed practice - Family support

Chapter 8
Cross-cutting issues
Gender, strategic communication and narratives

2 FTF Returnees: Facts, Figures and Profiles

This chapter provides an insight into what Europe is dealing with in terms of returning FTFs, as well as why so many people left Europe to join terrorist groups in the first place. It looks at the many different profiles that make up Europe's FTFs, as well as the different motives for returning and the challenges these create.

Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs)

Foreign terrorist fighters are not new. Many conflict zones have attracted foreigners in the past, such as Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc. The blowback effect has also been evident in several terrorist atrocities, such as the 2005 London bombings, the perpetrators of which had received terrorist training abroad in Pakistan. What is unique about the current foreign fighter contingents in Syria and Iraq is the sheer volume of foreign fighters, which is unprecedented. Many of these European citizens who travelled to Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones where terrorist groups rule, are now coming back. In fact, many have already returned.

In recent months, Daesh has been under increasing military pressure in Syria and Iraq, causing the group to lose ground, leaders, manpower and supply routes. If the Daesh 'caliphate' is defeated militarily or collapses, the number of FTFs returning to Europe (especially Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom) is expected to rise. Although it is difficult to predict how the situation will develop, most affected EU Member States expect a slow but gradual rise of returnees, rather than large numbers at the same time. Various estimates exist, predicting between 1 200 and 3 000 returnees. They will have different backgrounds, and a large section of the returnees will be women and children. So far the return rate for FTFs is around 20-30 %.

2.1 Facts and figures

More than 42 000 foreign terrorist fighters have travelled to join Daesh from over 120 countries (between 2011-2016). **More than 5 000 FTFs have departed from Europe**. Many of these left from Belgium, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, but significant numbers also left from Austria, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. The **average percentage of FTFs returning to Europe is around 30 %,** but the figure is higher for Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Nearly half of FTFs from these countries have returned.

The mobilisation of FTFs seems to have peaked in 2015, and **flows stemmed significantly in 2016** in terms of travel to Syria. The continuing conflict enveloping Iraq, Syria and other conflict zones, combined with the collapse of Daesh, has led to a serious and growing concern over a massive exodus of fighters and a large influx of FTF returnees. It is clear that Europe can expect a growth in the numbers of people returning who have lived and fought with Daesh or the al Qa'ida-linked Hay'at Tharir al-Sham (HTS, formerly known as Jahbat Fatah al Sham, the old Jahbat-al Nusra).

Experts consider a mass exodus of FTFs unlikely but some will return to their old neighbourhoods (this is more likely to be the case for women and children). Some will be imprisoned, others will not. Most will experience trauma from inflicting or witnessing violence. Some returnees will be disillusioned and even remorseful; others will continue to have violent extremist views and may become influential radicalisers, or even terrorist sleepers. Some will return with the explicit intention of planning and executing attacks.

The terrorist attacks in Brussels in May 2014 (Jewish Museum) and March 2016 (airport and metro station), as well as the multiple attacks in Paris in November 2015, were all atrocities perpetrated to some degree by FTF returnees. In the Paris attacks, at least six of the perpetrators were FTFs returning from Syria, while three out of five Brussels attackers were FTF returnees. While many FTF returnees will not become operational terrorists, mere contact with 'jihadi' terrorist groups such as Daesh and / or HTS translates into significant national security risks. **Operational connectivity between Daesh and the perpetrators has been identified for a significant number of terrorist plots within Europe**. Between 2014-2016, there were 42 terrorist attacks against the West, of which 38 involved some connections between Daesh and the terrorists who carried out the attacks.[5]

---

5   Olidort J. (2016), Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State, *Policy Focus* 147.

2.2 Recruitment, motivations and living conditions

There is no one-size-fits-all profile for FTF returnees. Their stories, experiences, traumas and skillsets differ substantially. Any effective approach to dealing with returnees must take this into account. In this chapter, the manual provides in-depth insight into Daesh recruitment tactics, the situation on the ground in Syria and Iraq, and the different roles played by various types of FTFs, including women and children.

2.2.1 Recruitment and travel

Travel routes used to join Daesh or other terrorist groups often involve flights to cities in Turkey, and then travel to the Turkish-Syrian border. There, recruits are helped across the border by Daesh facilitators; they are interviewed or interrogated, filling in recruitment forms to cross-verify who had facilitated the journey and providing other verifiable personal details. These forms include 23 data fields.[6] Foreign fighter testimonies reveal that **recruits are then separated according to Daesh-identified specific skillsets** that determine whether the recruit will, after training camp, take up frontline duties or more specialised roles. When filling out this Daesh personnel file, male recruits are also asked who recommended them or could vouch for them, and what role they want to play. Specifically, they are asked to "select from three options: fighter, suicide bomber, and suicide fighter (inghimasi)". This recruitment form is a valuable tool for verifying information provided by FTF returnees during interviews.

Recruitment manuals such as *Hijrah to the Islamic State (2015)* provide practical advice for preparation, equipment and travel, as well as guidance on concealment upon arrival in Turkey and *en route* to various safe houses along the border. It also contains sections devoted to women travelling to Syria. Women recruits are advised that they can travel without a mahram (male guardian) to disguise their purpose. When travelling together with their husband, women are taken to a separate house called a madhāfah[7] until their men have finished at the training camp. Since the autumn of 2015, travel rates have reduced. The slowdown in travel is due to a depletion in recruits, disillusionment among returning fighters, military and territorial losses by Daesh, and targeted security measures against foreign fighters making it difficult for them to travel.

2.2.2 Motivations for travelling (*hijrah*)

There are multiple reasons for individuals joining violent extremist groups such as Daesh and HTS. This means **there is no single psychological profile for FTFs**. They also cover multiple nationalities, ethnicities, ages and both genders. There is not one factor but many vectors that combine to form infinite combinations of causation. A kaleidoscope of push and pull factors driven by social media, group dynamics and radicalisers influences the process of radicalisation[8]. There is still a dearth of consolidated, evidence-based information on the background and radicalisation process of those FTFs who left for Syria and Iraq, as well as on associated returnee issues. Often the information resides with security services and police. There are however a few exceptions, as explained below.

One way to understand why individuals are motivated and recruited to join these groups is to look at the **central themes of Daesh propaganda** and the way it is constructed. *Ingram*[9] argues that the building blocks of Daesh propaganda are born of three interrelated and interlinked themes: **identity, crisis construct and solution construct**. Accordingly, Daesh uses the interplay between value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing narratives to strengthen in-group and out-group identities, as well as the overall system of meaning. Specific themes are projected throughout Daesh propaganda, according to *Winter[10], such as: mercy, belonging, brutality, victimhood, war and utopia. Others*[11] have identified themes such as: **military, governance, *da'wa* (propagation), *hisbah* (control of Sharia), promotion of the 'caliphate' and enemy attacks**. These studies offer entry points for understanding FTFs' motivation to perform *hijra*.

---

6   Dodwell, B., Milton, D., Rassler, D., *Then and Now: Comparing the Flow of Foreign Fighters to AQI and the Islamic State* (Version of 8 December 2016). Retrieved from ***https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Then-and-Now.pdf***.

7   The word madhāfah applies to any visiting house or guest house. Since the Jihad in Afghanistan, it is used for the safe houses where foreign terrorist are accommodated before joining jihadist training camps.

8   Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), (2016). Issue Paper: 'The Root Causes of Violent Extremism'. Available at ***https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/home-affairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_root-causes_jan2016_en.pdf***.

9   Ingram, H.J. (2016), *Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda* (The Hague: ICCT).

10   Winter, C., *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015.

11   Zelin, A. Y., *Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output.* (Version of 2015). Retrieved from ***http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/445/html***.

A _study_[12] of the back-issues of Daesh magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* reveals different projected themes, but a vacillation between two: war and utopia. Unsurprisingly, it shows that the **issue of war has become more prominent** over time as Daesh has lost territory. In terms of war themes, Daesh projects inevitable victory, martyrdom, the killing of enemies and victimhood. Themes relating to utopia focus on belonging, welfare, justice and order, and eradicating cultural transgressions.

Dabiq 1 – 15, Rumiyah 16 – 22

Legend: Victimhood, Utopia, Belonging, War, Brutality
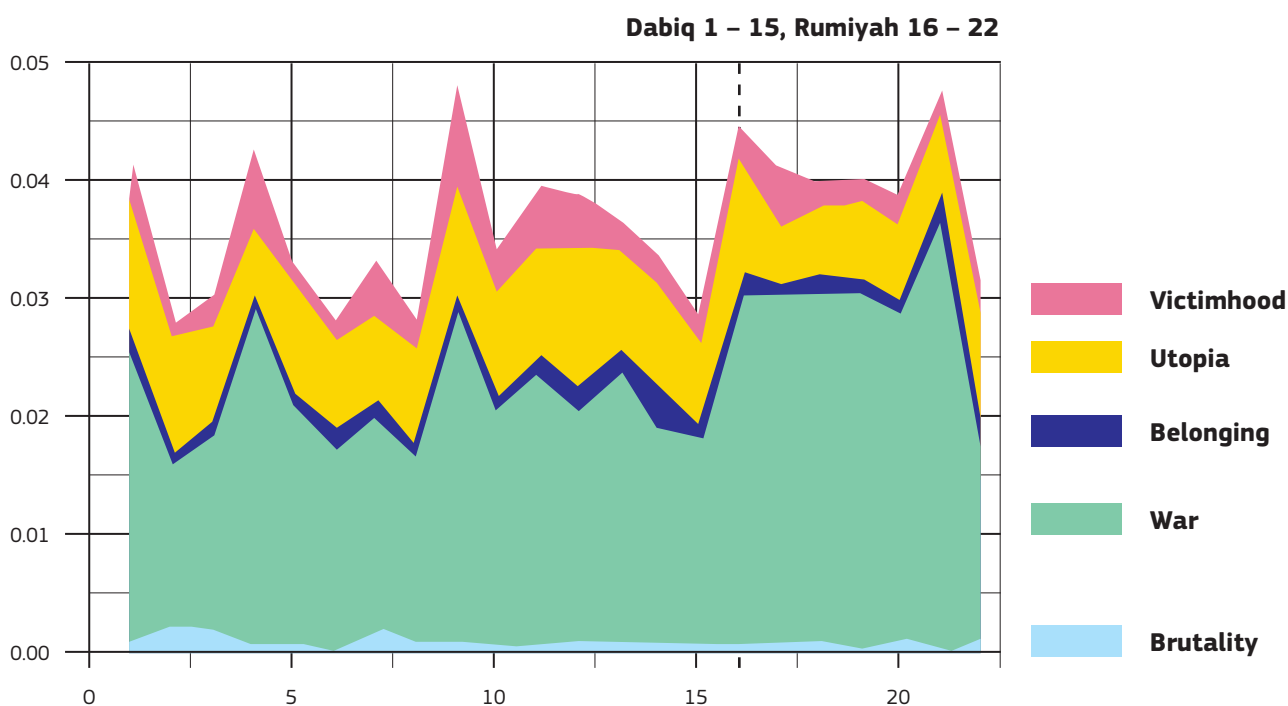
Figure 2: Lisa Kaati (FOI, May 2017)

A central theme that Daesh promotes to attract supporters and recruits is that of success. The Daesh slogan *'Baqiyah wa-Tatamaddad'* (remaining and expanding) projects the image that Daesh constantly achieves success and inevitably victory. As such it is in constant motion and in kinetic action. It **combines this image of status and belonging with one of a utopia for 'pious Muslims'**, and simultaneously projects itself as a defender of Muslims under siege and violent onslaught from oppressors and tyrants. According to Daesh propaganda, the oppressive conditions experienced by those suffering, combined with the promise of religious utopia, make it a sacred duty for every individual to perform *hijra* and to wage jihad against enemies. Even setbacks and defeats are interpreted as part of the process leading to the final apocalyptic battles, which are part of Daesh eschatology.

Recruitment strategies are conducted both online and offline. Online messages are simple, powerful and binary, offering Muslims stark choices between abandoning their secular and conflicted life in the West to perform *hijrah* to the so-called caliphate, or remaining oppressed and subjugated by tyrants in the West. As such, Daesh's recruitment focuses on grooming techniques that exploit identity confusion and focus on persuasion, emotional manipulation and total obedience.

There are many reasons why recruits are attracted to this destructive ideology and motivated to join. For some it offers **excitement and status**, looting **opportunities**, **wages, housing**, and the option to keep women as slaves; for others it is an opportunity to offer **humanitarian support**.[13] For some it offers an escape from their ordinary, depressing and problem-filled lives. Others seek **belonging**, **a sense of purpose and a higher calling**. It can offer excitement and action, or strict rules on how to live within a clear moral framework. Some are recruited from within their families and friendship circles. Using grooming techniques, Daesh recruiters identify individual psychological weaknesses and skilfully exploit these through online and offline techniques.

---

12   Kaati, L., (2017), *Det digitala kalifatet: En studie av Islamiska statens propaganda* (Stockholm: FOI (FOI-R—4429—SE)).

13   The humanitarian motivation was strong early in the conflict until 2014 when the 'caliphate' was declared. While individuals were initially attracted to travel on humanitarian grounds, some later became attracted to a destructive ideology and pathways.

2.2.3   Experience in theatre

FTF returnees' experiences are varied, but extremely challenging to deal with on multiple levels. Once new recruits have crossed over into Daesh territory, they face numerous security and social controls limiting their behaviour, communication and freedom of movement. Recruits are separated according to gender. Male FTFs go through registration and questioning while they surrender their ID documents.

Inducted Daesh recruits all take **compulsory sharia courses**. The length of the course depends on Daesh's assessment of the individual's loyalty and value to the group, but can last from three weeks to three months or longer. These courses take place alongside **military training**, the content of which depends on whether there is a need for new fighters or if the recruit is being trained for a suicide-attack.

Daesh also employs **shock tactics**, both on and off the battlefield. A central strategy is the use of extreme brutality, involving mass beheadings, on-the-spot executions and torture. This scares the population into submission and makes it possible to control occupied territories. It is not only adults that experience this but also children, some whom are recruited into indoctrination and training camps from the age of nine. Young impressionable children are not only exposed to the ravages of war, but also to countless acts of unspeakable cruelty, from the mass beheadings to public floggings, amputations and crucifixions. Some children have been deployed in combat roles and as executioners.

Daesh also uses children as eyes and ears – as informants – creating a deeply distrustful environment. This destroys traditional linkages of clan and family loyalty as accusations of sharia infractions are used as a tool in Daesh-infighting and against all enemies. The Sharia Courts are administered by the _Diwan_ of Judgement and Grievance and dispense with religious judgements on all matters. Considerable bureaucracy and meticulous documentation and paperwork provide enhanced control functions. The control of infrastructure, food, water and jobs is used as a tool against locals to force them to join Daesh. The _Diwan_ of Public Security enforces internal security and counter-intelligence work. Travel outside city limits is forbidden without permission and requires official authorisation.

When arriving in Syria, **women** are obliged to live in single women dormitories known as _maqar._ Husbands may be selected but are then regularly sent to frontlines or on missions. If he dies, the wife is placed in a _shahada's maqar_ (for widows).

Women have to conform to a strict dress code in public, wearing a niqab and gloves. The _Diwan Hisbah_ (morality police) enforces these strict dress codes and travel rules. If caught straying from the dress code, the _Hisbah_ may issue a notice to the husband. The husband must then appear before a Sharia court hearing, where punishments for him and his wife will be decided, ranging from a fine to public flogging or even death.

2.2.4   Return to Europe

FTF returnees make their way back to Europe along several routes:

- some request consular support, especially if they require new passports or assistance with children born in Syria or Iraq; some travel on false ID documents;

- some make it back via detours through other European destinations; some travel back directly through Turkey.

- some that are captured by the Turkish or Iraqi authorities, or by the Kurdish forces;

Travelling to European destinations, returnees might be met at the airport by police or security officials, who either arrest returnees or, at the very least, subject them to questioning to assess risk levels, the returnees' mood as well as general condition. Some of them return unnoticed and either report themselves, or are reported by family members, local authorities or practitioners. Some may remain unnoticed. If not charged with terrorist related offences, some may

Return Pathways

Figure 3, The return to Europe

still face criminal prosecution for financial fraud or benefit fraud. This first meeting can often be used as an entry point for further investigation and interventions. It is also useful to use risk assessment tools (see chapter 3) in this and subsequent meetings.

Security services and police should provide information, possibly via a designated point of contact (see chapter 4), to the relevant local **multi-agency coordination team** assigned to the case. This team will most likely include: local authority coordinator or representative, local police, social work / family support professional, child protection services and a mental health professional. Based on the case, an educational professional, a prison and / or probation representative, NGO professionals (e.g. exit workers) or community members may be involved. They should have meetings about the returnees in which each individual agency is requested to provide input and views on the returnee concerned, and how he or she should be approached and agree the best form of intervention.

This multi-agency coordination team should provide, to the extent that is possible, a 360-degree view of the individual concerned, their parents, children, friends, history and current circumstances. **The team should develop a tailored action plan for the returnee concerned** and clear instructions as to which agencies are in the lead to carry out meetings, risk assessments and dialogue with the returnee, their relatives, friends, and relevant stakeholders (see chapter 4).

If returnees are arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to prison (see chapter 5), the local multi-agency cooperation team should assess and be able to hold early meetings with the inmate as well as with his / her parents and spouse to establish a personal relationship and possibly a working relationship. This relationship could involve resocialisation interventions such as mentoring, psychological assistance, parent support and networks, practical assistance in dealing with authorities about housing, employment, release conditions, etc. (see chapter 6).

If the returnee is not prosecuted, it is important that the local multi-agency coordination team meets to establish procedures for managing the returnee and possible needs. It is important for the team to organise **mentoring and family support**. These interventions can be seen as barometers for the well-being of the returnee. They offer the

opportunity to conduct risk assessments of the returnee and assessment of the family dynamics. At the same time they offer the opportunity to establish trust and working relationships with the returnee and his / her family (see chapter 6).

Another important issue is to assess the well-being of children in these households and to safeguard them from any risks, such as indoctrination or being forced to travel back terrorist controlled areas. These difficult assessments need to be carried out by professionals. Extensive consultation with the returnee, plus family and friends is crucial and necessary (see chapter 7).

2.3   The different profiles of FTF returnees

The FTF returnees have different profiles, as well as reasons for return. Those who have travelled to join Daesh or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) have filled a variety of roles within the organisations, from would-be suicide bombers to fighters and other auxiliary roles.

2.3.1   Different generations

As a first step in tailoring responses to several groups of returnees, it might be beneficial to consider two generations, although a strict differentiation is not appropriate:

a) The first generation of returnees, predominantly men, and motivated to leave for humanitarian reasons and / or to fight the Assad regime, was — with some notable exceptions — more prone to disillusionment, arguably less violent and relatively free to leave the terrorist-held territory;

b) The current, second generation of returnees is more battle-hardened and ideologically committed, had to evade pervasive surveillance by Daesh to escape and may have come back with violent motives: to harm EU citizens.

There are also **children returnees** to consider. From the age of nine, some have received military and ideological training. Returning children have experienced war trauma, witnessed executions and punishments, and in some cases been forced to execute people. This was highlighted for instance by the Dutch intelligence agency AIVD in their publications *Focus on Returnees*[14] (2017) and *Life With Daesh: The Myth Unravelled*[15] (2016).

As Daesh has put up many barriers to FTF leaving (strong surveillance and monitoring of communication, threats of execution), authorities need to **question the intentions of returnees**, investigate whether they have committed crimes (including overseas), and whether they have ulterior motives for returning, such as planning attacks within Europe.

Further reading: Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS) at the Swedish Defence University

This *study* examines a set of variables of the foreign fighters from Sweden who joined jihadi terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq between June 2012 and September 2016.

Dutch intelligence service publications about Daesh

This *paper* describes life within the so-called caliphate.

In this *paper* outlines the possible threats posed by returnees to society.

---

14 Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (2017), *Focus on Returnees*. Retrieved from *https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2017/02/15/publication-focus-on-returnees*.

15 Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (2016), Life with ISIS: the Myth Unravelled. Available at *https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2016/06/17/life-with-isis-the-myth-unravelled-available-in-arabic*.

2.3.2 Differences between men, women and children

- **Male returnees:** Men in particular may have been involved in war crimes such as murder, rape and slavery, and may have taken part in terrorist or violent extremist atrocities. **All of them have witnessed extreme violence, and lived in unsafe and unhealthy conditions**. It is also important to note that disillusion with a terrorist group does not necessarily equate to distance from a violent ideology, nor disengagement from the 'jihadi' cause, when back in EU.

- **Female returnees:** Some analyses of women joining Daesh depict them as victims[16]. This perspective deprives women of their agency and ignores the fact **Western women who join jihadist groups tend to be very motivated by ideology**. For many women, joining Daesh is driven by **utopian ideals**, and fulfils a need for **excitement and meaning**. Daesh propaganda focuses on projecting an idealised image of life in Syria and Iraq. Other factors behind women leaving Europe for Daesh include teenagers falling in love with the image of marrying a 'warrior', or discrimination (perceived or experienced). Many women are striving for the establishment of the so-called caliphate according to prophetic methodology, which is, at its core — in their belief-system — a complete system of governance. Daesh projects a romanticised image of a society free from discrimination in which women are allowed to practise their faith. The Daesh dialectic salafi-jihadist worldview, dividing the world into opposites such as purity and impurity, focuses on rejecting *dunya* (the material world), which followers condemn as corrupt and polluting.

  Many women were led to believe that joining Daesh would give them a sense of **empowerment**. Some saw this as a revolt which could free them from parental restrictions and traditions, enabling them to find their identity, community and a sense of belonging. In joining, they assumed they would be able to take independent decisions about their lives and future, allowing them to marry outside family control. Daesh projects the family as the core focal point, ensuring stability for FTFs travelling to the front and retaining morale within fighter ranks.

  The Daesh magazine Dabiq portrays women as child-bearers and indispensable to the long-term survival of the so-called Islamic State. The principal responsibility of women is to raise their children and indoctrinate them into to the core values of the so-called caliphate: sons should sacrifice themselves as martyrs and daughters should replicate their mother's example.

  Daesh has developed an intricate bureaucracy of public virtue which is reinforced by the *Hisbaa* and the Sharia courts. This entails a long list of proscribed dress-codes and behaviours. For example, all women require a male guardian to leave their homes. Women must be accompanied by a *mahram*, who is a related male guardian such as a brother or father, or other women, when outside or travelling. The all-female *al-Khaansa* unit enforces public virtue, meets out punishments, and mans roadblocks to search women (ensuring men cannot use the niqab as a disguise). Several Western women have joined this unit.

  The recruitment of women to Daesh usually occurs through social media and during social activities such as childcare, the preparation of food and attending activist demonstrations.

  It is also clear that **women play an active role in disseminating Daesh propaganda** on social media to attract more female recruits. Women in Syria have also made themselves available to others looking for advice on things like how to carry out *hijra*, what to pack, how much money to bring, and so on.

  Female returnees often return to their home countries within the EU for one or a combination of several reasons: some are disillusioned after their experience of hardship and oppression, or after their husband was killed; others come back for medical treatment and family support. In a few instances, women have been bought free and rescued by their families. Some return due to family pressure.

  It is important to note that there are female Daesh-supporters who will likely exert pressure on female returnees once back home.

- **Child returnees:** Children and minors brought to Syria or born into families with an allegiance to the Islamic State represent a serious and special issue. A significant number of children have been taken to Syria and Iraq by one or both parents. Many more have been born into FTF families in the field. Those born in theatre, risk statelessness as Daesh birth certificates are invalid. Establishing parenthood to enable children to return to Europe with their parents is important.

---

16 See for example, Lakhani, S., Ahmadi, B. (2016), Women in Extremist Movements: Not Just Passive Victims, (U.S. Institute of Peace). Retrieved from ***https://www.usip.org/blog/2016/11/women-extremist-movements-not-just-passive-victims***.

Providing exact numbers for the children living in Daesh-held territory in Syria and Iraq is very difficult. Many women become pregnant quickly as contraception is illegal, and because Daesh wants families to have as many children as possible. For example, **the Dutch counter terrorism coordinator estimates that at least 80 children with a Dutch connection live within Daesh-held territory in Syria and Iraq.** Of these 80 known children, 30 % are between four and eight years old and around half of them are aged three or younger. According to French officials, there are around 460 French minors in Daesh claimed territory, with half of them under the age of five and a third born there. Belgian officials reported around 78 Belgian minors in Daesh-claimed territory.

The **recruitment of children into Daesh begins formally at the age of 9** and continues until they are around 15 years old. Children as young as 9 years old receive weapons training.[17] Many of these children are recruited through multiple pathways, ranging from religious indoctrination at mosques and camps, their parents and financial enticements. This child socialisation goes through at least six stages: "seduction, schooling, selection, subjugation, specialization, and stationing"[18]. These *Ashbal al-Khilafah*, or 'cubs of the Caliphate' are often forced to attend camps where they are subjected to intense ideological indoctrination, training in fighting skills (martial arts and self-defence) and how to deal with prisoners.

Daesh **child recruits are indoctrinated to show absolute loyalty to Daesh** and commitment to martyrdom as the highest cause. This loyalty is instilled through religious instruction and watching Daesh videos. Once they are socialised into the ranks of Daesh, they perform multiple roles: spies, preachers, recruiters, soldiers, executioners, suicide-bombers. Daesh teachers and officials ask children to act as informants, to report any suspicious behaviour by their parents or others that violates religious laws or suggests opposition to Daesh-rule.

Girls are often asked to stay at home with their mothers so that they may be raised to support their future husbands. Religious education is also encouraged. According to the Daesh manifesto 'Women of the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case study', girls can marry at the age of nine and at the latest at the age of 16 or 17 years old. They should not work.

Children are also used in Daesh propaganda efforts: Daesh films and distributes execution videos in which children murder captives in barbaric ways. The group's use of children is not only tactical, but also strategic in terms of state-building and fostering a new generation. The children are encouraged to join as suicide bombers, a role extolled by their instructors as the highest calling for pious Muslim youths.

Outside of the training camps, children are taught in Daesh-administered schools with only religious education on the curriculum. Daesh has produced a curriculum on two levels: "Salafization [of Islam] and ISization [of society]".[19] Through this process, Daesh promotes only what it perceives as the purist interpretation of Islam, while concentrating on preparing the next generation through a focus on the 'caliphate', state building, violence and apocalypse.

The welfare of the child must be the first priority for the multiagency response. Children are deeply impressionable and malleable. Exposure to extreme levels of violence creates trauma and potentially desensitises children to brutalisation and violence. Acting out what they see adults do is a major risk. This will traumatise them and lead to psychosocial problems and possibly major security risks for the future. Understanding the extent of indoctrination, the exposure to violence and the living conditions experienced is crucial to assessing these children.

Further reading: *Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State* by Jacob Olidort: this paper describes how children in the so-called caliphate are schooled.

---

17   Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (2017), *Focus on Returnees*. Available at ***https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2017/02/15/publication-focus-on-returnees.***

18   Horgan, J. G., Taylor, M., *Winter*, C., From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* **(**Volume 40, Issue 7, 2017).

19   Olidort J. (2016), Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State, *Policy Focus* 147.

2.3.3 Different motives for returning

We can distinguish between different reasons and motives behind FTFs wanting to return:

1. the intention to carry out an attack;

2. disillusionment and remorse — some have had enough of the dire living conditions, others see no opportunity to remain (due to a loss of power from terrorist group they belonged to)[20];

3. family pressure and intervention;

4. health-care reasons (i.e. injuries or childbirth);

5. return after refuge in Turkey;

6. capture and extradition back to the EU.

2.4 Foreign terrorist fighter returnee challenges

FTF returnees are a major security concern precisely because of their battlefield experience, training in the use of weapons and connections to international terrorist networks. **Desensitisation to the use of violence, combined with the post-traumatic stress disorder** (PTSD) that often accompanies combat experience, and potential involvement in atrocities such as those that Daesh proudly publicises, further increases the potential threat posed by returnees.

This cocktail of risk factors is magnified through **humiliation, frustration, brutalisation, trauma and loss**. The combined effect of this can be further radicalisation, fighting skills and a lower threshold for violence and killing as well as a combat mindset. Many FTFs suffer from asocial psychological disorders, which manifest themselves in low impulse control, anger management issues, aggression and violence in social relations. FTFs often return to their previous radical milieus or criminal gangs, having an adverse effect on social dynamics.

There are many **security challenges** and possible scenarios for FTF returnees. Those that succeed in making it to Turkey or Syria / Iraq's neighbouring states may seek consular support without proper identification or passport, and without financial means. Procedures and contingency plans are required as soon as the returnees present themselves abroad. These must be — as described in paragraph 2.2.4 — accompanied by cooperation between the national and local levels. Children who have been born without registration or documents need to be processed and coordinated.

Challenges for female returnees:

• deep commitment to the 'caliphate' ideal and to Daesh;

• peer pressure from Daesh-women support groups at home;

• being able to leave the house and actually doing so, as Daesh rules aim to keep women cloistered inside their homes; breaking this rule also means breaking the taboo of gender segregation;

• stigmatisation within the community;

• dealing with the violence and restrictive movements witnessed / experienced;

• child protection issues as children may also be radicalised.

Challenges for child returnees:

• proving parenthood and nationality (possibly through DNA testing);

• physical and psychological problems;

---

20   First 3 types inspired on the typology used by Mr Richard Barrett , Director of The Global Strategy Network.

- dealing with severe stress and trauma.; the effects of which may manifest themselves through loss of speech, aggression, intense fear and signs of post-traumatic stress disorder;

- combat experience and subjection to violence and punishments as part of everyday life;

- indoctrination (children are taught at a young age that anyone not observing the correct and strict interpretation of Islam is a *kufar* (unbeliever) and must be killed

- dealing with participation in executions;

- dealing with previous involvement in terrorist missions or collecting targeted information in the West and other intelligence useful for Daesh;

- experience of arranged marriages and sexual abuse;

- physical suffering through previous beatings, torture and rape;

- injuries sustained through punishment or fighting;

- detachment from their parents — training camps are designed to do this;

- vulnerability to influence by the attitudes and behaviour of the parents;

- stigmatisation as a 'terrorist' at school;

- broken kinship ties and altered lines of loyalty, particularly among children who were seeking affiliation and identity;

- lack of familiarity with EU society and norms.

3 Investigation and Risk Assessment

This chapter provides a framework for conducting threat and risk assessments of returnees. It is meant to guide the process of developing suitable tools that police and multi-agency cooperation teams can use to assess returnee risks and intervention measures. The chapter also gives an overview of several risk assessment models developed for different purposes. No specific model focusing on FTFs has been developed. Importantly, this manual provides just such a model, the RAN CoE Returnee 45 model.

There are **four pre-requisite actions** when a returnee comes back to his or her home country:

1. The returnee must be identified and debriefed for information about his / her travel, actions and return, and for information about the terrorist organisation he/she joined.

2. A risk assessment of the threat the returnee poses to society must be made.

3. On national level, a national point of contact or taskforce should also start preparing — in a multi-agency setting — the interventions needed to minimise the risk when the returnee goes back into society (see chapter 4 for details). This person should also set up contacts with the local multi-agency cooperation team.

4. The local multi-agency cooperation team should start preparing a coordinated approach tailored to the returnee's circumstances and the risks he / she poses when going back to his / her home town.

The first two are addressed in this chapter – the last two in chapter 4.

3.1.1 After departure for Syria / immediate preparation for return

In cases where individuals have succeeded in joining terrorist groups abroad, it is essential for police to begin work on their case before they return.

There are three main reasons to do this:

1. There is a substantial risk that siblings and peers may be targeted for recruitment from abroad. Preventing chain-recruitment using the same facilitation and finance networks is a priority concern for police.

2. In cases where the families were not aware of the impending departure, they need substantial counselling and support to build trustworthy relationships with their relatives and others close to the foreign fighter with a view to assisting in the resocialisation and reintegration of returning FTFs.

3. Establishing contact with the family will provide valuable insights into the family dynamics and context. It will also provide an opportunity for data-gathering on the circumstances surrounding the foreign fighter, which will be valuable in managing the returnee process. Most returnees return to their familiar surroundings. Establishing relationships within these milieus and picking up information about other vulnerable individuals and how a returnee may influence radical milieus will be valuable. (For more on family support see chapter 4).

Almost all approaches to returnees in Europe follow the same process. This process has been summarised by the Dutch counter terrorism coordinator and its factsheet *Comprehensive Approach Returnees* (figure 3). The approach is more or less the same as the one being developed and improved for radicalising individuals who want to travel, or who have been stopped from leaving for the so-called caliphate. This **intelligence-based and investigatory approach becomes the first line of response**, starting with a criminal investigation and assessment of the risk and threat posed by the returnee to the community and society. In cases where there are no prosecutions, the case will be handled by the local multi-agency cooperation team and an individual case approach will be developed. Findings by the RAN Police (RAN POL) Working Group have emphasised that no radical new approaches and institutions for handling returnees are needed. Instead, the objective should be to copy successful approaches, to adapt them and to improve them.

Travel

To prevent people from travelling with the intention to join a terrorist organisation, local and national authorities and other organisations work closely together. When they discover that someone wants to travel to join a terrorist organisation, he or she is discussed in a multidisciplinary case management team. This team consists of the minicipality, the national police, the public prosecutor and other local and national parties. They weigh and impose interventions on a case-by-case basis. Examples of interventions are: revoking passports, the use of international systems to identify travellers, European Arrest Warrants or child protection measures.

Return
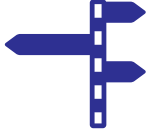
Returnees are detected as early as possible in order to minimise their potential threat. The public prosecutor and the police investigate know jihadist travellers. They an also be subject of an intelligence investigation. These investigations can also disclose that someone wants to return to the Netherlands or Europe. On an international level information is exchanged in order to detect returnees in time. If a returnee is detected outside the Netherlands, he or she can be escorted to the Netherlands by the military police.

Arrival

Every returnee is arrested for questioning and is prosecuted on the basis of the criminal investigation. Furthermore, an assessment is made of the threat that is posed by each returnee. Returnees are also subject of discussion in a multidisciplinary case management team.

Individual approach

The multidisciplinary case management team decides which interventions are best suited to minimize the potential threat from a returnee. A tailor made approach is key. Examples of interventions are: criminal prosecution, restraining orders, acre programs or a deradicalisation program. If a person is convicted ad subsequently detained, he or she is subject of the multidisciplinary case management team during and after detention.

Authorities continuosly gathering information to build a criminal case agaisnt returnees so they can be prosecuted upon return.

Criminal investigation

Figure 4: Dutch approach to returnees

3.1.2 Specific action points for police officers dealing with returnees

- Open a **case file** on anyone who has left for Syria. This should cover both pursuit and investigation angles, as well as prevention and resocialisation options.

- Establish **a case-management process** to deal with returnees through available multi-agency structures. Two processes occur simultaneously: 1) pursuit and investigation; and 2) prevention and engagement with the family.

- Establish a case-management process to deal with returnees with children that relies on the multi-agency cooperation put in place for child protection and child abuse cases. This case-management deals with the entire family at risk.

- **Test the information-sharing protocols** in returnee scenarios. What improvements are needed and what options and resources are available? Consider drawing up a short, tailored handbook for handling returnees that takes into account processes, procedures and resources.

- Consider establishing a **24/7 police resource specialist** on returnees and extremism issues that can be consulted by first-line practitioners.

- **Engage with the FTF** and family as soon as someone leaves for Syria / Iraq. Specific police officers, such as family contact officers and trusted community police officers should make themselves available for consultation on police matters. Families are desperate for information on what is going on, how they can get their children back and what exactly will happen when their children / spouse return. Home visits, together with family support or social services, can be helpful. It is important the police officer (or someone else) has the right personality and relation-building skills for this interaction. (See chapter 4 on family support.)

- In cases where families distrust police and other authorities, **use influencing techniques** to get a foot in the door. Some police use hostage negotiator techniques to build working relations with individuals who strongly dislike or oppose police. Robert B. Caldini's six key principles of influence[21] (consistency, reciprocity, liking, social proof, authority and scarcity) form a proven approach to influencing returnees and families.

- In cases where there are returnees with children, **consult specialist mental health professionals** to prepare specialist trauma treatment and proper assessment procedures. The lessons from child soldiers, as well as children exposed to domestic violence or sexual abuse, tell us that in terms of treatment, we need long-term interventions, delivered by specialists — not the police. For the police it is relevant to determine how to engage with young children who might be witnesses, victims or perpetrators. There are valuable lessons to be gained from police experience in child abuse and domestic violence cases. (See chapter 5 on children.)

- Check returnees' **financial footprint**, including bank accounts, debts and transfers. Financial investigations increase understanding of relationships within networks. Many foreign fighters accumulated debt and transferred funds to take to the terrorist group they joined.

Practice in Action: Example of police using conversation as an intervention:

A Guide to Police Conversation Intervention: A dialogue promoting responsibility and positive change, National Police Directorate Norway, 2011

3.1.3 Returnees in transit and arriving home

Foreign fighters trying to return to Europe face innumerable practical obstacles. Travel from Syria into Turkey or Libya and then into Italy is difficult and hazardous. When recruits join Daesh, for example, they are asked to surrender their passports to the organisation for security reasons. These documents are then either destroyed or used by human traffickers for terrorism purposes or other illegal activities.

Some foreign fighters do succeed in returning to the EU unnoticed to security. More often, foreign fighter returnees and their families approach the consulate or embassy to request new passports. Other foreign fighters are interdicted by national authorities who, after interrogation and investigation, may then instruct foreign embassies / consulates and hand over returnees. This provides intelligence services and the police with early-warning mechanisms, alerting them to returnees long before they return home. These different scenarios provide a host of different consular challenges:

- verifying returnees' identities;

- dealing with children born 'stateless' and without proof of identity;

- how practically to transfer returnees and families back to their country of birth – should an armed escort or other security arrangements be used?

- how and when to interview minors;

- information-sharing between intelligence and police, as well as between police and other government agencies — investigation and prosecution procedures may hamper willingness to share the information that someone is returning;

- whether and when to inform families.

Some EU Member States have established **multi-disciplinary teams at embassies / consulates** in the foreign countries in which returnees first arrive when in transit to process practical issues and begin criminal investigations.

---

21   Robert Caldini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (Harper Business, 2006).

The first challenge or task is the **criminal investigation and the threat analysis in terms of national security**. This should also cover elements of physical and psychological needs, as well as other relevant problems. The initial risk assessment might be done by the security and intelligence services and the police. Many such services and police agencies do not know the location of foreign fighters; their reason(s) for going to Syria or Iraq; which organisations they joined; what activities they undertook; the reason(s) for returning; where they return to, or the level of violent threat they pose to society.

Conducting criminal investigations and risk assessment is a complex undertaking and requires multi-mode investigation tools and risk assessment models. The first task for intelligence services and the police is to carefully conduct interrogation and interviews with foreign fighters.

3.2   Risk assessment tools for violent extremism

Very few existing risk assessment tools specific to violent extremism have been tested or verified for effectiveness. Various governments use violence risk assessment tools for both terrorists and extremist offenders in a prison environment, or as a diagnostic instrument to screen radicalised individuals for risks and needs. They are based on evidence drawn from extensive terrorism literature reviews.

There are three basic models risk assessments:

1. Professional judgment involving risk predictions based solely on the professional's experience and knowledge of the individual being assessed;

2. Actuarial tools based on checklists of risk indicators, using a formula which results in an overall risk prediction (e.g., high, medium, or low risk);

3. Structured professional judgment (SPJ), which combines both approaches (professional and actuarial) to guide the process systematically, identifying risks and evaluating the individual in context. In this SPJ model, assessment is based on both the presence and relevance of risk factors for the individual concerned.

These models guide the multi-agency process, create a shared understanding across government agencies and provide useable risk indicators for future violence.

Risk assessments are usually carried out by trained professionals within the police or social services. Not all risk assessment tools require formal training. They are often used as guidance together with other relevant information gathered from interviews with returnees and their families. Several risk assessment tools stand out: ERG+22, IR46, VERA-2 and TRAP-18. The UK government employs ERG22+ in the screening process of individuals referred to the Channel process. Similarly, the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (VERA-2) is widely used by prison and probation services in several countries. The IR46 is a Dutch risk assessment model used in a multi-agency setting by Haaglanden Regional Safety House (Veiligheidshuis). The Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18) is used as an investigative framework and employs 8 proximal warning behaviours and 10 longer term distal characteristics. See annexe 1 for an overview of these four risk assessment tools.

These four tools can offer guidance on conducting risk assessment. Elements of these can also be modified for use as risk assessment tools for FTFs. All risk assessment tools work with lists of indicators for factors such as: (i) beliefs and attitudes (ii) context and intent (iii) history and capabilities (iv) commitment and motivation (v) protective circumstances. The indicators are presented below as a guide for professional judgement.

It is important to note that any risk assessment needs to be based on triangulation and judgement from multiple sources. It is also important to assess the gender aspect and to use other professional judgements on the role of minors. Risk assessment tools should be one component of a multi-method assessment strategy involving specific tools to be used in multi-agency settings. They should be combined with police interviews and other relevant sources to provide a diagnostic or fuller picture of individuals posing a potential risk.

3.2.1   RAN CoE Returnee 45

Based on experience with the aforementioned risk assessment tools, **we have created a *risk investigative tool specifically for use with returnees.** The **RAN CoE Returnee 45** is a risk investigative tool to be used in relation to FTF returnees in order to help organise reflection and operational planning for possible interventions, and to reduce the threat of violence. It is a framework for general investigation into the motivation, levels of commitment and other risk factors throughout the FTF process – from leaving to returning.

A major reason for developing the RAN CoE Returnee 45 was that existing risk assessment tools were not specifically aligned to the parameters of FTF returnees, but were focused instead on risk assessment in prisons (VERA), multi-agency assessments (ERG22), or geared towards lone actors (TRAP-18). There are some features common to both RAN CoE Returnee 45 and the other tools, and strong evidence-base for risk behaviours of extremists, but the new tool also takes into account specific risk behaviours inherent in FTF cases, from them leaving to returning.

The RAN CoE Returnee 45 provides a **template for the multi-agency response** to organise operational data on returnees so that specific focus areas can be identified and isolated when planning interventions. It serves as a checklist, allowing the intervention specialist a quick overview of risk levels so that an identified issue may be further investigated. As for all risk assessment or risk investigation tools, it is important to stress that this is just one tool in the process, and that it needs to be cross-verified across a range of other information sources (such as police interview etc.). The risk investigation tool is not a predictive tool, but rather a way to flag and organise risk behaviours that need to further assessment by relevant professionals.

Each section contains a risk rating system that provides an indication of the specific risk behaviours requiring further attention. The assessor analyses why an individual has scored high, medium or low, and identifies those areas in need of further investigation. The tool serves as a basis for discussion in multi-agency settings, where decisions are taken on specific mitigating actions, as well as any additional action required. It is important to note that these risk behaviours are counterbalanced by protective factors, such as supportive family and other stability factors. The protective factors need to be factored into the overall risk assessment of the returnee.

4 Multi-agency agreement on intervention

This chapter covers pre-requisite actions numbers 3 and 4 (see chapter 3). It provides a framework for conducting multi-agency coordination at the national, regional and local levels.

Experience across Europe shows that **multi-agency structures and working processes are crucial for handling FTF cases.** Early and effective identification of returnees, improved information-sharing and joint decision-making are only possible when actions are coordinated. Information about a person having departing to join a terrorist group needs to be shared with the relevant partners at local, regional and national level. Such information sharing gains in importance as soon as there are signals that the FTF is returning.

When the returnee arrives, intelligence assessments and police investigations are pre-requisites to determining appropriate responses in line with the specific circumstances of each case. Responses can include judicial proceedings, administrative measures or resocialisation measures. Parallel to this is the work at national level and within the local multi-agency coordination team. This team focuses on minimising the risks the returnee poses to society by coordinating **holistic structures and working procedures** in order to prepare for reintegration and resocialisation within society when there is not enough evidence to ensure prosecution. Alternatively, the team prepares for the eventual release-process.

4.1   Coordination at national level

At the outset, it is crucial to make the distinction between coordination at a national level and a local, multi-agency approach. The remit for coordination at national level extends to police and intelligence efforts, risk assessment of the returnee and possible prosecution. Coordination at national level is also needed to set up rehabilitation efforts. This is crucial to minimising the risk posed by the returnee to society. Rehabilitation efforts include medical or mental health treatment — if needed — or having children followed by the child protection services.

If a returnee is **released or not prosecuted**, the local / regional multi-agency team should be involved with or take over (depending on the division of responsibilities within the country) the coordination of responses to this returnee and focus on resocialisation and rehabilitation in society. The practitioners who support the returnee in his / her concrete return into society — after all — at local level.

The key point is to ensure that there **is vertical and horizontal coordination between the national and local / regional levels** from the moment a returnee enters the Member State, and that agencies or authorities do not work at cross purposes. To ensure this, a national point of contact or taskforce for returnees could be installed. The tasks and the size, extent and remit of such a point of contact or task force depends on the number of FTFs currently in terrorist-claimed territory and the expected number of returnees. If applicable, this point of contact or taskforce should be part of the national coordinating body for counterterrorism or prevention of radicalisation. They should also cooperate closely with intelligence services, national police and prosecution services. Providing overall coordination of effort, the point of contact or taskforce could offer a single point of contact for (local) government agencies dealing with FTF returnees, and enables them to monitor challenges, measures and results.

The national point of contact or taskforce is envisaged as performing three crucial coordination tasks:

Task 1: Minimising risk to society by starting reintegration efforts immediately

The overall objective is to **minimise the risks to society posed by returnees** by coordinating the launch of their (eventual) rehabilitation and reintegration in society. This means organising any necessary medical treatment immediately and ensuring mental health professionals carry out screening. If children are involved, the national point of contact can involve child protection services or arrange foster care if needed.

Contacting the local / regional **multi-agency coordination team within the home town of the returnee** to ensure a coordinated information flow from local / regional to national level would also be one of the national point of contact's or taskforce's responsibilities, along with assisting at local / regional level with preparations for the return of the FTF. The national point of contact or taskforce could also assist in drafting national policy and communication strategy (see chapter 8) about returnees, and could be tasked with compiling a national overview of efforts and results for policy-making purposes.

Task 2: Point of contact for regional and local level

The national point of contact or taskforce could also be **the point of contact for regional or local authorities**. The main task would be to assist these authorities in dealing with returnees. It is important that information and assistance is swift.

Sub-tasks:

- help set up a coordinated information flow from the local / regional to national level and vice versa, involving municipalities dealing with or preparing for the return of FTFs to their community;

- provide assistance and information about dealing with returnees, including on mental health, child protection, education, employment, housing, communication, and providing context on what returnees have experienced;

- put local authorities in contact with other national organisations if needed;

- put local authorities in contact with other local authorities dealing with returnees;

- collect information about local challenges and results.

Task 3: Facilitating exchange within the EU

Another possible task for the national point of contact or taskforce is to **liaise with national returnee points of contacts / taskforces in other EU Member States** to exchange information about returnees and experiences with prosecution and resocialisation. Contact would also facilitate / encourage an exchange of experiences and good practices between national policy-makers, local coordinators and first-line practitioners in different countries.

4.2 Multi-agency process at local or regional level

The basic functioning of the local / regional multi-agency approach, involving structured interventions and coordination between different agencies, as well as guiding principles for the effective management of cases, is extensively discussed in an earlier RAN CoE policy paper, *Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles* (see 'Further reading' below).

Many local authorities across Europe do not currently have distinct procedures for handling returnees, and have instead have integrated the returnees issue within ordinary multi-agency structures. Several elements should be taken into account when dealing with returnees through local multi-agency cooperation.

Add returnee elements to existing scenarios

Established structures and collaboration between local authorities, police and other statutory partners (such as education, social services, child protection services, youth services and even offender management services) need to pre-exist for procedures and protocol for handling specific cases to be designed. It is important to establish **clear-cut agreements about respective roles and limitations for all actors** involved. Efficient coordination requires rehearsals of different case-handling scenarios, including those specifically focused on returnees. These scenarios should also include different challenges and solutions for different returnee profiles and situations (male, female, children and entire families).

Further reading: The *RAN CoE policy paper, Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles,* focuses on how to develop the necessary framework and components for local prevention action plans. What are the principal challenges involved in this work and what are the guiding principles? The paper is based on broad practical experience and collective wisdom from more than 20 cities across Europe.

The City of Copenhagen (Denmark) developed a *local framework* for the prevention of radicalisation. Copenhagen's anti-radicalisation effort is part of the Safe City initiative, and is managed in close collaboration with work on preventing crime and creating a sense of security in the city. The city works closely with SSP (a locally based co-operation between schools, youth clubs, social services and police) and the Copenhagen Police in preventing radicalisation.

Information Sharing Protocol

A major issue for multi-agency cooperation is **legal barriers to information-sharing on individuals**. This makes committing to an Information Sharing Protocol (ISP) between the agencies participating in the multi-agency cooperation structures essential. An ISP clarifies legal barriers to information exchange between different agencies and outlines how cases will be discussed and handled during multi-agency meetings. It also allows for clarity on the chain of custody in the information flow process (how information is passed from the security service to the police and then to other agencies).

Local Point of Contact

Creating one point of contact in the local social services and other agencies will **build confidence in information-sharing mechanisms.** Social services often complain that information about returnees is piecemeal or even lacking. It is important to get information and intelligence from all partners on the individual, the community and the family before, during and after travelling. Do not forget to inform partners about what happened with the information they shared.

> **Practice in action:** The Danish Centre for the Prevention of Extremism, which functions across national and local levels and is a clearinghouse for good practice. It provides direct operational support to local municipalities handling returnee cases.

Different cooperation models possible

There are different ways to ensure cooperation when needed. Depending on the organisational structure and the scale of the returnee problem, multi-agency coordination at a local level can be either a permanent or temporary structure.

- *Multi-agency structure at local / regional level*: Using and adapting an existing structure for multi-agency cooperation is important to ensure cooperation, efficiency and coordination. Work with returnees is usually conducted within existing multi-agency processes. The Danish SSP model involves close-knit cooperation between schools, social services and the police, and has functioned for over four decades in support of crime prevention. This type of structure also exists in the Netherlands, in its 'Safety Houses', which also focus on crime prevention.

- *Intervention teams to assist at local / regional level*: Some countries and regions have adopted special multi-professional teams that can be called for assistance at local or regional level instead of multi-agency structures. The Finnish Anchor model is such a hub, where professionals work on crime-prevention and counter extremism interventions through coordinated, targeted action. The model extends to cooperation with an NGO, which supports disengagement from ideologically motivated violence through mentoring.

Multi-agency cooperation tips[22]:

- **Rehearse procedures** and Information Sharing Protocols using different returnee scenarios and real-life cases.

- As soon as information is received about a departure, files should be opened on the individual; this will aid pursuit and investigation as well as prevention and resocialisation.

- **Establish who (which agency) takes the lead** as case-team manager.

- Establish a specific multi-agency cooperation team for returnees, or hold special returnees meetings with the local / regional multi-agency team.

- **Establish contact with the returnee and their family as early as possible** in the process. Building a relationship with returnees and their families is key. Most families have a need to understand the situation, how they can get their child back and what will happen after the returning child sets foot on home soil. The engagement should be carried out by police with relevant skills and expertise, like family contact officers or a trusted community police officer. Although they will identify themselves as police, their main task is to support the family in police matters.

---

22   This collection of tips and lessons comes from practitioners within RAN.

Practice in action: A local police unit has created a 'Counter Terrorism Extremism Radicalisation Backbone' of police experts, who may be consulted by colleagues not completely familiar with extremism and returnees. A backbone officer is available for consultation 24/7. An internal handbook for all officers contains instructions to follow should an individual appear to be subject to radicalisation and wanting to join a terrorist movement. One of the chapters is entitled, 'What to do when a returnee appears on the radar', and sets out who to contact and what to register in the police systems.

Practice in action: The Aarhus model revolves around the Info House and the regular scheduled multi-agency meetings involving social services, schools and police representatives. For issues such as FTF returnees, Aarhus has established a Syrian contingency involving working groups for different forms of intervention, such as screenings and risk assessments, mentoring, family networks and social and employment.

- Ensure **cooperation between the social welfare services and the police** before approaching a family that has seen a relative either depart for a conflict zone, or return.

- Build a **relationship with the family**, or ask another agency to do this.

- Focus on **siblings** and other family members who may become vulnerable to violent extremism.

- Children are seen as victims first and foremost. However, events in Syria and Iraq have shown that **children as young as nine could also pose a risk**, either in the short or long term. If the returning father or mother is in custody or jail, child protection takes over. The child must be assessed from several perspectives, and it could be months or even years before risk behaviour presents.

- Ensure swift and specialised access to **mental health specialists**. The Danish Dignity Institute, which works on the reintegration of returnees, emphasises early treatment; 90 % of returnees to Denmark have come from families in which at least one of the parents was traumatised.

- In most countries, changes in legislation mean that travelling to Syria and Iraq falls under **terrorism laws**. Returnees to these countries might therefore be held in custody, and some receive a prison sentence. This provides a window of opportunity for approaching such individuals.

- Assessment at local level should not focus exclusively on risks. It is intended to support risk assessment, but should help to create tailor-made plans for individuals. Therefore, certain parts of the assessment can be more oriented towards **care and resocialisation**.

- The multi-agency team may need to establish / manage relations with **NGOs** in the field. In most countries, exit programmes are run by an NGO; an NGO is better placed to build trust and credibility with the returnee. Since collaboration with the police might violate this trust, there must be clear agreements and processes regarding information-sharing. Transparency between the agencies involved and towards the returnee is key. Coordination of the resocialisation programme is the responsibility of the municipality or exit organisation. The police may be involved if there are concerns over safety, either from their side or from another agency involved.

- Establish **process-orientated and individualised Action Plans** to ensure coordination, continuity and follow-up in each case. These Action Plans are tailor-made and outline options for mentoring, psychological and trauma assistance, parent networks and counselling, and possibly exit programmes. They engage not only the returnee, but also the closest social support (i.e. family).

5 Prosecution Route

This chapter focuses on the response strategy once a returnee is prosecuted and becomes part of the prison and / or probation process.

5.1.1 General overview and issues

In EU Member States, an investigation will be conducted, as a general rule, into all returnees suspected of living with / taking part in terrorist groups and activities abroad, to see whether the returnee should be prosecuted based on criminal activities. When the returnee is known to have returned, or when he / she voluntarily contacts the authorities, arrest and interrogation usually occur. Based on the evidence available, further steps will be taken within the criminal justice setting.

Differences between returnee offenders and other violent extremist / terrorist offenders

Within the criminal justice system there are many different types of violent extremist / terrorist criminals. These differences are based on personality, experience, motivation, capability, intent, disillusionment or belief in the Daesh cause, signs or trauma or resilience, length of stay abroad, and evidence of a criminal. The same applies to returnees.

The circumstances in which persons lived while abroad tend to be harder to establish than those of people living in a domestic, extremist environment. Although the latter can have a psychological impact, those living in a war zone (especially given the atrocities committed by jihadist movements) are more likely to suffer from PTSD.

Within a group of returnees, there are differences based on **the type of crime committed**: planning / executing a terrorist attack, travelling to a terrorist zone, aiding a terrorist organisation with resources, recruiting, spreading propaganda and so on. Not all returnees are violent extremists (anymore) and they may be prosecuted for other crimes that are not related to terrorist activities. Some never were extremists, and went to a war zone for other reasons. Some have lost their faith in the ideology because of their experience.

Some practitioners say that the first generation of returnees (in the earlier days of Daesh) were easier to deal with than other radicals as many returned disillusioned with the ideology, the terrorist organisation and / or the circumstances in which they had to live. Returnees coming back today seem to be more hardboiled in their beliefs, and trained and rehearsed in how to act and respond to (formal and informal) questioning.

Whether returnees have a special **'status' in prison** also varies. For some other prisoners, being a returnee gives a certain 'hero' status; for others it has the opposite effect: they can be seen as traitors for deserting Daesh. They may also be targeted by other offenders for their beliefs, for example by right wing extremists.

5.1.2 Returnee-specific challenges

The foreseen growth in the number of returnees will lead to a number of challenges for the criminal justice system. Although the focus of this chapter is on the prison and probation perspective, it also highlights challenges for the judicial sector.

- **Lack of a clear FTF returnee profile within the prison and probation setting:** There is currently a grey area for those who intended to travel as a FTF and were stopped before or during travel, and those that have actually been in a terrorist conflict zone. In a lot of European countries, they are subject to the same judicial approach (laws that forbid preparation, attempts to travel or get involved with (extremist) groups like Daesh or be part of one of these groups). It is worth considering those who are stopped as a separate group, as the failure to reach the intended destination can increase the feeling of being treated unfairly in the West, while the attractive image of living in Daesh is not challenged by the horror and reality of war and bloodshed.

- **Difficulties in gathering evidence:** A specific challenge for those dealing with FTFs and returnees compared to e.g. home-grown right-wing extremists, is access to information and evidence that would support a criminal prosecution. FTF returnees have most likely been involved in terrorist activities outside the EU, in areas with different legislation and usually in areas with limited access to (trustworthy) information on the ground.

- **Shorter sentences and early release:** A lack of supporting evidence may result in shorter sentences, which means returnees will be back in society much sooner. Due to the difference in type of charges and length of sentence, there may be quite a large number of offenders released in a short period of time. This would leave less time for rehabilitation and deradicalisation in prison. Preparation for their release therefore requires careful planning and a multi-agency approach to make sure released returnees do not fall back into their old patterns and networks, which may lead to reoffending.

Case study — returnee on early release

Male returnee, returned to town A in 2015. He was imprisoned for a short time and granted an early release. He had a diploma and no criminal record and his reintegration went well. A group of returnees (against whom he testified) will also be eligible for early release soon. This is causing a lot of stress and anxiety for the returnee because the chances runoff him running into them are quite high. Also, his sister-in-law (married his brother, who died in battle) has tried to contact him as she wants to return. Although he is very cooperative with the authorities and has shared this information, he is still afraid he will somehow be connected to Syria once again.

Lessons learned:

- In a relatively small town, abiding by release conditions such as avoiding contact with certain people from the old network and / or taking part in a deradicalisation programmes is quite challenging as networks are concentrated and resources scarce. Relocation may be considered so that the individual can honour release conditions. This should be weighed against the possible negative effects of relocation.

- Cases are sometimes linked; this can open the door to more information and a more complete picture.

- A clear information-sharing procedures is needed as linked cases can also mean danger for the professionals working on them, as well as the people close to the returnees should specific information get into the wrong hands.

- **Legislation and sentencing:** With the adoption of the EU Directive on combating terrorism, there is an obligation on EU Member States to extend criminalisation to preparatory acts of terrorism. This may result in an increased number of persons being prosecuted for a broader range of different terrorist (related) crimes. The group of terrorist convicts will thus become more diverse, which needs to be taken into account during sentencing (length and conditions of sentence)and imprisonment (level of security).

- **Public opinion on returnees:** The image of returnees in society and political pressure make it difficult for staff and management to make decisions that involve security and fairness (how strict should you be compared to other prisoners?) and how is this perceived by the returnees (we are being better looked after then others).

- **Female and juvenile returnees:** Very few jurisdictions so far have experience with women returning from the conflict area and becoming part of the criminal system. Convicting women is more difficult as there is often not enough evidence as to whether they were involved in combat or really helped organise attacks. The few cases to date suggest that new challenges will arise in this area, for example on how to deal with female prisoners on terrorist units. Children and juveniles also pose separate challenges, which will be addressed more extensively in chapter 5 on child returnees.

5.2   Guiding principles from a prison perspective

The guiding principles on dealing with returnees in a prison environment are similar to those for working with violent extremist / terrorist offenders in general. The RAN working group on Prison and Probation (RAN P&P) has documented these extensively in the RAN P&P working paper. The main conclusions on dealing with all kinds of violent extremist offenders are:

- the safety of society is best ensured through promoting the well-being and rehabilitation of offenders;

- terrorism crimes cover a range of activities; individuals sentenced for terrorist acts do not all represent the same risk to society;

- offenders are capable of positive change and they need support to disengage from violent extremism;

- universal human rights must be upheld at all times and under all circumstances;

- promoting positive staff-prisoner relationships and healthy prison climates is a pre-condition for reducing risks related to radicalisation and contributing to rehabilitation and reintegration;

- multi-agency cooperation is crucial to preventing radicalisation and supporting desistance processes.

> **Further reading: The** _RAN P&P working paper of 2016_ provides an overview of all issues that prison and probation staff are dealing with in terms of violent extremist offenders and the interventions developed within the EU in response. The guiding principles are explained in this paper, which provides additional guidance on the trends, challenges, methods and interventions relevant to prison and probation settings.
>
> The Council of Europe _website_ on Prisons and Community Sanctions and Measures provides an overview of the standards contained in different conventions, recommendations, protocols and guidance documents regarding prisons and community sanctions.

5.3   Concrete methods and intervention models in a prison setting

Once a returnee has been sentenced to prison, there are two main areas in which prisons can apply concrete methods and interventions:

- safety and security (to ensure the safety and well-being of the prisoner, the prison population, staff members and wider society – this can be seen as short-term security, during imprisonment);

- rehabilitation and reintegration (to support the prisoner in desisting from the violent extremist path and preparing them to lead a crime-free life once back in society. This should also provide long-term security, after imprisonment).

The **process, timing and decision making** for these methods and interventions will differ in each jurisdiction, based on the legal framework and specific courts' decisions, the risk assessment posed by the returnee, the availability of professionals to deliver interventions, the availability of (places in) special wings, and the specific rules and regulations in place in the prison.

Generally speaking, the returnee will enter prison once an arrest has been made and preparations begin for the trial. In some cases, returnees do not have to remain in prison during the pre-trial phase, but can stay at home (perhaps with electronic monitoring). Risk assessment will begin during this phase, carried out by probation staff, psychologists or social workers (depending on the infrastructure in place), and the results will in most cases be presented to the court. It is unlikely that other interventions will be launched during this phase as returnees do not want to incriminate themselves —indicating that they have, for example, radicalised may negatively influence the trial (they can also be advised by their lawyers not to take part).

Once the trial has ended and sentencing (prison or community) has been decided, the returnee will be placed accordingly. Different jurisdictions have different rules on how **placement in a specific prison or prison wing** takes places and who takes these decisions (e.g. the judge, the Ministry of Justice, the prison governor).

The initial risk assessment that was carried out pre-trial will form a basis for the prison to work with the offender. **Risk assessments should always be repeated over time** to assess whether the risk profile of the offender is changing. This assessment will also inform the interventions (both for safety and security and for rehabilitation) that will be put in place. Decisions on these interventions will often be made in teams involving different professionals, such as prison staff, the prison governor, psychologists, prison staff from rehabilitative programmes, police and so on, depending on the specific national and local infrastructure.

5.3.1 Safety and security methods and interventions

Returnees may pose specific challenges if they have stayed in a war-zone for some time and have certain conflict skills (such as manipulation, fighting skills, how to use everyday objects as weapons) that could endanger others. If they are severely traumatised and / or suffering from other mental obstacles and illnesses, they may also be a danger to themselves and those around them.

As the population of returnees within the European criminal justice systems is still small, **no specific safety and security measures have been developed for this target group**. However, in recent years, a lot of effort has been channelled into designing specific safety and security measures for violent extremist and terrorist offenders in general. These measures will be of added value for work with returnees:

- **Specialised monitoring and information gathering:** specific monitoring and information-sharing tools have been designed within the prison system and / or in cooperation with police, probation and intelligence services to keep track of potential radicalisation processes in prison. Not all those who are suspected of being radicalised have been sentenced for terrorist (related) activities. In some returnee cases, it could be difficult to prove terrorist activities but possible to prosecute for other criminal behaviour. It is important to monitor within the wider prison population whether radicalisation is occurring, or whether recruiters are active. The Italian prison service and Ministry of Justice have developed a specialised monitoring system called the Situation Room, described in the paper referenced below.

Further reading: The _RAN P&P ex post is paper on the study visit to the Italian penitentiary system_ provides an overview of the Italian approach to dealing with radicalisation in prison and terrorist offenders. It explains both the security and information gathering methods as well as their approach to rehabilitation.

- **Specialised risk assessments**: In many criminal justice systems in Europe, risk assessments are used to understand an offender's risk of, for example, recidivism or violent behaviour. Recently, new risk assessments have being developed that focus specifically on determining the risk of extremism. These specialised assessments are usually used in addition to 'regular' risk assessments which do not focus on the ideological aspect. They can inform the level of safety and security measures to be taken but also the tailored rehabilitation plan for an offender. The ERG and the VERA-2 (see annexe 1.) tools are both specific to risk assessment. According to prison practitioners, these risk assessments have also been used in returnee cases, in which they have proven to be helpful.

- **Specialised regimes:** the term 'regime' refers to both the specific set of safety and security measures followed for violent extremist / terrorist offenders, as well as the regime choice: dispersal of these offenders within the general prison population or grouping them in separate wings. **In most EU Member States there is already a protocol in place stating in which security regime offenders convicted of terrorist (related) crimes should be placed**. For example, they might always be placed in a medium to high security facility. Sometimes their placement is geographically determined, prioritising close proximity to the courts that handle such cases. Over the last decade, some countries have also developed special wings in which terrorist offenders are placed together. These are now present in Belgium, France and the Netherlands, and under development in the United Kingdom. The RAN P&P Working Group developed an overview of such regime choices and their advantages and disadvantages. Violent extremist offenders are referred to as VEOs:

Regime choice	Potential Advantages	Potential Disadvantages
Containment	–Close monitoring	–New and stronger bonds forged among prisoners
	–Limited effect on mainstream population	–Eroded trust between staff and prisoners
	–Focused interventions	–Entrenched oppositional mindset
	–Specialised staff	– Perceptions of unfairness reinforced
	– Reassuring to public safety	– Labelling effects, stigmatisation
		– Status associated with being on a special unit
		– All VEOs assumed to be of equal risk
		– Difficulties finding staff
		– High financial cost
Dispersal	– Less stigmatisation and marginalisation	– Generalist staff, training costs
	– No status derived from placement on special unit	– Difficult to ensure high quality of intelligence
	– Opportunities for positive influence from others	– Challenges in knowing prisoners and dynamic security
		– VEOs may exert influence over others
		– VEOs may be influenced by criminal gangs
Combination	– Tailor-made response to individual needs/risks	– Selection criteria /risk assessment is imprecise

This table presents a summary. The contents are explained in more detail in the 2016 RAN P&P working paper.

Practitioner experience: Returnees in special wings

Special wings have some experience with returnees. To date, this experience suggests that they are no different from other types of terrorists on these wings. A psychologist working in a special wing for terrorists noted that she finds it difficult to make real contact with most of the returnees. They appear to be trained in 'model behaviour' towards authorities, and do not reveal their true thoughts and emotions. Although the model and polite behaviour is appreciated by staff members, they must be aware of ulterior motives and not let down their guard.

Further reading: This _RAN P&P ex post paper on the Dutch terrorist wing in Vught_ provides an overview of the Dutch approach to terrorist offenders in general, as well as a more detailed account of the special regime in the prison of Vught. It encompasses risk assessment, the advantages and disadvantages of having a special wing, how the regime works and has developed over time, and staff issues.

- **Specialised staff:** Whether or not violent extremist / terrorist offenders are placed in special wings, many EU countries are investing in training specialised staff to work with these types of offenders. Although not limited to returnees, there are some aspects to extremist offenders that may create challenging situations for staff. They may try to manipulate or recruit staff and lure them into their extremist mindset. On the other hand, they may be very dismissive of staff based on their ideological belief that they are not 'human' (e.g. calling them dogs). Recent incidents in which terrorist offenders have attacked prison staff have also increased stress levels for those working with these offenders. As dynamic security research shows, day-to-day relationships between staff and offenders are crucial in maintaining a safe and secure prison environment. With the number of returnees in prisons expected to rise, investment in training specialised staff is imperative.

5.3.2   Rehabilitation and integration: methods and interventions

The length of a returnee's prison sentence will affect how much time can be invested in rehabilitation and integration in the prison setting. As the general public has a tendency to regard returnees as individuals undeserving of 'help', it may be **difficult to secure sufficient resources** and programmes despite the risks involved of not providing such services. Rehabilitative interventions come in different shapes and forms, and are explained in detail below. To date, no specific integration or rehabilitation programme for returnees exists.

The RAN P&P Working Group's guiding principles make the case for **rehabilitation being tailored to the offender**. Most rehabilitation plans are a mix of interventions, based on the offender's risk- and needs assessment. The plans are designed by a team of different professionals (prison guards, prison governor, psychologists, staff running rehabilitative interventions), and will be discussed with the offender. Whether taking part in the interventions is voluntary or obligatory depends on the sentence conditions and on the prison's policies. In general, practitioners believe that voluntary participation will lead to better results as there is an intrinsic motivation to take part.

Taking into account the **needs and wishes expressed by the offender** is also essential for the rehabilitation plan. If they want, for example, to learn a foreign language or a specific trade, it is helpful to see whether this can be integrated within the rehabilitation plan as it will both help foster good cooperation with the offender and ensure there is a focus on the future.

Case study — returnee rehabilitation in prison

Male returnee in the age range of 25-28, travelled to Syria after the proclamation of the so-called 'caliphate'. He came from a middle-class family, had a well-paid job and a good level of education. He stayed in Syria for three months. There is no clear evidence of involvement in combat. He was able to return by saying he was picking up his wife at the Turkish border. He was however arrested a couple of months after his return and his arrest received a lot of media attention. He is still in prison at this time (spring 2017) and is in contact with an NGO providing support. Being in detention and isolated for hours is making him unstable and sometimes he refuses contact. He also has a strong distrust of the system and is therefore reluctant to take any advice from those who try to support him. The influence of politics and the media increases this distrust and makes it more difficult to build a trust-based relationship.

Lessons learned:

• NGO staff should consider using their own names and biographies to demonstrate authenticity — doing so in this case increased the returnee's confidence in the NGO's sincerity.

• Persistence often pays. In this case, the NGO maintained contact even when the detained returnee refused to see them. This was to make sure the returnee felt valued.

• Not asking direct questions about his stay in Syria, but showing an interest when the topic is brought can be helpful. The NGO involved in this case never pushed this conversation.

• Prejudice and bias can be avoided by not reading all files and media reports before meeting the individual.

• It helps to ensure good contacts with the prison administration and other authorities.

Exit programmes

This collective name refers to programmes and interventions aimed at disengaging and / or deradicalising violent extremist / terrorist offenders. As indicated by the RAN EXIT Working Group in their expost paper on the 'Minimum methodological requirements for exit interventions':

"Deradicalisation is a common term in public debate, but not always embraced by most of the people working on it. The term does not reflect everything involved in persons leaving an extremist environment and / or changing their thinking pattern. Apart from shifting mind-set and thinking, this process also requires behavioural (like abstaining from violence) and practical (like work, housing and school) changes. Disengagement is the term used for these changes. 'Exit' combines deradicalisation and disengagement. Other terms refer more to the goal of a process, such as like 'rehabilitation' or 'resocialisation'."

In practice, **programmes and tailored rehabilitation plans for returnees comprise deradicalisation and disengagement elements**. What the rehabilitation plan looks like is highly dependent on the risk and needs assessment made by professionals within the penitentiary system, the availability of interventions and the willingness or obligation of the offender to take part in them.

- ***Offering regular interventions:*** Every prison system has in place standard interventions to support the rehabilitation of prisoners. These include access to work, leisure activities and education. These types of activities will help prisoners to prepare themselves for release and reintegration into society. As it is highly likely most detained returnees will return to society (sometimes even within a couple of months / years), it is important to have these regular activities at their disposal. They may also have a normalising effect after their experiences of living in a conflict area. These activities can in themselves therefore have a disengaging and deradicalising effect.

- ***Working on the ideological dimension:*** Whether or not imprisoned returnees maintain an extremist ideology and mindset depends on their motivations and drivers to become a foreign fighter in the first place — and their experiences and exposure to this dimension during their stay with a terrorist group. Initial assessment is necessary to determine the extent to which a rehabilitative intervention aimed at influencing the returnee's mindset is necessary, or whether other interventions will provide a better 'fit' with the returnee's risks and needs. Should the assessment show a need for intervention at the ideological level, there are several forms in which this intervention can take place:

  - *One-on-one counselling:* In these sessions, a professional with expertise in ideology, theology, extremism or related fields will talk with the returnee. The objective is to 'open up' the returnee's worldview to different perspectives and interpretations through conversations. Some countries have appointed special 'deradicalisation experts' to conduct this kind of counselling. Voluntary participation in these counselling sessions is recommended; the sessions also create a safe space to share thoughts and emotions.

  - *Group dialogue sessions:* as a means to reflect real-life situations (in which people often live among others), and to make use of differences in views and opinions, group dialogue sessions can be an effective way of triggering emotions and a thought process on worldview. It is best to combine a group approach with an individual approach. Careful consideration should be given to:

    - who can be part of the group (careful selection is necessary, it is best to not put together offenders who are already 'teaming up' within the prison, it is helpful to have diverse profiles);

    - a voluntary or obligatory approach (voluntary is recommended);

    - who will lead the group (this should be someone with expertise on the topic and experience in group dynamics);

    - group dynamics and creating a safe space (to make sure there is no intimidation / bullying that disturbs the learning process).

    - *Education and reflection:* there are several ways in which the returnee can him / herself reflect on beliefs and world views. Offering a diverse collection of books, magazines and documentaries that show a variety of perspectives on, for example, foreign policy, double standards and discrimination, may be a trigger for detained returnees to educate themselves and reflect, especially during the hours they spend in their cell.

- ***Providing religious and spiritual support:*** By nature, prisons are a context in which many offenders at some point feel the need for spiritual or religious guidance. A range of impetuses may drive this need: the desire to continue practising a religion, to gain direction and a meaning to life, to help find 'peace of mind', to help re-establish self-worth, to support behavioural change, to gain protection from certain groups, to have the opportunity to meet members of the opposite sex, to gain free access to special resources and so on. It is important to understand this variety in motivations as these should be perceived as 'normal' and not directly alarming in terms of extremist religious ideology.

  Practice shows that some imprisoned returnees practise and are interested in their religion. Providing **proper religious care** through chaplains (in these cases often Imams but also figures from other religions) will help harness the positive effects of a religious lifestyle and will help steer prisoners away from extremist religious ideology by discussing different religious interpretations and perspectives.

  In providing this care, it is important that chaplains are properly vetted and trained to work in a prison setting. The same goes for religious materials and sources made available in a prison setting. It is worth underlining that **chaplains should be able to work in a confidential setting** (to also remain legitimate in the eyes of the prisoners) **and should not be automatically tasked with deradicalisation** objectives (as they would need specific training for this).

`

- ***Reconnecting with family and the social environment:*** A key feature of extremist and terrorist groups is their aim to isolate vulnerable people from their normal social surroundings so that they may influence and recruit them. In many cases, restoring positive relationships with the family and social network is an important step in rehabilitation. This also ensures a safety net upon release from prison. However, in some cases the social network and family do not have a positive impact or may even be conspiring with the offender while he / she is in prison. A careful assessment is therefore necessary before involving family and social network in rehabilitation interventions.

  In some cases, the family feels ashamed and stigmatised by the affiliation of their relative with a terrorist group and does not want to be in contact. If this is the case, it will take time to rebuild relationships and trust. The process of reconnecting with the family may prove to be more difficult when it comes to converts who have become FTFs and returned. In those cases, the family and social contacts are not usually capable of understanding why their family member converted in the first place and are not sure how to deal with this. As the release date approaches, it is important that there is a safety net to avoid the offender falling back into old patterns or being re-recruited immediately after release.

Case study — Returnee rehabilitation involvement of family

A young male, travelled to Syria in 2012 for the first time. He was there for six weeks and then returned. During 2013 he travelled to Syria twice, each time spending six weeks in the country. He was suspected of fighting for the Al-Qaeda related group Jabhat al-Nusra. Even though he was suspected of criminal behaviour, grounds for prosecution were not sufficient. The multi-agency partner team has been trying to establish contact with him since 2010, but it has been constantly 'on and off, very much depending on his situation at that point in time.

During 2015 the returnee got married and became a father. In March 2016 he was arrested and imprisoned for a crime involving theft of large numbers of passports. The multi-agency partner team used this opportunity to build a relationship with his wider family, and in particular a closer and tight relationship with his wife and little boy, offering them help from the authorities. In December 2016 he was released from prison and in January 2017 he contacted the authorities voluntarily and asked for help to re-establish his life. In February he entered an Exit programme. The authorities remain closely involved with the wife and child, and a mentor has been assigned to the returnee to strengthen his life and education skills.

Lessons learned:

- It is important to establish many entry points to the returnee and his / her family and to create confidence and good relations.

- Prepare for endurance and persistence when approaching the individual.

- **Providing psychological support and trauma intervention:** This is a standard intervention for prisons. In general, an assessment of the mental health of an offender is part of the overall risk and needs assessment. For returnees, the same should be in place, with particular attention paid to psychological problems and traumas that might have developed because of their stay in a conflict zone. Should other mental health issues be detected (such as borderline syndrome, autism etc.), treatment for these issues should be made available, and taken into account when including the returnee in other schemes. Prisons need to improve their capacity and / or access to trauma experts to deal with this particular group.

- **Offering mentoring programmes:** mentoring programmes for violent extremist and terrorist offenders are / have been in place in several countries, such as the UK, Denmark and Norway. The programmes can be adjusted to fit the profiles of returnees in prison. The basic idea behind them is that a specific person is assigned as a mentor for the offender, and they meet on a regular basis to talk and in some cases undertake activities. Mentors can be members of staff, community members, NGO professionals, religious leaders, ex-offenders etc. To have an effective mentoring programme, the following should be put in practice:

  o Whatever their background, the most important criterion is that there is some connection or 'fit' between the mentor and mentee on which a trust-based relationship can be built.

  o In a prison setting it is also important that the mentor has good contact with the prison staff who deal with his / her mentee on a daily basis.

  o Mentors should be carefully vetted before they are put in contact with a possible mentee. If either one is not comfortable with the match, the mentorship should not continue.

  o It is important that the mentor-mentee connection is not there to reach an objective or deliver a specific result, but that it is one of the interventions in the process of the offender's rehabilitation. This is also important to not put pressure on the relationship and to ensure the mentor is not seen as 'part of the system' (a system that many violent extremist offenders distrust).

  o Mentors should be trained before the mentor programme starts. Training should focus on the circumstances they can expect when working with the returnee, the signals that are a cause for concern and need to be reported to prison authorities, how to have open conversations and build trust, and how to explain boundaries and manage expectations.

  o If the intervention framework allows for it, it is advisable to maintain good mentorships after release and make sure the same mentor and mentee can still meet.

o The safety of mentors and their families / social networks should be taken into account at all times. Mentors should have a place to report suspicious behaviour. Working only with first names and having a specific phone number or e-mail address for contact may help to protect the mentor against negative intentions (should they appear).

- Working with former extremist (offenders) / former soldiers: As part of the education- or ideology-focused interventions, meetings with former extremists or former (veteran) soldiers (those who have also experienced war and conflict situations) may help to shed a different perspective on the experiences of returnees; they can learn and reflect based on stories dealing with fear, anxiety and trauma. Because of their experience, formers and veterans may have more legitimacy and respect in the eyes of returnees and they will be able to better relate to, understand and connect with them. When working with former extremists, it is of particularly important that:

    o they really are formers, and have openly distanced themselves from extremist ideologies and groups;

    o they have been trained and are experienced in working with extremists and preferably also offenders;

    o monitoring is in place to ensure that they do not have a hidden agenda to influence or recruit those with whom they are in contact, or to obtain information. The safety and security of former extremists should also be assured — they may be viewed as traitors.

5.4   Guiding principles from a probation perspective

Reintegration aims to prevent violent behaviour and enable inclusion and participation in society**. A sense of belonging and acceptance makes commitment to violence less sustainable**. Radical ideas are not dangerous in themselves, even though they may remain a risk factor for violent behaviour in some circumstances. There is limited research on violent extremist offenders (VEOs) post-release, and little is known about what helps resettlement. However, the RAN P&P Working Group has distinguished some general guiding principles for good practice that will also guide work with returnees:

- Reintegration plans should be included in the working agenda for the offender as early in the sentence as possible. This means that rehabilitation plans already take into account the length of the sentence and the opportunities for continuing interventions after release. For example, when a mentor is part of the rehabilitation programme, ensure the mentor can stay on after release. This is also important for religious counselling and programmes as they can connect with religious organisations in the community.

- Risks and needs assessments (as explained in chapter 3) are key to designing effective re-integration programmes. Probation services (or the national equivalent) should cooperate on this assessment during the final stage of the prison sentence. Individualising the assessments is essential; they should facilitate the desistance and / or deradicalisation process by recognising a potential to contribute to society. It is recommended that multi-disciplinary teams evaluate offenders' individual needs and risks.

- Transition management is key. This involves cooperation between different organisations (prison, probation, police, local authorities, support organisation etc.) to ensure the offender has a smooth transition from the prison

environment back into a local community. As transition periods are those points when the risk of recidivism is high, it is important to have plans in place prior to the full sentence being served.

- Trust is central to effective probation work, and often the process of matching extremist offenders with probation officers is carried out with the building of trust in mind. Probation officers who share a cultural or religious background with the offender may help to foster trust.

- Studies on desistance —how individuals cease or desist from crime — suggest the importance of co-producing a process with others. These 'others' include correctional officers and additional persons in social networks. Representatives from other collaborating organisations, including community organisations that help with job-seeking or religious or spiritual guidance, and social services, can meet social support needs and decrease sources of risk. Friends, family members and other meaningful relationships are crucial for desistance trajectories and for reinforcing a positive view of non-violent behaviour as well as a positive identity. This co-production with others is key to reintegration because it is not only the effort and decision of the offender to want to reintegrate in society, it is also society (especially those around the offender) that need to accept him / her and be willing to offer a second chance.

5.5   Methods and intervention models in a probation setting

Prison and probation settings share some overlaps as well as differences. Both have in common the fact that no specific interventions for returnees have been developed. So the methods and interventions used for terrorist offenders on probation will also be valuable when dealing with returnees. As returnees go back into society after a prison sentence, there will be additional challenges for both the returnee him / herself as well as for the support services and the community. These may hamper reintegration interventions, as explained in the overview of different types of interventions that is given in this paragraph.

Case study — Support after release 1

Male returnee, left for Syria in 2013 when in his early 20s together with his girlfriend. He didn't have a high level of education and was not able to hold on to jobs. He had stayed away from criminal activities and had no criminal record prior to leaving. He returned in 2014 and is therefore seen as one of the first generation of foreign terrorist fighters. He had stayed in Syria for six months. He was convicted for taking part in combat in relation to Daesh, although he denies being part of Daesh. As his return was in 2014, there were not so many barriers and he simply crossed the border. He returned together with his wife, who was pregnant at the time (this was an important reason to leave) and who gave birth whilst back in their home country in the EU. Upon return he reported to the local authorities and police but remained in the community for several months before he was officially arrested by a large arrest team. As he had already reported himself to the authorities, he felt the scale of the arrest was unnecessary. He was prosecuted and sent to jail for two years. He has now been out on probation for about a year and he lives with his wife and child and has moved to another town. Probation services were initially involved, reporting their assessments to the court. During his stay in prison the probation services had limited contact; weekly contact was established after his release. He is consistent and reliable in his visits with probation, but the team has noticed that he has become more outspoken in his sympathies towards Daesh and the fact that he has been in combat. He is not very open about his network. He will remain under obligatory probation for one more year.

Lessons learned:

- Even though the probation services have indications that he is connecting with some of his old network, they cannot talk about it with him because that could make him suspicious. They have to wait until he provides them with an 'opening' to make sure his trust is not compromised.

- The two-year stay in prison left a mark on this returnee. He experienced the strict regime as very hard and humiliating and his sympathy for the Daesh ideology increased. This is also because he was placed together with other convicted terrorists with similar mindsets, which created less space for counter- and alternative messaging. He did get some support from staff members and an imam but the effects of this seem to be minimal. Probation practitioners must be aware of this history and the potential detention damage that has been caused.

- Building trust has proved to be very time-consuming and required patience as there is much distrust. Having an open and transparent attitude towards the returnee about what he can expect from the probation officer and how they will report on his case is important to regain trust.

- Probation practitioners are tasked with supporting the reintegration of offenders and in these cases should be prepared for a long and complex trajectory. In this case reintegration is very difficult. The returnee tried to connect to a mosque but they did not welcome him. He is also part of a work reintegration trajectory that is coordinated by the local authority but hasn't yet found work. He doesn't want to be in contact with the police. He is only in contact with the local authority, probation and the family support service. He has also recently shown interest in psychological support. His wife does not wish to have contact with anybody. The returnee also seems to have no desire to reintegrate into society in his home-country as well as a wish to live in an Islamic country. He realises however that moving to his country of heritage is not an option because he would be arrested immediately —he is labelled a convicted terrorist there.

- As many different organisations have been involved in this case, is has been crucial for probation to have good multi-agency cooperation. The availability of a partner-table at which different organisations could talk about case, search for ways to share information and learn about each other's interests and objectives has been very useful.

- **Probation support:** In most cases, the end of a sentence (or early release) will be conditional and include follow-up visits with probation to support and monitor the returnee's reintegration trajectory. Probation professionals serve as 'case-managers' that lead the way to other institutions and support agencies such as local authorities, police, NGOs and so on. The length of probation support will usually depend on the decision by the court. Practitioners have indicated that this is often quite short, making it crucial to have a broader support plan after obligatory support through probation ends. Local authorities, who in many cases oversee financial and other forms of support for the returnee, can play a role in this, as well as NGOs or community organisations and mentors. Most of these efforts must be on a voluntary basis. Local authorities may have some leverage for cooperation because of financial support. As working with terrorist offenders on probation can be quite stressful (due to the public and political anxiety linked to terrorist offenders), it is important that probation staff are empowered and supported in their work. Support should include:

  o *Training for probation officers:* specialised training on radicalisation, ideology, how to address signs of concern and so on can help probation officers feel more secure in their everyday work.

  o *Working in teams:* working together with other probation officers that work with the same offender group and specialists / experts with extensive knowledge of terrorism, radicalisation and related fields, can also help create a safe space for probation officers to share their challenges and concerns.

Practice in action: Dutch probation TER teams

The Dutch probation service established a special team to deal with terrorists, extremists and radicals (TER) on probation in 2012. The team comprises 13 (internationally) trained, specialised probation officers. Read more in the *RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices.*

For more information, contact the *Dutch probation service.*

- **Practical support:** As in any reintegration process, there will be a number of practical issues to organise for the return of a convicted returnee to society. First of all, they will need a place to live. Experience shows that careful consideration should be given to whether the returnee returns to his / her original hometown or is located elsewhere. This will depend on a number of factors such as:

  o willingness of the local /regional authority to take them back;

  o willingness of landlords / housing associations to provide housing;

  o willingness of family members to provide housing;

- o connections to the old network (are they positive or negative, do the release conditions restrict contact with (some) members of the old network, what is the returnees 'status' In the old network e.g. hero or traitor);

- o whether multi-agency support structures are available in the foreseen location.

- In addition to housing, some form of financial support will most likely be provided through the welfare system as finding a job can be challenging. Employers may be fearful of including a convicted terrorist and returnee in their workforce. Most countries also have special lists of convicted terrorists that will make it more difficult, for instance, to open a bank account. Support from a national / local authority is needed and is usually conditional upon the returnee cooperating with the authority and even taking part in rehabilitative programmes. Also, in terms of education, the returnee will need help to connect to educational institutions.

Probation officers, local authorities and other support professionals may also support the returnee in rebuilding a positive network and connecting to religious institutions, sports clubs, leisure organisations, voluntary work and so on. However, in each of these cases the public image of FTFs and returnees may make acceptance very difficult in these circles. Because of media attention, keeping a low profile can also prove to be difficult.

Case study – Support after release 2

Man, now 24 years old. After travelling to Syria in 2012 he returned to his home town at the beginning of 2014 with his wife and one child. It is unclear why and how he returned. His return was noticed by an alert community policy officer and reported to authorities. He was then arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to three years in prison for joining a terrorist organisation. During his imprisonment, there was close cooperation between the director of the prison, the prison psychiatrist, the probation officers and the case manager in prison. These parties started preparing for the release of the man six months prior to his release. By asking the man "What do you need when you are released?" or "How do you expect to spend your days when released?", they involved him in the planning. A multi agency reintegration plan was conducted. The focus of this plan is to reduce the risk he poses by making his swift reintegration into society possible, and prolonging treatment and monitoring.

A specific set of release conditions was formulated in cooperation with probation. He is now living with his wife and child in his home town. Currently he is on welfare but has to spend his day earning this support at a community working facility for reintegration. This facility monitors him specifically on signals of radicalisation and / or recruitment of others working at the same facility. He also receives mental health treatment and mentoring. The contact between him and his mentor, who is also the local case manager, is stable. They have weekly mentoring sessions and whenever he 'panics' or has 'extreme thoughts' he will contact his mentor.

At this moment the multi-agency team involved in the man's reintegration comprises the local coordinator and case manager, a mental health professional (therapist), a case manager from the welfare organisation, police, probation, a family support worker and an exit worker.

Cooperation with the prison psychiatrist and probation officers and then local case coordinator has endured, and discussions on the case take place regularly. The general impressions of the practitioners involved is that the man will need mentoring and treatment for an unspecified period.

Lessons learned:

- It is important to get to know the FTFs in your home town by name, as well as their families and former surroundings. Doing so increases the chance of being informed when the FTF returns.

- Using the family's desire to keep any children in the family can be used as leverage to contact the returnee. In this case the returnee was keen on having his child living with his parents and not in foster care. By talking to the family and then to the returnee about this, the local authorities could establish contact with the returnee.

- Cooperation with the prison staff and probation officers and involving the returnee in his / her reintegration plan is crucial when preparing the return to society.

- Starting to build a relationship with the returnee while he is in prison can be a valuable investment. This returnee stated that the mentor only had influence because the mentor contacted him when he was still in prison.

- If the returnee is on the UN Terrorist list, his / her assets are frozen. To start a 'de-lifting' procedure, you need to contact national government. If this is not done before his / her release he / she will not be able to earn money, open a bank account access an existing account. The de-lifting procedure takes several months.

- It is helpful to make clear agreements and define tangible goals for the reintegration process — with the partners in the multi-agency team but also with the returnee. If this is not done properly the whole integration process risks becoming a type of 'sticky plaster'.

- Frequent face to face contact with the returnee is a must to assess how the returnee is really doing.

- Keeping track of the returnee's activities also by monitoring his / her social media accounts is vital. In this case, an analyst from the municipality monitors the (public) social media communication of the returnee and passes on information to the mentor. The mentor confronts the returnee with his / her statements or actions on social media during the mentoring sessions.

- Reintegration takes time. It is a very slow and complex process. Once you started prepare to be in it for the long run.

- **Psychological support:** Practice shows that it is very difficult to determine psychological state and level of trauma among returnees because they are usually reluctant to share any stories of what they have experienced abroad, even after they have been convicted and spent time in prison. This also poses a challenge for probation services, who are tasked with guiding returnees to fitting psychological support, as well as creating an open and trust-based relationship. In most cases, there needs to be an 'opening' created by the returnee him or herself to talk about psychological problems, allowing probation workers and other professionals to offer help in securing support. Practitioner experience shows that trying to force returnees to talk about their experiences will have a negative effect.

- **Family and community support:** The family and social network around the returnee plays a crucial role in rehabilitation and reintegration. There are many varied scenarios: **families who were left behind devastated, families who think their relative is a hero, families who have travelled and returned together** (with only some members convicted), families that were established abroad and so on. This wider network needs to be taken into account when providing support. Probation officers should always be aware that one never really know what goes on behind closed doors and how tight family bonds can be. Should the family and social network seem to have a negative effect on the returnee (e.g. reinforcing extremist thoughts), probation officers and other partners should focus on bringing new people into the social circle to provide a counter-balance. These could be religious leaders, community mentors or NGO professionals (*also see considerations on mentor programmes and working with formers in the prison setting section — they also apply to probation*). If the family and social network seem to be a positive force for change, probation officers and other partners should harness that potential and see if they can include family members in elements of the rehabilitation process — for example, through joint mediation sessions or undertaking leisure activities together. The main objective would be to strengthen family bonds again and avoid isolation of the returnee.

- **Ideological support:** the outcome of the risk- and needs assessment will provide an indication of the extent to which the returnee is still ideologically motivated and whether this is still extremist in character. Probation officers as well as other support professionals dealing with returnees have indicated that the experience of being in **prison has in some cases had a negative effect on ideological development**, meaning that it has hardened returnees' convictions. This may be caused by prison circumstances that returnees have found to be humiliating and dehumanising (e.g. overcrowding, visitations, long hours alone in a cell) or through contact with other prisoners who shared their ideology. The result is distrust and suspicion towards 'the system' and authorities. Even though more and more prisons offer rehabilitative programmes and activities, they may still be in stark contrast to the regular conditions for prisoners. When this is the starting point for a probation officer to work with a returnee, it will be difficult to build a trust-based relationship, and much time and effort needs to be put into that relationship. Participation in initiatives designed to influence mindset can be obligatory (part of the release conditions) or voluntary (an offer from probation or other support organisations that the returnee needs to agree to). These type of support programmes may take the same forms as described under the prison interventions (one-on-one counselling, group dialogue, education and reflection), but in a community setting.

Practice in action: Dutch probation programme 'Inclusion'

Inclusion is an individualised, tailor-made programme that is devised when a person is on probation. The initiative's main aim is to disengage radicalised Muslims (mainly home-grown jihadis) from radical movements.

Read more about the programme in the *RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices*.

For additional information contact the *Dutch probation service*.

Healthy Identity II programme

The Healthy Identity II programme is designed by the UK's Prison and Probation Service. Its purpose is to try to prevent individuals from committing future extremist offences. To achieve this, it encourages and empowers participants to disengage from an extremist group, cause or ideology.

Read more about the Health Identity II programmeUM

Case study — Support after release 3

A male returnee in his mid-20s, the youngest child of a poor family. He has felt his whole life that he has had to 'prove' himself. He went to Syria after the proclamation of the so-called 'caliphate' to become a suicide bomber. There is however no clear evidence he really participated in combat during his three-month stay. He reported to authorities 3-4 months after his return. Although at that point no action was taken, several months later he was arrested with helicopters, weapons and a large number of police in the apartment. He spent 26 months in prison. During this period, he was regularly visited by his parents, but compared to his siblings he received little attention. The case received a lot of attention from the media and politicians. This led to the returnee having severe anxiety before his release. He feels the whole system is against him, everyone knows him and he is being observed all the time. He feels no-one wants him to reintegrate.

Lessons learned:

• around the clock support can be needed to help a returnee deal with anxiety — in this case, this was provided by an NGO;

• providing access to a theologian for counselling can be helpful if religion plays a central role in the individual's life;

• regaining and retraining a structured life-style can be key. In this case, an NGO is supporting attempts to create that structure through housing, education, social activities etc.

6 Non-prosecution route / resocialisation

The focus of this chapter of the manual is on the resocialisation of returnees. This can be returning men and women who have not been prosecuted (yet), men and women who are prosecuted but found not guilty, and men and women who have already been to prison and are now released and not on probation.

6.1 Introduction

This chapter covers response options regarding the resocialisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees along the lines of four topics:

1. family support;

2. mentoring and counselling;

3. mental health;

4. practicalities;

Each paragraph looks into one of these topics and provides, next to a brief general overview, the elements that should be taken into account when drafting methods and interventions, examples, tips and cases.

For probation responses, see chapter 5. For resocialisation responses specific to children, see chapter 7.

6.2.1 General overview

When returnees come back, national police and/or intelligence services will first debrief them to **establish the risk** the returnee poses and whether prosecution needs to take place. When returnees are not prosecuted (yet), or when prosecution took place and the individual is not or no longer imprisoned, he or she will return to society. The general idea is that the safety of society is best ensured through promoting the social well-being and rehabilitation of returnees. Those persons who are and feel part of society are less likely to fall back and become attracted to terrorist or violent extremist groups (again). The **resocialisation process must be tailored to an individual's situation**. When supporting a returnee in his or her resocialisation process, it is necessary to take stock of the reasons behind their return, their personal social situation, their mental state and their ideological convictions.

6.1.2 Four guiding principles for the resocialisation and reintegration of returnees

1. **Resocialisation, reintegration and rehabilitation** are important to prevent returnees from harming society.

2. **A tailored and differentiated approach** based on the risk profile of each returnee is necessary. Returnees are all different and need distinct approaches and diverse interventions and tools.

3. **A multidisciplinary approach and local-level involvement**, both for risk assessment and rehabilitation / reintegration, are important. All relevant organisations should be involved in a comprehensive effort to resocialise and reintegrate the returnee. Local or regional authorities are best placed to coordinate this comprehensive approach towards a specific returnee at the local level.

4. **Information exchange** between intelligence, police and social organisations from national and regional levels is paramount when dealing with returnees. Extra investment in information exchange between national and local level, and between different organisations, should be considered. [23]

---

23 These guiding principles are agreed on in all EU communication about FTF returnees. For example, see EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 'Foreign terrorist fighter. returnees: Policy options', Brussels, 29 November 2016 14799/16.

First-line practitioners such as social workers, exit workers, family workers and mental health coaches use numerous programmes, methods and interventions that have proven to be successful for resocialising, reintegrating and rehabilitating (former) radicalised persons within society.[24] These initiatives can also be used for returnees as long as they are tailor-made to the returnee, and if the differences between returnees and other (former) radicalised persons are taken into account.

For practitioners supporting returnees in their resocialisation, whether social workers, mental health professionals or family support workers, it is important to take into account the following eight aspects whilst designing and delivering interventions specifically for returnees:

- **Design interventions on the basis of a risk and needs assessment**: A returnee can pose a threat to society. A risk assessment of the short-term (attack, recruitment) and long-term (psychosis, violent behaviour) threats the returnee poses is mandatory. If a risk assessment is not provided, ask for it via the local police or the national returnee contact person — not to stigmatise, but to establish the risks and the facts. This information (the unclassified parts) is also important to share with other organisations and persons who play a role in the resocialisation of the returnee. For more details on risk assessment, see chapter 2.

- **Be prepared for an increased level of information sharing:** Because returnees can pose a threat to society, they are subject to extra attention by the national and local government, police and intelligence services. Be prepared therefore to share information and ensure the necessary information sharing mechanisms are prepared and in place. Discuss information flows within the local or regional multi-agency coordination team. Discuss specifically what information is needed, what kind of information needs to be shared and with whom, and when you will exchange information about the returnee. It is best to do this the moment preparations begin for the individual's return to the local community. Consider having one or two designated liaison officers at the local level and part of the multi-agency team who make sure that relevant information about the returnee flows from local level to national and vice versa.

> **Advice from a Local Coordinator with experience of returnees:** "Early on there needs to be a sharp clarification of roles between the national police, intelligence agency, local police and local authorities. Roles will depend on the type of returnee, background, capacity, the fighter's intention and capability (level of threat) and psychological state of mind."

- **Use tools and methods that 'fit' people with strong convictions:** Most returnees still have or have had a strong ideological conviction. They were all subject to severe indoctrination. This means not only commitment to Jihad-Salafism and its fight against the infidels but also strong ideas about, for example, democracy, sexual orientation, the role of women. [25] When mentoring them, prepare to use techniques and interventions used when dealing with strong convictions. Address these 'beliefs' when mentoring and counselling (see section 6.2.2 on *Mentoring and Counselling Responses* for more details).

- **Unwilling to reintegrate:** There will be returnees who do not want to reintegrate in society. If this happens, discuss with the local multi-agency coordination team and assess who has the best relationship with the returnee. Is this the family worker via the family members of the returnee? The social worker? The child protection worker? Or the police? This person / organisation should make it clear to the returnee that he / she might be monitored on account of having joined or tried to join a terrorist organisation. Maybe this person can convince the returnee to cooperate. If absolutely unwilling, discuss the bare minimum of cooperation needed (based on national regulations) with the local multi-agency team and with national authorities. Make this mandatory for the returnee. (Local) police can enforce these obligations. Mentoring a returnee to disengage or deradicalise will however have no use if the returnee is pressured to take part. If confronted with an unwilling returnee, consider contacting probation officers to discuss specific persuasive tools and interventions.

---

24 For inspiring examples see the RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices, ***https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_ network/ran-best-practices_en***.

25 The element of ideology and indoctrination plays an even bigger role with returning children, especially when returning from living with Daesh (see chapter 7 'Children').

- **Place a special focus on the safety of the returnee's immediate social contacts:** As returnees have been carrying out or witnessing extreme violence on a frequent basis, the likelihood of extreme and / or violent actions on their part is increased. Pay extra attention to the safety of persons around the returnee, as well as that of first-line practitioners working with the individual. Keep stock of the returnee's risk assessment and discuss the risk of violent behaviour and the way to deal with this risk within the multi-agency coordination team (see section 6.2.2 on Mentoring and Counselling Responses for more details).

- **Have assessments of mental and physical health in place:** Living in terrorist territory and in a war zone means it is likely that returnees are suffering from trauma and other mental health issues; they may have been carrying out very violent acts, witnessing extreme violence, death of family members, or been a victim of violence (rape, beatings etc.) and living in an acutely unsafe environment for a long period. Asses the mental state of the returnee when dealing with him or her (see section 6.2.3, Mental Health Responses, for more details). The living conditions in terrorist territory are dire and unsafe. Be on the look-out for physical medical needs as a result of injuries, war wounds, malnutrition and disease. Prepare to provide treatment or refer accordingly if necessary (see paragraph 6.2.4 *Practical Responses* for more details).

- **Be aware of the high profile of returnee cases**: All returnee cases get considerable amounts of media and political attention. It will feel like the whole of society is watching the returnee and the way he or she is treated by government and social work organisations. What 'extras' they get, where they are going to live, who is paying for them and how much of a threat they still pose will all be followed closely. Contact the communication experts from your organisation and (via them) the communication experts within the local authorities and prepare a communication strategy about the returnees you are dealing with or preparing to deal with. See chapter 8 *Cross-cutting Issues* for tips regarding the communication strategy.

- **Be aware of the risk of isolation and stigmatisation when trying to resocialise:** Most people are very aware of the atrocities of Daesh, Al Qaeda and other violent extremist groups. Persons returning from these terrorist organisations will be treated with distrust and hostility. Returnees will be stigmatised and isolated from the local community they are going back to. This will pose an extra challenge to the resocialisation and reintegration of returnees. You may want to put extra effort into informing the local community about the reasons why and how the returnee will be integrated. Relocating the returnee to another town or city may also be an option for consideration. Take stock of possible sectarian divisions. Some Member States reported incidents between Kurdish groups, ex-Syrian Army fighters and returning Daesh FTFs.

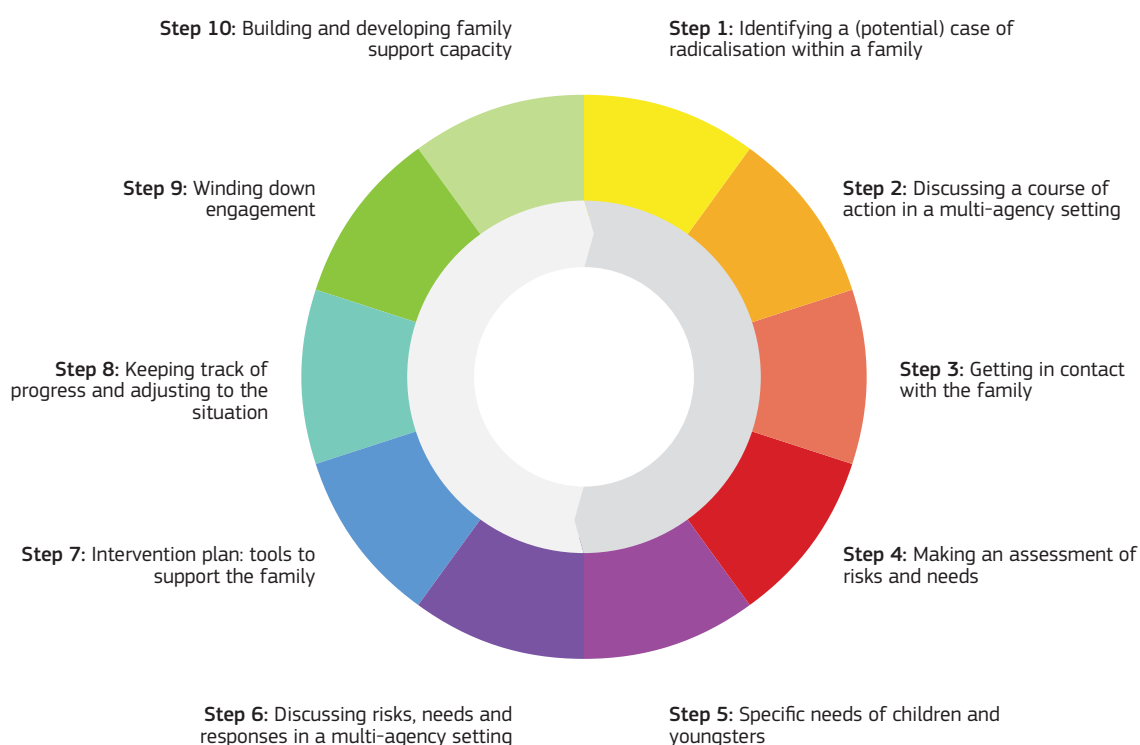## 6.2   Concrete methods and intervention models

6.2.1   Family support responses

The **family members** of the returnee can play a crucial role in the challenging period of resocialisation and reintegration into society. Most persons break off their contact with their social network before travelling to terrorist territory and are only in touch sporadically with their mother and / or father and siblings. When they return, family members are often the only social contacts left. It is important to build a relationship with the family of the FTF, strong and established contacts with the family will support the cooperation when the FTF returns.

Family members can provide a **gateway back to society**. It is important however to asses to what extent the family is supportive of the returnee and – if applicable – their spouse and children. Support for those who have a positive influence on the returnee is helpful. However, not all family members and friends are good companions during resocialisation as they might be supportive or part of the terrorist or violent extremist movement. This should be assessed before involving them.

RAN developed a **10-step approach to working with families**. The steps are indicated in the graphic below and visualised as a circle as they will influence each-other. The steps are both applicable in general as well as on a case-to-case basis. In the RAN ex post paper *Working with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation; Step by step guidance paper for practitioners and policy-makers* the 10 steps are explained and illustrated with practice examples. Fundamental principles that form the foundation of a good family support approach are also shared in this RAN paper. [26]

Step 10: Building and developing family support capacity

Step 9: Winding down engagement

Step 8: Keeping track of progress and adjusting to the situation

Step 7: Intervention plan: tools to support the family

Step 6: Discussing risks, needs and responses in a multi-agency setting

Step 1: Identifying a (potential) case of radicalisation within a family

Step 2: Discussing a course of action in a multi-agency setting

Step 3: Getting in contact with the family

Step 4: Making an assessment of risks and needs

Step 5: Specific needs of children and youngsters

Figure 5, 10-step approach to family support

---

26   See Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). (2016). Ex post paper, RAN YF&C and RAN H&SC: 'Working with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation'. Retrieved from *https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-h-and-sc/docs/ran_yf-c_h-sc_working_with_families_safeguarding_children_en.pdf*.

Additional elements to take into account when involving and / or supporting the family of a returnee:

1. **Assess the relationship between the returnee and his / her family and social network:** The relationship will have been under a lot of pressure. The returnee left the family, may have isolated him or herself from them before leaving, and has been away with probably not much contact. Also, the family members might harbour grievances towards the returnee and the fact that he / she left to join a terrorist organisation and may have suffered their own alienation / hardship as a result of this decision. Conversely, the family members might be very supportive of their relative and see him or her as a hero who made the right choice. **Practitioners working with these families should assess the relationship between the returnee and his / her family members. Is there still a relationship between them? And if so, what is the nature of it?** Is the family willing to support the returnee even if this might mean other people in the community isolating or condemning the family for doing so? Do the family members support the terrorist group and further or ongoing radicalisation? Keep in mind that the family situation might have fed into the breeding ground for the radicalisation of the returnee in the first place. If the family is not an contact option, try to establish contact with other persons with whom the returnee used to be close.

Advice from an experienced exit worker: "Supporting the families of foreign fighters will deliver benefits once the fighters return. If these families trust the exit organisation, they can become important partners and motivate the returnee to cooperate with the programme."

---

2. **Be transparant about information gathering and sharing with authorities:** Those who travel to terrorist territory usually have some contact with their family members during their time away. Contact is even more likely when someone is trying to return or planning a return. It is therefore wise to contact the family members of those who have left, and to invest in a relationship. They might need and want your support. **This relationship might provide valuable information** and an opportunity to prepare for a relatively smooth return. Information from the family should be shared with (local) police and / or (local) authorities. Be explicit with the returnee's family that information will be shared — and which information exactly — with (local) authorities. This should be transparent. You are dealing with a person who joined a terrorist organisation, the family needs to face this, and its consequences.

Case study — connection with family of possible returnee

17 year old girl, left town A for Syria in 2013. Married a Daesh fighter from her home town while in Syria, even though they were not a couple before. They have three children. The local support structure is very involved with the family. There were specific concerns about the younger sister, who seemed vulnerable. This situation has improved. Because of the length and intensity of involvement with the family, there is a good connection. The girl has been in contact with her parents and has indicated she wants to return. However, she has been threatened about this, including by her own husband. Because the husband's family lives in the same town, there are tensions between both families.

Lessons learned:

*   Careful management of cooperation between different practitioners is essential. In this case, both families are supported by the local support structure. However, sharing information between the support practitioners is challenging and implies risk.

*   It is recommended to support families with information about the extent to which return can be facilitated. Here, the daughter has asked her parents for money for her return. The legal framework is not clear on the consequences of doing so (will it be seen as aiding their child or supporting a terrorist group?). The parents want to take actions 'under the radar' to not endanger their child. However, practitioners have advised documenting all their communication and transactions. After consulting with national government, very specific instructions have been sent to the family on how to transfer the money.

*   Information must be managed very carefully. In this case, the police would like more information from the contact so as to better assess the situation and risk. The parents are scared that their daughter's communication is being

monitored and they do not want to endanger her or their grandchildren. The husband's family is spreading rumours that the daughter is still in a leading position within Daesh's female police force. It is not clear whether this information is true.

- Children can be protected if there is agreement on where they will live before they return. If the daughter in this case returns with the children, there are concerns about custody as the husband's family is also likely to want custody. Besides the risk of a custody battle, the tensions between the families might also have a negative effect on the children.

- There is a strong need for a clearer legal framework, including at practitioner level. Legal advice and support should be established to support and protect practitioners should they get involved in court cases, and when practitioners are asked to advise families about situations with legal consequences. This is to avoid practitioners having individual legal responsibility.

- Returnee cases have become much more concrete. Whereas before some families seemed to surrender to 'what will be will be', they are now more driven to get family members back — and they are much more likely to come back.

3. **Inform the family about the legal consequences of aiding their children:** Parents and family members are usually very involved in trying to get their child (even if he / she is an adult) back. They have a tendency to look for different ways to help and speed up this return, for example by sending money and travelling to Turkey or Syria themselves. Legal frameworks and jurisprudence on these actions differ between countries. Family support practitioners should therefore be trained and informed about the legal consequences of these actions in their own countries so they can advise families accordingly. Close cooperation between practitioners and national government on the topic of aiding return and / or sending money is mandatory.

Case study — paying for illegal return?

A woman from town B travelled to Syria and married a man from town A. She was rejected by her own family in town B, but her mother-in-law, who lives in town A, has a strong connection with her. Her husband died in battle. The woman has indicated she wants to return. She also has children and the mother-in-law has indicated she wants to provide the necessary care for the children. The mother-in-law also knows the family of another woman in town B who travelled to Syria. The family of this other woman received the same instructions to send money as the mother-in-law received. However, this information can't just be shared with the families because of safety reasons. There are concerns about the legitimacy of the request — does she really want to return or just want money? The woman from town B has meanwhile found residence with a Syrian family that is taking care of her and her children. She has indicated that she even wants to send the children ahead to Turkey to get them to safety. The mother-in-law is willing to travel to Turkey to collect the children.

Lessons learned:

It is important to stress the benefits of organised return and manage expectations. In the country that this family comes from, the approach is to ask people who want to return from Syria or Iraq with children to sign up at the home country consulate. Children are DNA-tested to establish the biological connection to the parent(s) before the family can travel. Since it takes a while for these results to arrive, families might not be willing to wait and the risk of them taking matters into their own hands increases. The returnee family and their family members should be informed about the wait, so that they are prepared. The benefits of organised return include protected, less dangerous travel, immediate child support, better preparation for the children's stay within the family.

4. **Be aware of additional risks to which returnees and their families are exposed:**

- the returnee might be mentally unstable, traumatised or still angry at his / her family and might try to harm them;

- the terrorist organisation might want to take revenge against the returnee for leaving and threaten the returnee and his / her family;

- Daesh considers the children of (former) Daesh fighters their property and have threatened the returnee and his / her family, seeking to coerce them to return the child in several cases.

- the community might want to take revenge against the returnee for being part of a terrorist organisation and / or the family for supporting the returnee.

These risks should be discussed in the local multi-agency intervention team and if needed with national government. National and local police and mental health professionals can help assess the situation and mitigate the risks.

5. **Take into account the position of the family in the wider community:** Depending on the situation in the community, the returnee's family might be isolated or severely distrusted by the surrounding community since their relative is part of a terrorist organisation. If so, support the family in their reintegration into their community by developing a specific reintegration plan for them. Do not forget that this needs multi-agency cooperation and possibly a communication expert to help communicate the situation of the family on a broader (but still local) scale.

Practice in action:

Support in prevention: Via a _free helpline_, the French government provides immediate support for parents, relatives or peers of individuals trying to travel to Syria or Iraq, or returning from Daesh. The helpline can be called for immediate assistance or for information. The caller will — if necessary — be linked to a regional action team. This helpline can also be contacted for information or support in case of signals about (possible) radicalised persons in general.

Support for parents of FTFs: Violence Prevention Network (Germany) has family counselling to provide support for parents of radicalised youngsters and / or FT's. See: _Family Counselling -Support for parents of "foreign fighters" or youths at risk to be radicalised_

Mentoring and parent coaching: This Danish manual on implementing local efforts in the area of mentoring, parent coaching and supporting relatives provides a practical and extensive description of several interventions and assessment tools. See Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism, _Mentoring effort, parent coaching and relatives and carers networks Solution-focused work on life skills_.

Resilience training: The Belgian government, funded by the EU, developed a resilience training programme for youngsters at risk and their family members. It is called _Bounce_. The programme can be used by any country, and includes train-the-trainer guidance. is available.

Family Support Centre: _The Dutch Family Support Centre_ is an example of how to support families of radicalised persons (including FTFs)

Counselling service on radicalisation: The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) provides support to family members and friends of persons who are radicalised or in the process of becoming so. Since 2012, _the advice centre_ has served as a first point of contact, providing families with general knowledge on Islamism, giving advice to individuals and even helping parents or other relatives of youths who left the country for Syria or Iraq, or who returned from these countries. The counselling is given by experienced civil society partners at local level. Together with the federal states, a nationwide network has been built, which is constantly being expanded and enhanced.

Further reading: Principles for reintegrating: For more information regarding the reintegration of returnees see: _Malta Principles for Reintegrating Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs)_.

6.2.2 Mentoring and counselling

When the returnee is willing to reintegrate, mentoring and counselling during this process is essential. He or she needs to integrate and reintroduce him or herself to the community, to neighbours, employers and maybe also to a lot of agencies and commercial organisations (banks, insurance company etc.). In this section we will look into mentoring and counselling responses to returnees.

Case study – the role of mentoring

An 18-year old man attends high-school and a local mosque. He becomes a member of a radical salafi youth group. As he becomes increasingly radicalised, there are dramatic swings in behaviour. He changes from an outspoken, kind and dedicated person to become introverted and withdrawn. He is seen several times as a supporting spectator during a terrorism trial. He drops out of school and his work in a local supermarket. In May 2013 he leaves for Syria with a friend. The family is left in shock and feels very insecure. Talks are initiated between the local CVE coordinator and the parents. The parents are invited to participate in the local parent network, and attend meetings frequently. Six months after departure, the 18-year old returns. His father contacts the local coordinator immediately. The next day, the local coordinator meets with the returnee and his father. He appears physically and emotionally exhausted. The returnee is open, friendly and forthcoming and states he "wants his old life back." The returnee is extremely grateful for the reception on his return and all his signs of radicalisation are gone. A few weeks later the returnee was introduced to his mentor. He was also allowed to return to school on the condition of mentoring and counselling. This was very successful, and in summer 2016 the returnee graduated as an A-student.

Lessons learned:

• Be prepared to invest in relations with the family and returnee so that ideological and theological themes can be addressed within a mentoring scheme.

• This case illustrates the importance of establishing contact with family and involving them early on in the process. This pays off later.

• Mentoring is essential in guiding the returnee and ensuring they follow through on their commitments.

Mentoring and counselling a returnee as he or she returns to society is also called exit work. Exit interventions and tools used when providing help to radicalised persons wanting to exit the violent extremist organisation they were part of are also useful when dealing with a returnee. See chapter 5 for more information on mentoring programmes.

Practice in action:
Four-step exit programme for returnees: Aarhus, has developed a four-step exit programme for returnees. A description of the programme is available on p.8 of the *RAN Ex ex post paper on Setting up an exit intervention*.

Counselling and deradicalisation: The German organisation Hayat offers counselling programmes for persons involved in radical Salafist groups or on the path towards violent Jihadist radicalisation, including those travelling to Syria and other combat zones. See their *website* for more information.

Counselling in case of extremism: The Austrian Extremism Information Center offers face-to-face counselling, expertise as well as workshops and lectures to help relatives, social workers, teachers or any other person concerned that someone might have joined an extremist group. The advisory service is free of charge, anonymous and confidential. More information on this *website*.

Streetwork and counselling: Kitab, a Team at VAJA e.V in Bremen (Germany), works on countering radicalisation processes affecting youngsters in the context of fundamentalist Islamism and Salafism. They provide counselling to the radicalised person and his / her parents, relatives or other persons belonging to their social circle. For more information, *contact VAJA*.

Alongside the eight aspects to take into account whilst designing and delivering interventions specifically for returnees mentioned in section 6.1, there are two extra elements of which to take stock when mentoring a returnee.

- **Be clear about objectives and goals**: Before starting a mentoring project with a returnee, formulate clear objectives and goals for this mentoring. Several practitioners noted that it is hard to establish if and when the goal of the mentoring is reached for returnees. They reported that needs for mentoring are infinite. Clear goals and objectives should be formulated to prevent a situation in which the mentoring remains too shallow and not challenging enough for the returnee. This will not support proper reintegration into society.

Case study – returnee pregnant to a well-known FTF

A woman in her early 20s followed her husband to Syria in 2015 to stay with him in Daesh-claimed territory. Six months after she arrived, her husband died. With help from a family member who travelled to Turkey and used his contacts there, she returned to her home country pregnant. She claims she did not fight. She left after her husband died, and did not want to be married to another man from Daesh. After her return, she was briefly arrested and her passport was confiscated. When back in her home town a social worker from the municipality — informed by national government about the upcoming return —got in contact. This first-line practitioner checked whether the woman was mentally ready to become a mother. She seemed ready, but there were signs of depression and trauma. The practitioner feared the woman might go back to Daesh the moment the child was born. One-on-one counselling was arranged for the woman. Her family and former friends supported her the whole time. In 2016 the woman gave birth. At the same time, Daesh claimed the baby as theirs. They threatened the woman and her family. In 2017 it seems that the woman is intending to stay, she is planning to go back to school and gives a better and less depressed impression. The risk of Daesh kidnapping her child seems to have reduced. But the father of this child is well known among Daesh followers; he had quite a high function within Daesh before he died and is admired, so his child might receive extra attention.

Lessons learned:

1. Support from family members is crucial when reintegrating into society. This woman returned to a forgiving and open environment, and it was also very helpful that the woman's friends welcomed her back.

2. The security risk is a crucial issue. It helps to get attention and budget but it makes sharing information very difficult. Intelligence and police do not easily give information because most of it is classified. This makes assessing a case quite hard. In this case the threat of Daesh and their claim to the baby increased the security risk even further. It would help if the sharing of information could be more transparent and faster.

3. When to stop mentoring? With returnee cases it is harder to asses when an individual is integrated within society. As long as they can travel to Daesh or be contacted by Daesh, it pays to be very cautious.

- **Security:** Mentoring and counselling a returnee to mentally leave the terrorist organisation he / she was part of means working with individuals who are accustomed to violence and crime. The risk of violence against the practitioner involved is very real and must be taken seriously. The risk will differ per case and organisation. The overview in Figure 6 describes safety measures to be implemented should the situation so demand.

The office
- Do not communicate the address of your office online or offline (signage).
- Keep sensitive documents and files safely secured in your office.
- Employ security.

Communication
- Regulate information. Do not share sensitive information over insecure mediums.
- Do not use private phones for work.
- Control information: Who knows what?

Protecting staff
- Conceal staff members' home addresses.
- Keep colleagues informed about each other's appointments and whereabouts.

High-risk cases
- Collaborate with security agencies.
- Create disinformation to mislead former groups.
- Form emergency plans and contact structures.

Case management
- **Analyse the threats:** groups, person(s), roles, dangerous knowledge, history.
- **Shield:** prepare an information plan and measures for the exit procedure.

Protecting the individual
- Tell the individual to make a note of all threats.
- Provide them with a logbook.
- Relocate them to a new environment.
- Create a safe environment where the client can share his/her story.

Figure 6, Keeping everyone safe

Advice from an experienced practitioner: "The security of first-line practitioners involved with returnee cases needs to be reassessed. They also need to receive training, briefings and debriefings from competent experts. Those who have most knowledge and expertise are usually those from security services and military educational institutions. However, those who frequently meet with returnees face to face – like practitioners –usually do not have the required knowledge about the challenges and security dilemmas."

- **Strong convictions:** Most returnees still have or had a strong ideological conviction, including views on how society should function, and quite dogmatic beliefs on, for example, democracy, sexual orientation, the role of women and education. To successfully integrate within society he / she needs to be aware of the fact that his / her opinion might not be shared by the majority of the community into which he / she is reintegrating. When mentoring them, prepare to use deradicalisation techniques and interventions used when dealing with strong convictions. If needed, lessons can be learned from those organisations that support right-wing extremists in their reintegration, or interventions used to reintegrate members of IRA or ETA.[27]

More information about mentoring and counselling in section 5.5.

---

27   For example Exit Germany, an organisation supporting right-wing extremists wishng to leave their right-wing group *http://www.exit-deutschland.de/english/* or for more information about disengagement of IRA members, see Fergusson, D.M., Swain-Cambell, N.R. and Horwood, J. (2001) Deviant Peer Affiliations, Crime and Substance Use: A Fixed Effects Regression Analysis. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, vol.30 (4) pp. 419–430.

6.2.3 Mental health responses

Returnees are more likely than the average person to suffer from mental health problems. Spending prolonged periods in terrorist-claimed territory and conflict zones can leave significant psychological scars. Much of our knowledge about this comes from conflict-induced trauma suffered by regular armed forces.[28] There is the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among those returning from conflict zones — whether they have fought or not — which can leave them traumatised, vulnerable to radicalisation, and potentially a danger to themselves or society. **While PTSD is at the far end of the spectrum, those returning from conflict zones can also be subject to a wide range of trauma-related problems**[29]:

• **Physical:** trouble sleeping, overly tired; stomach upsets, trouble eating; headaches and sweating when thinking about war; rapid heartbeat or breathing; worsening of pre-existing health problems; feelings of shock, numbness, inability to be happy.

• **Common mental and emotional reactions**: bad dreams, nightmares; flashbacks or frequent unwanted memories; anger; feeling nervous, helpless or fearful; feeling guilty, self-blame, shame; feeling sad, rejected or abandoned; agitated, easily upset, irritated, annoyed; feeling hopeless about the future.

• **Behavioural reactions:** trouble concentrating; edgy, jumpy, easily startled; being on guard, always alert, concerned too much about safety and security; avoiding people or places related to the trauma; too much drinking, smoking or drug use; lack of exercise, poor diet or personal health care; problems carrying out regular tasks at work or school; aggressive driving habits.

Psychologists working with returnees also report some suffering from 'moral damage' rather than PTSD: their belief systems have been altered by what they have seen in Syria-Iraq or other terrorist conflict zones, which leads them to question their **moral image of the world and belief systems**. They might also be left with a sense of betrayal after being exposed to the reality of the conflict, or be disillusioned with the radical cause itself. These reactions are, in a sense, a good thing; they offer an opportunity for intervention. But left unsupported, these persons are also vulnerable.[30]

Next to psychological problems induced by staying in terrorist claimed territory, studies show that a disproportionate percentage of FTFs suffer **from mental health issues**. Data from three EU Member States indicate that up to 20 % of FTFs suffer from some mental health-related issues. Switzerland indicated that between 15 and 20 % have mental health problems, whereas in the Netherlands, research indicates that 60 % of individuals who are known or suspected to be jihadi radicals suffer from mental health issues. [31]

Considering the high probability of mental health problems, screening for mental status is essential.

---

28 Briggs Obe, R., Silverman, T. (2014), _Foreign Fighters Innovations in Responding to the Threat_, Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

29 US Department of Veterans Affairs (2010), _Returning from the War Zone: A guide for military personnel._

30 Briggs Obe, R., Silverman, T. (2014), _Foreign Fighters Innovations in Responding to the Threat_, Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

31 Paulussen C., Nijman, J. and Lismont, K., (2017), _Mental Health and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: A Case Study from the Netherlands_, ICCT Report and Mehra, T., (2016), _Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics and Policy Responses_, ICCT Policy Brief.

Mental health screening for returnees [32]

1. Social:

    a. What is his / her current situation in terms of family members, friends, education, daytime activities, living situation, financial situation and religion or ideology?

    b. What was the situation during their time away in terms of family members, friends, living conditions, daytime activities and religion or ideology?

2. Somatic: what is the current health status? Are there any medical complaints? (tired, chest pain, headaches, blurred vision, etc.).

3. Psychiatric: what is the current mental state? (agitated, mood swings, trouble sleeping, worried, aggressive, etc.). Also check for addictions and test the IQ of the returnee.

4. Analyse: weigh all the facts and come to a first draft conclusion.

5. Counter check: ask a colleague to analyse this case and combine conclusions.

6. Discuss conclusions in the local multi-agency intervention team — they might provide valuable input regarding the returnee and his / her resocialisation. Also discuss possible interventions and treatment.

7. Draw a final conclusion and, if needed, develop the intervention and start treatment.

When developing a mental health response for returnees, it is important to take into account the following five aspects[33]:

• Do not presume to understand the returnee. Motives vary, and some returnees may not even have an in-depth understanding of their own motives. Presumptions can form barriers to building a relationship with the returnee.

• Traumatic states can be difficult to assess and are often neglected, misinterpreted or not detected. Also, trauma does not necessarily manifest itself immediately. Ways of detecting and assessing trauma should therefore be included in the treatment for returnees. The mental health professional who will work with the returnee can prepare by contacting a trauma expert.

• Some returnees will need long-term professional treatment and / or medication. Organise this if needed; a lack of treatment or insufficient treatment creates risk.

• To successfully treat a returnee, a coordinated and holistic approach that targets different aspects is needed. If treatment is not coordinated carefully, it can create confusion and frustration for the returnee as well as impinge on the effects of the intervention. Discuss the treatment within the local multi-agency team.

• Patience and time is needed. Psychological processes are often difficult, take time, and needs may fluctuate. Access to services must therefore be ongoing and smooth.

Case study, FTF with avoidant personality disorder

Man, born in 1993. Drug-addict father (cocaine, serial offender) and raised by single mother. Father physically abused mother, which led to the first contact with mental health providers (counselling because of abuse). Mother had a lot of debts, moved in with her employer, married him. The man felt jealous and ignored, started drinking, smoking cannabis, developed lots of problems at school. He gravitated towards the wrong crowd. A general pattern developed of never finishing anything (school, courses, jobs, etc.). The man was put into care (living in an institution) at 16, left the facility for a more open setting at 17 and converted to Islam at 18. While on holiday with his mother, he met a converted girl and her mother and was married within a

---

32   The elements of the mental health screening tool for returnees are based on interviews with mental health specialists.

33   These considerations come from an experienced mental health professional who has worked with several returnees.

year. Some months later, when he had just had a baby boy, he travelled to Syria (December 2012). His story, as told by him, is as follows:

He went to Syria believing he was starting a new life in a cheap, well-regulated Islamic country. His wife and baby would follow soon after he had everything arranged. When he saw Syria in reality (especially the second location), he became very anxious because of the fast developing war and ongoing armed fights; he told his 'superiors' in Syria that he wanted to return to his home country. He was interrogated by these 'superiors' on a daily basis for several weeks. They suspected him of being an informer for his country's intelligence service. After interrogation for 2.5 months, he received permission to leave. In total, he stayed four months in Syria in 2012 – 2013 as part of the 'first generation' of Syria travellers. There are no details about how he returned. Back in his home country he was prosecuted and convicted for active participation in a terrorist network and imprisoned for a brief period. When he returned he received mental treatment for PTSD, but stopped his medication after two days "because it tasted foul". Then he was referred to specialised trauma-care (EMDR), but did not like the waiting-list ahead of him and did not pursue further treatment. Since 2016 he has been living with his wife and two children in a rented apartment. He has been offered several jobs but does not last anywhere more than two weeks. The man is also very media-eager, has given several interviews to journalists and also wants to publish his own book. Furthermore, he claims he is being threatened by another returnee. His current forensic treatment focuses on 'building character/ identity', his wife is being treated for anorexia nervosa and both children are under surveillance by child protection services. A few weeks ago, the intelligence services contacted the mental health practitioner coordinating the man's treatment. He has been affiliating with a younger, highly radicalised man and is now monitored by government and a new risk assessment is being conducted.

Lessons learned:

• Some radicalised persons are in need of lifelong mentoring. In this case, an avoidant personality disorder means that every move that man makes is 'radical' or 'drastic'; the general conclusion is that this reactive pattern and a certain level of dependency (on institutions) will stay with him throughout his life, in combination with a strong tendency to externalise and manipulate. Because he lacks resilience or identity of his own this will remain an ongoing point of focus in his treatment, as well as learning to see out the consequences of 'radical decisions'.

• It is important to pay attention to cynical attitudes regarding treatment and to reassign practitioners / case managers if needed. Part of this man's problem / disorder is that he constantly holds others responsible for fixing his problems. He never takes any responsibility and manipulates. One minute his 'new life' is handed to him on plate, and the next he makes another drastic move and creates a whole new set of problems. This has resulted in a cynical attitude among all professionals involved. He is not taken seriously anymore, by anyone, which creates a new danger in itself.

6.2.4   Practical responses

Returnees often stop informal and all formal relations before travelling to terrorist-claimed territory. Their job, housing, insurance and welfare has been stopped due to them not being present or not paying over a prolonged period. Most of them are no longer registered as citizen in their home town. When reintegrating in society they need help to get these practical things organised and to make this process as swift as possible.

Advice from an experienced first-line practitioner: "Most often, returnees lack proper / up-to-date registration in the public system and so cannot receive support and treatment. The time it takes to go through a regular process is too long, and requests may easily be turned down because of a lack of referrals or insufficient information."

For each returnee, an overview of the more practical needs should be drafted. Most likely the person counselling or mentoring the returnee will have the best overview of what is needed. Discuss initially with this practitioner and draft an overview of what is needed. This overview should be on the agenda for the meeting with the local multi-agency intervention team on this returnee.

Practical

Practicalities mainly fall into eight categories.

- **Start**: start by making sure the returnee is registered in the necessary national and local citizen databases.

- **Immediate treatment:** assess the need for medical treatment due to war injuries, contagious diseases or mental disorders and refer accordingly. Treatments may have been provided the moment the returnee entered the country.

- **Housing:** make sure the location in which the returnee will live is safe for him / her and the neighbourhood. If necessary, provide anonymous housing to avoid safety issues involving agitated neighbours.

- **Finances:** help the returnee to apply, if needed, for financial support from local or national government. Also, help with opening a bank account, if needed. Returnees might be on the UN Terrorist list as most FTFs are. If so, his / her assets are frozen. You need to contact national government to start a so-called de-lifting procedure. This takes several months. In the meantime, he / she will not be able to earn money, open a bank account or access his / her bank account.

- **Employment / education:** help the returnee to take part in structured daytime activities. He or she should be employed or start an educational course as soon as possible.

- **Medical treatment:** put the returnee in contact with his or her (new) general practitioner. He / she should be able to contact his / her doctor when needed. The returnee may have received medical treatment organised by national government when he / she arrived and was arrested. If so, the general practitioner should be informed.

- **Mental health treatment:** if not already done, help the returnee to contact local mental health services if needed.

- **Legal:** there may be specific legal questions to deal with, such as the formal recognition of a returnee's children, the payment of fines from before leaving for terrorist-claimed territory, or how to reunite with family members with a different nationality. Get legal advice for the returnee by arranging a (probably pro bono) lawyer or via a local coordinator if needed.

7 Child returnees

The introduction to this manual provided an overview of the complex challenges at stake with child returnees based on their experiences abroad. This chapter focuses on how to respond to these challenges, taking into account both the safety and security of the child him / herself and their environment, as well as the need to resocialise the child as quickly as possible into the new environment.

7.1   General overview

The challenges faced with children who have been confronted by extremism and terrorism will require both immediate action as well as a long-term approach as many of the potential side-effects could become apparent at a much later stage.

What do we mean by 'children'? As laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a child is any human being below the age of 18. The principles set out in the UN Convention on the rights of the child have been ratified by all EU countries. From a legal perspective, EU Member States differ in their jurisdictions when it comes to defining whether someone under 18 falls under juvenile legislation or adult legislation. Often this will also depend on the nature of the crime.

Child returnees: definition in this manual

Within this manual there are three groups to take into account when talking about child returnees:

1. children who left the EU (with their families or on their own) to live within a terrorist organisation abroad and who have returned (with their families or on their own);

2. children who were born in terrorist conflict zones and who then travelled to Europe;

3. children who were born in the EU to a mother and / or father who was involved with a terrorist organisation abroad (a female FTF returnee who has returned while pregnant with the child). In this case, the child has not lived in the EU before and has also not lived in the terrorist conflict zone. This category is also included in the manual because the returnee status of the parent(s) can have an effect on the child at a later stage in his / her life.

Responses will not necessarily differ according to the group, but will be dependent on: the level of trauma and indoctrination, character and personality, the child's direct environment and so on.

Children of different ages

Although it is apparent that age matters when it comes to child returnees (as well as the length of time they have been exposed to the conflict situation and the level of engagement), there is no clear-cut guidance on age groups when it comes to responses. In terms of interventions with children, psychological and psychiatric guidelines should be followed. This would mean that children are categorised into **child / pre-tee and adolescent children**. Decisions on cut-off marks for each category need to be made by professionals, and to take into account differences in development and cultural considerations; but as a general guide, under the age of 12 / 13 would be categorised as pre-teens and above would be adolescent children. Adolescent interventions are only possible if a child has reached a certain cognitive level. [34]

From the moment of conception and during pregnancy, children may already suffer from the circumstances in which their mother is living; these may also lead to long-term effects after birth. The impact of periods of stress on the developing child is particularly relevant here.[35] **If the mother is regularly undergoing a physiological stress response, this has a damaging impact on the developing foetus**. Threats to the development of the brain in the first 3.5 years (1 000 days) are also considered to have a huge impact on the child's ability to engage with the world

---

34   Theodore, L. (2016) Handbook of Evidence-Based Interventions for Children and Adolescents. Springer, New York.

35   Mulder, E. J., De Medina, P. R., Huizink, A. C., Van den Bergh, B. R., Buitelaar, J. K., &Visser, G. H. (2002). Prenatal maternal stress: effects on pregnancy and the (unborn) child. *Early human development*, vol. 70(1), pp. 3-14.

around them.[36] As a consequence, this should be taken into account when dealing with young children who have been exposed to a conflict situation for a relatively long time compared to their age.

In cases where older children (12 years and older) have returned from Daesh territory and have presumably been witness and party to extreme violence and abuse, the main concern is that these children are less open to intervention and less capable of change. In addition, and supported by criminological literature that points to the influences of peer groups on offending,[37] there should be significant concern about the spread of radical ideas amongst peers. However, it is vital that older children are treated with key services (e.g. psychological, educational, pastoral) tailored to their developmental level. They should not be included in adult services.

Regardless of the child's age, promoting the development of fundamental elements such as interpersonal skills, managing emotions, having a stable family life etc. remain key to ensuring the possibility that these children will become contributing members of society.

Experience in working with children who have returned from Syria and Iraq is still very limited in the EU. There is, however, a large body of experience and research on working with children who have been exposed to combat situations (e.g. child soldiers) as well as on severe trauma and extremist ideology in general. In addition, there are guiding conventions and international frameworks that shape policies establishing the rights and protection of children in vulnerable situations, and that can provide guidelines when designing policies and interventions in this area.

Based on this experience, practitioners working with child returnees, whether a police officer, a mental health professional, a social worker or a teacher, should take into account the following whilst designing and delivering interventions:

- Children living / growing up in conflict areas are particularly vulnerable because of the abuses they face, as well as the violence they witness, and because of the fact that their normal social, moral, emotional and cognitive development is interrupted and corrupted by the experience of war.[38] In addition to traumatisation related to living in a conflict zone, **the process of resettlement (returning to the EU) may be a cause of further trauma.** This is even more pronounced when families are separated, or when children have travelled alone.

- Children exposed to armed conflict are highly likely to face **multiple and ongoing trauma[39]** related to interpersonal / interfamilial violence, sexual abuse, hunger, malnutrition, neglect and abandonment. Exposure to multiple and repeated trauma represents a significant risk a child's development and overall functioning.[40] In addition, further trauma as a result of resettlement and integration processes is a distinct possibility.[41] This may be caused by discrimination, social exclusion, instability, parental unemployment and the absence of peer networks of support.

- When children have been involved in violence, psychological evidence demonstrates an inability to adequately consent to involvement in violent activity and a lack of capacity to fully understand the consequences of this involvement. A child's upbringing, as well as their biological development, will determine at what age he or she can be expected to understand and oversee the consequences of his / her actions. **Like child soldiers, child returnees can be seen as victims and in some cases perpetrators at the same time.**

- Even though back in Europe and away from the conflict zone, practitioners should be aware that children might still be in a **transitional environment.** This is especially the case when their parents are incarcerated and they are, for example, living in foster care. This can be an impediment to dealing with trauma and rebuilding resilience[42].

36 Hair, N. L., Hanson, J. L., Wolfe, B. L., &Pollak, S. D. (2015). Association of child poverty, brain development, and academic achievement. *JAMA pediatrics*, vol. 169(9), pp. 822-829.

37 Fergusson, D.M., Swain-Cambell, N.R. and Horwood, J. (2001) Deviant Peer Affiliations, Crime and Substance Use: A Fixed Effects Regression Analysis. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, vol.30 (4) pp. 419–430.

38 Kohrt, BA., Jordans, MJD., Koirala, S. et al (2014). Designing Mental Health Interventions Informed by Child Development and Human Biology Theory: A Social Ecology Intervention for Child Soldiers in Nepal. *American Journal of Human Biology*, vol. 27, pp. 27-40.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Fazel, M., Reed, R. V., Panter-Brick, C., & Stein, A. (2012). Mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in high-income countries: risk and protective factors. *The Lancet*, vol. 379(9812), pp. 266-282.

42 Resilience refers to a child's ability to cope and to respond to both the normal and exceptional challenges that arise during development.

- Daesh ideology and their carefully orchestrated community infrastructure have created the foundations of an identity for children that also serves as a protective factor, allowing them to remain resilient while living in those circumstances. Interventions aimed at addressing the ideology / worldview of child returnees should take into account that **deconstructing the foundation of their identity and transitioning to a new identity is a complex, long-term process.** These kinds of interventions should therefore take place in the context of broader reintegration and rehabilitation processes and / or measures.

- Once returned, the **social environment** of the child (family, community and peer groups) will have a great influence on the success of rehabilitation and resocialisation. Practitioners should be aware that some returnees were in the public / local spotlight and are therefore stigmatised or celebrated amongst certain communities and groups. Children of different ages may become future targets of bullying and intimidation or, on the other hand, recruited back into extremist circles.

Further reading: UNODC Upcoming Handbook: Since 2015, UNODC has been providing technical assistance to countries facing the recruitment and exploitation of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups. In 2017, UNODC will publish a Handbook focusing on the treatment of children recruited and exploited by terrorist groups. The handbook, which targets primarily law- and policy-makers, as well as practitioners, will focus on the different roles of judicial actors, in coordination with other systems, in responding to three key sets of challenges: i) preventing the recruitment of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups; ii) identifying effective justice responses to children recruited and exploited by such groups, iii) promoting rehabilitation and reintegration of those children. Particular attention will be devoted to the specific situation and needs of girls.

7.3   Response strategy to child returnees

Key assumptions for a response strategy:

As was stated in the **RAN issue paper on Child Returnees from Conflict Zones**[43], when putting in place policies and strategies to respond to child returnees, it should be assumed that:

- *All* children returning from Iraq and Syria have been exposed to some level of violence and need intervention.

- Based on the intensive indoctrination programmes of Daesh, *all* children must be assumed to have had some level of engagement with and exposure to Daesh's extremist ideology.

These assumptions do not mean that all children are or will become potential violent extremists or terrorists. However a failure to recognise the impact of such an ideology on the potential for (re)integration in to European society may be significant.

Three key pre-conditions should guide the strategy for response interventions:

1. **A focus on early intervention and normalisation:** for the best possible results in resocialising returnee children into western society, *begin* normalising the day-to-day lives of the children and socialising them into an appropriate social network as soon as possible after their arrival. Children will benefit from a structured 'normal' and safe environment in which they can interact at day care or school with peers. In addition, based on findings from criminology in general, it is known that children who offend before the age of 12 are more likely to be persistent offenders.[44] Although these findings are not necessarily related to violence but deviance more generally and there is no research as yet about children growing up in terrorist-claimed territory, it should be considered as an impetus to focus on early intervention (meaning as soon as possible when the child returns).

2. **A holistic, multi-agency approach:** no single service can provide the necessary holistic response to child returnees in isolation. When designing a national and local response to child returnees, a multi-agency approach is needed to address the personal, family and social needs of the child. In general, it is likely that the following

43   Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2016). Issue Paper: 'Child returnees from conflict zones'. Available at *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*.

44   Loeber, R., Farrington, D.P. and Petechuk, D. (2003), Child Delinquency: Early Intervention and Prevention. *Child Delinquency*, Bulletin Series (May). Available at http://www.forensiccounselor.org/images/file/Child%20Delinquency%20Early%20Intervention%20and%20 Prevention.pdf.

actors will be involved in such an approach: law enforcement agencies, child services, social care services, local authorities, schools, health services, prison and probation related services (e.g. when parents are in prison), employment services, sports and leisure organisations, religious and charity organisations and so on.

3. **A tailor-made approach based on individual risk and need assessment:** each case will have its own background, dynamics, risks and opportunities for rehabilitation, which should be reflected in a risk and needs assessment. These cases therefore require a tailor-made approach, involving relevant actors as mentioned above. All children need an individualised assessment of their situation, needs, and even risks to be able to draft an appropriate intervention for the individual child.

These pre-conditions are not only specific to child returnees, and are based on general best-practice in dealing with radicalised individuals involved in violent extremism and terrorism.

The response strategy may comprise a variety of different interventions that serve to ensure safety and security for the child itself, as well as those within their social circle. In addition, there will be interventions that focus on rehabilitation and resocialisation of the child in a safe and stable environment (e.g. going back to school, receiving counselling, taking part in leisure activities) that address the child's well-being as well as the risk of the child becoming violent and / or radicalised in the future. The methods and interventions that practitioners can use to work with returnee children are explained in more detail in the next section.

Practice in action: Instructions on how to deal with child returnees in France

On 23 March 2017, the French Prime Minister presented an _instruction for French authorities and practitioners on the management of_ French minors and foreign minors returning to French territory after a stay in Iraq or Syria.

The approach underlines how every individual situation will be evaluated by the competent prosecutor's office, which will decide on whether the prosecution route should be taken. The office will refer the matter to the juvenile judge for any protective measures deemed necessary.

The aim is to ensure that all children receive appropriate care (following a somatic and psychological assessment upon arrival) and schooling corresponding to their needs, while protecting them from the risk of stigmatisation linked to their family history.

Schooling is under the responsibility of the academic director of the national education services, who establishes coordination between the different departmental services that make up the national education system, the educational establishments and all other actors responsible for the follow-up of these minors. The confidential nature of all information shared is respected.

Local units for the prevention of crime and radicalisation and family support, chaired by the prefects in close collaboration with the Public Prosecutor, ensure the overall follow-up of these children and their parents (whether or not they are subject to judiciary measures).

This instruction emphasises the need to properly train all individuals responsible for accompanying these minors and calls for the setting-up of a committee, within the Ministry of Justice, to assess the social and educational care of child returnees.
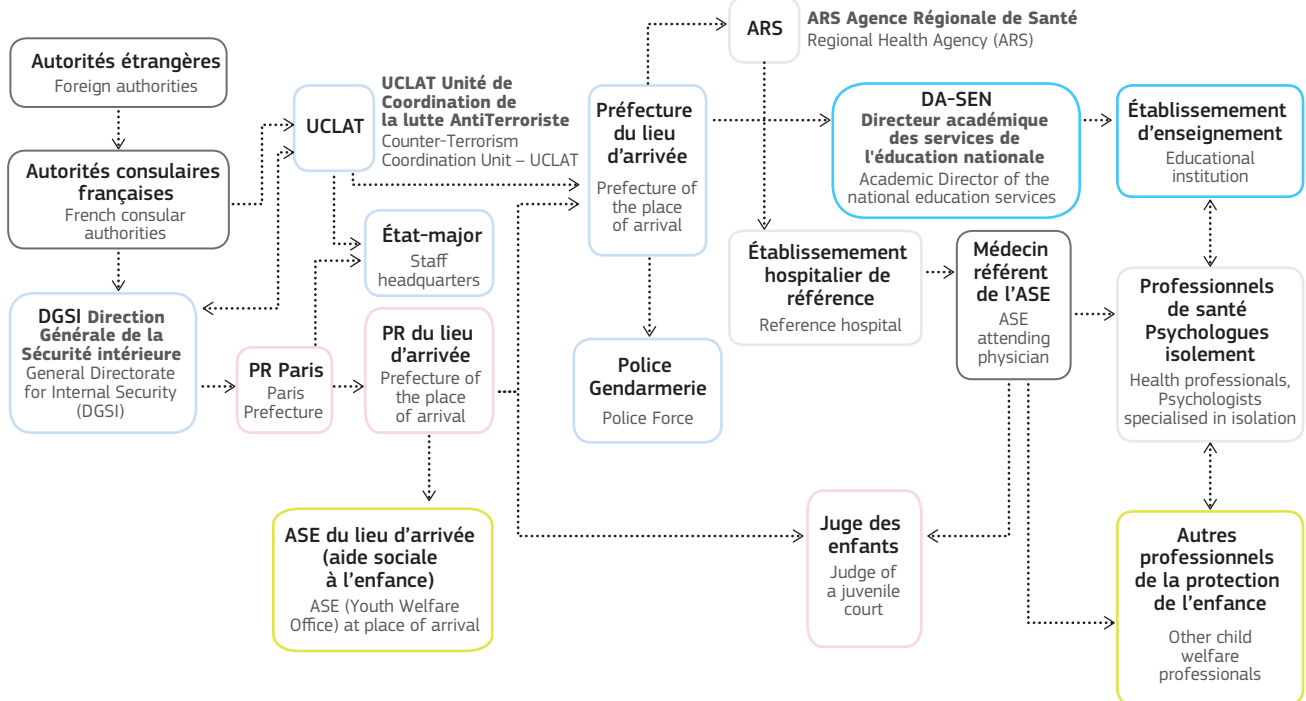
The graphic below gives an overview of the information coordination circuit that will be used for child returnees. _More information is available online_.
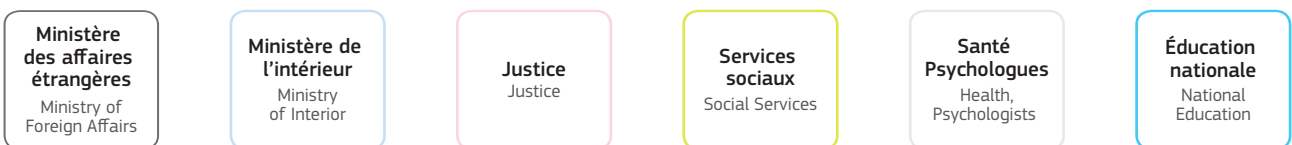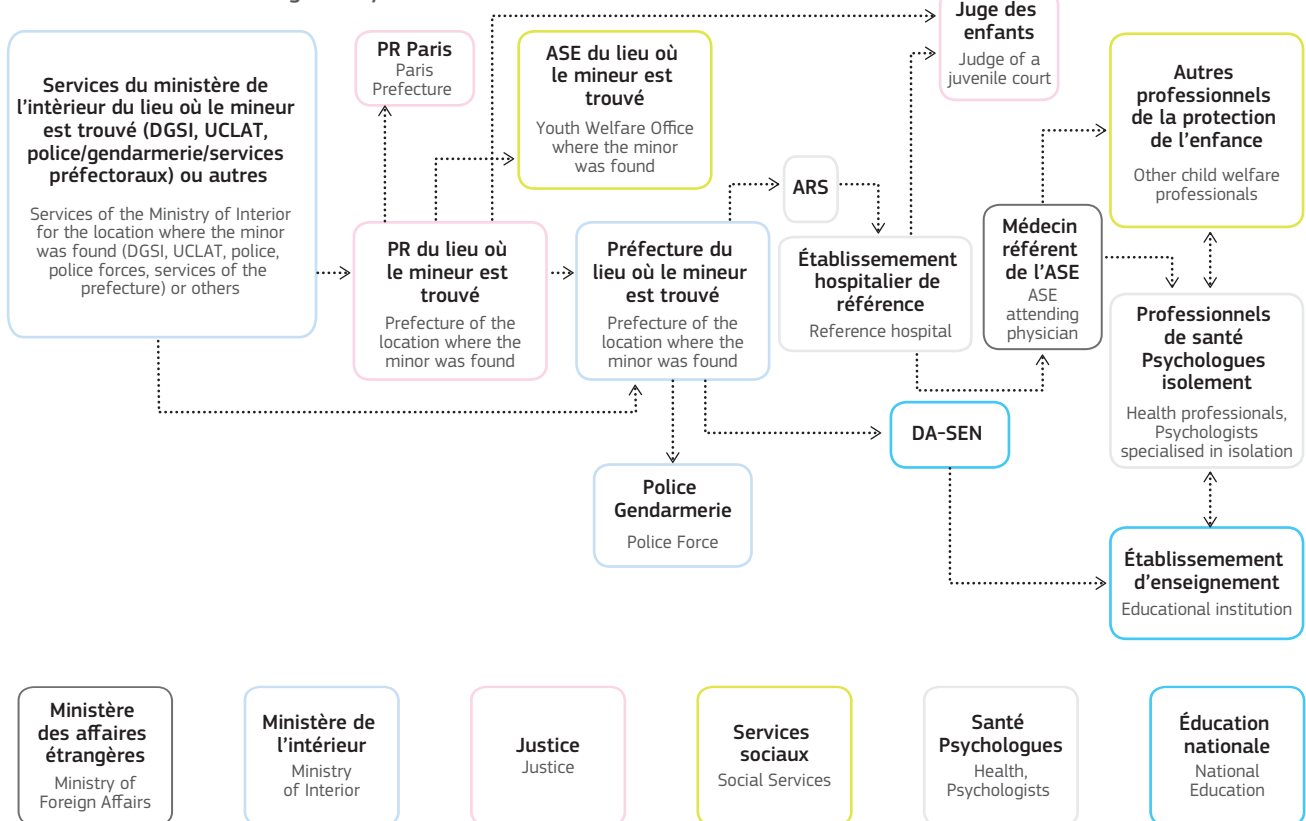
CIRCUIT D'INFORMATION / INFORMATION NETWORK

Annexe 3 from 'Instruction relative à la prise en charge des mineurs à leur retour de zone irako–syrienne'
— translations by the RAN CoE
Guidelines on the support to minors once they return to the Iraqi-Syrian zone

Phase de préparation/découverte	Phase d'arrivée/évaluation	Phase de prise en charge
Preparatory/exploration phase	Arrival/evaluation phase	Support phase

Entrée programmée / Scheduled entry

Autorités étrangères
Foreign authorities

Autorités consulaires françaises
French consular authorities

DGSI Direction Générale de la Sécurité intérieure
General Directorate for Internal Security (DGSI)

UCLAT
UCLAT Unité de Coordination de la lutte AntiTerroriste
Counter-Terrorism Coordination Unit – UCLAT

État-major
Staff headquarters

PR Paris
Paris Prefecture

PR du lieu d'arrivée
Prefecture of the place of arrival

ASE du lieu d'arrivée (aide sociale à l'enfance)
ASE (Youth Welfare Office) at place of arrival

Préfecture du lieu d'arrivée
Prefecture of the place of arrival

Police Gendarmerie
Police Force

ARS
ARS Agence Régionale de Santé
Regional Health Agency (ARS)

Établissement hospitalier de référence
Reference hospital

DA-SEN Directeur académique des services de l'éducation nationale
Academic Director of the national education services

Médecin référent de l'ASE
ASE attending physician

Juge des enfants
Judge of a juvenile court

Établissemement d'enseignement
Educational institution

Professionnels de santé Psychologues isolement
Health professionals, Psychologists specialised in isolation

Autres professionnels de la protection de l'enfance
Other child welfare professionals

Entrée clandestine / Illegal entry

Services du ministère de l'intérieur du lieu où le mineur est trouvé (DGSI, UCLAT, police/gendarmerie/services préfectoraux) ou autres
Services of the Ministry of Interior for the location where the minor was found (DGSI, UCLAT, police, police forces, services of the prefecture) or others

PR Paris
Paris Prefecture

ASE du lieu où le mineur est trouvé
Youth Welfare Office where the minor was found

PR du lieu où le mineur est trouvé
Prefecture of the location where the minor was found

Préfecture du lieu où le mineur est trouvé
Prefecture of the location where the minor was found

Police Gendarmerie
Police Force

ARS

Établissemement hospitalier de référence
Reference hospital

DA-SEN

Juge des enfants
Judge of a juvenile court

Médecin référent de l'ASE
ASE attending physician

Autres professionnels de la protection de l'enfance
Other child welfare professionals

Professionnels de santé Psychologues isolement
Health professionals, Psychologists specialised in isolation

Établissemement d'enseignement
Educational institution

Ministère des affaires étrangères	Ministère de l'intérieur	Justice	Services sociaux	Santé Psychologues	Éducation nationale
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Ministry of Interior	Justice	Social Services	Health, Psychologists	National Education

7.4 Methods and interventions

7.4.1 Legal response and child protection

When a child returns to the EU after their (or their parents') stay in a terrorist conflict zone, several **legal issues** become important. Practitioners working with these children should be aware of these, as well as the effects they may have on the child's rehabilitation and resocialisation.

- ***Nationality of the child:*** the nationality of the child and linked to that, its citizenship, will depend on legal judgements within each EU country. Difficulties most often arise when the child was born in the conflict zone and there are no documents confirming the biological connection between the child and his / her parents. However, to be able to ensure the child's reintegration, it is important to determine his or her legal status. In cases of uncertainty, DNA testing can provide evidence of biological connection. When there is no DNA evidence of a biological connection, it will depend on the legislation and jurisprudence applicable in the relevant country whether or not the child will be allowed into EU and with what status.

- ***Custody of the child:*** questions may arise over who has custody of the child. As with nationality, specific legal determinations will be country-specific. In most cases, if the parents are still together / one of the parents is seen as able to care for the child, they will receive (shared) custody. It is more challenging when the parent(s) is / are unfit to take care of the child because they are e.g. in prison, physically / mentally unstable or a potential risk to the child. In those cases, relatives such as grandparents may want to claim custody. If no solution can be found in the child's social environment, a care-taker will receive custody and the child is likely to be placed in an institution or in foster care. Practitioners need to deal with child custody battles, as well as the destabilising effect that this has on the child and those around him / her. Practice shows that the children will often stay with the mother as female returnees are prosecuted less frequently.

- ***Criminal prosecution of the child:*** as more and more distressing accounts come to light about the role of children in combat with terrorist groups (e.g. as suicide bombers, as soldiers, as executors), so questions over whether these children are legally accountable for their actions multiply. As specified in a 2016 report by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) on 'Children and counter-terrorism', the current legal framework concerning children who were recruited by armed or terrorist groups is complex. With regard to recruitment into armed groups or forces, international law, treaties and protocols support the line of thinking that children under 18 should not be prosecuted for these actions but should be reintegrated and rehabilitated, whether they were forcibly or voluntarily recruited, and whether as active combatants or in a support role. When it comes to terrorist groups however, the situation becomes much more complex. EU Member States establish their own legal frameworks on terrorist groups and activities, as well as on the age at which children may be on trial as adults, guided by the EU legal framework and other international agreements. According to UNICRI, thus far there seems to be no specific legal framework when it comes to children recruited by an armed or terrorist group. Recent jurisprudence has shown that juvenile justice provisions have been applied to terrorism charges. The UNICRI report recommends that, *"cases involving children engaged in terrorist related activity should be tried in accordance with juvenile procedure and in juvenile courts. Terrorist offences should not be treated any differently than other criminal offenses involving children."*

- ***Rights of the child and child protection:*** all EU Member States have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and are bound to this under international law. The basic principle behind this convention is that all states act in the best interests of the child. In addition, it covers compliance with child custody and guardianship laws to ensure that every child has basic rights such as the right to life, to their own name and identity, to be raised by their parents within a family or cultural grouping, and to have a relationship with both parents, even if they are separated. There is an obligation for states to allow parents to exercise their parental responsibilities. There is also an obligation to provide separate legal representation for a child in any judicial dispute concerning their care and to ensure that the child's viewpoint be heard in such cases. In addition, the Convention states that parties must *"take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence."* The EU takes this convention as the starting point for the rights of the child and has built its policies and actions in line with the CRC. When it comes to child returnees, especially those who are thought to have been involved in terrorist activities, the UNICRI report concludes that:

"Overall, the underlying principles of the UNCRC, including the right of the child to have his or her best interest treated as a primary consideration', do not appear to be implemented in relation to children engaged in terrorist related activity, nor in relation to measures imposed on their family members. Furthermore, it is not obvious that either article 40 (3)(b) [of the UNCRC], which requires states to introduce measures for dealing with children without resorting to judicial proceedings, or Article 37 (b) which requires that deprivation of liberty should only be a matter of last resort for the shortest period of time, are being implemented in any meaningful manner when it comes to children engaged in terrorist related activity".

In line with these findings and conclusions, one of the UNICRI's main recommendations is that: *"States should be encouraged to ensure that children are specifically addressed in legislation dealing with terrorism and that the rights of the child under international treaties are assured to them. This is likely to require special legislative provisions related to children from the point of detention to the point of, and including sentence and reintegration on domestic legislation."*

For more information on this topic, see the [Neuchatel Memorandum on Good Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context](#)

- **Multi-agency approach and information-sharing:** all EU Member States have structures and procedures in place to deal with vulnerable children. However, child returnees form a new group that requires the adaptation of existing structures to the current reality in terms of cooperation, determination of responsibility, coordination and information-sharing. To work efficiently, swiftly and effectively in a multi-agency approach and to adapt it to child returnees, the following is necessary:

  o Clear legal rules and regulations around information-sharing, especially when it comes to dealing with children in vulnerable positions (such as drug abuse by parents, domestic violence, sexual abuse). Practice shows that the sharing of information gathered for security purposes is particularly difficult, though sometimes necessary for child services or social work to make a sound assessment of the child's needs. This requires room for security clearances in some cases. On the other hand, family support professionals might learn something about a child's background or circumstances that could influence the safety and security of the child. This type of information should be shared in a structured manner with police and intelligence services.

  o Part of the response strategy should be to review current legal frameworks for cooperation between services so as to ensure safety and security, to protect the child's welfare and to develop appropriate legislation that allows the necessary information-sharing.

  o Bringing different expertise together around partner tables or in expertise units. For child returnees, there should be expertise on trauma (development and response), child development in general, intelligence gathering, the judicial system, family support, education and so on. These multi-agency expertise units can help with specific cases, with designing overall training for first-line practitioners and assessing risks and needs.

- **Legal guidance for practitioners:** practitioners such as family support professionals and social workers in contact with child and other returnees are faced with many questions from the returnee's family and social contacts, including some of a legal nature. These might address custody, support for sending money, nationality, citizenship and so on. Practitioners also talk about increasing numbers of court cases on these issues. To be able to provide correct information to the individuals and families, as well as to protect practitioners who might become involved in court cases, creating a legal back-office structure is highly recommended. This would be a place (either physical or through an online service) where social workers or family support professionals can ask legal guidance about the questions they receive from returnee families. Appropriate legal training to practitioners dealing with children can be considered. The scope of such training could be broadened and include a general focus on the rights of children, and in particular the rights of children who are victims of violence, and the rights of children in contact with the justice system.

Case study — Barriers to working with child returnees

A 35-year-old woman with three young children returned from Daesh-claimed territory after staying there for two years. The Security Services met the women at the airport but she was not arrested or prosecuted. The Security Services kept in contact and visited her periodically. The social services were not informed but learned after a few months that she had returned. When social services visited the women she did not want to discuss her experiences or where she had been. She claimed that she had lived outside Daesh-controlled territory and had not participated in any Daesh activities. Through relatives, social services learned that the woman and her children had indeed lived with Daesh and had strong sympathies with the organisation. Her eldest boy had also participated in an indoctrination / training camp. She is now the second wife of an extremist and has completely cut off contact with authorities. Social services are not able to investigate or remove her children. Due to information-sharing restrictions, no information has been passed to the school attended by the children.

Lessons learned:

- The first period back home is the most important in terms of making contact and offering interventions as most returnees will be most willing to talk and cooperate at this point.

- If information is not shared, it can make delivering interventions difficult. In this case, the failure to pass on information to either the social services or the school meant that it was difficult to reach the woman or her children.

- It is crucial that children are factored in from the beginning and are offered mental health care to treat trauma.

7.4.2   Risk and needs assessment

The rehabilitation and resocialisation of children rely heavily on risk and needs assessments. These should address the child's physical and mental well-being, level of trauma, level of indoctrination / extremist thinking, attitude towards violence and so on. At the moment, no specific risk assessments for child returnees have been developed. However, practitioners can draw from existing psychometric tools that assess for example multiculturalism, group identity, cognitive flexibility and religious adherence.[45] As the existing specialised risk assessments on radicalisation have been designed for adults and are still in their infancy when it comes to their evidence-base, these are not suitable for child returnees. In view of the fact that children are still developing, the use of individual assessments that include assessment of risks, but focuses on the overall situation and needs of the child, and on the most appropriate course of action in her or his best interests, may be a more appropriate tool. It is important to distinguish between returnee girls and boys because they may be exposed to different forms of violence / trauma, and because they may require specialised interventions. Member States should therefore invest in designing specialised assessments for child returnees.

Practice in action: Aarhus screening tool for families and children (in development).

The social services and Infohouse in Aarhus are currently developing a screening tool to be used by practitioners focused on a deradicalization process. Eventually the screening tool will have four categories:

- 9 months – 1 year

- 1-6 years

- 6-12 years

- 12-18 years

For more information on this tool in development, contact the Aarhus Infohouse through: Christina Lehtinen — *cle@aarhus.dk*.

---

45   Saklofske, D. H. Schwean, V. L., Reynolds, C. R. (2013) The Oxford Handbook of Child Psychological Assessment. Oxford University Press.

7.4.3 Placement and living conditions

The custody procedure will determine where a child lives. This may be with his / her parent(s), grandparents or other family members. This may also be in an institution or in foster care with another family if the biological family is found to be unfit, or perhaps even a risk to the child's rehabilitation. This option should be a last resort as the impact upon the child will be significant and unpredictable. The child may be back in the city or town he / she or his / her parent(s) originally came from, or starting a new life somewhere different. Alongside legal proceedings and (in some cases) constraints, it is important to underline the importance of the new living situation in the rehabilitation process. For rehabilitation purposes, normalisation must happen as soon as possible, but can be influenced by factors such as:

- parental employment;

- having a structured everyday life;

- access to a private living space;

- access to education and leisure activities;

- living in a suitable community;

- access to peer groups;

- role models;

- a sense of self-determination.

Those responsible for deciding on the child's living conditions (this will differ per Member State, but is most likely to be influenced by parents / direct family, local authorities, child protection, juvenile courts) should take these factors into account.

Case study: Returnee with three children

Female returnee, aged 30, went to Syria for 8 months with her husband and two children. She returned in the late stages of pregnancy with a third child and with her two other children. Her husband presumably died. She was not arrested, pending investigation, and is now living alone with her three children and trying to find a job. Since her return, many organisations have been involved. Multiple social services were involved initially, because of concerns about her children and her mental state (the children were underfed when they were returned) and are still monitoring the children's well-being. The police and municipality have also been involved and have visited her on a regular basis. A case manager has been appointed to coordinate all the necessary care. In her informal network, her sister is active and assists her if she needs to go to appointments or talk with officials. She is also in contact with her family and her in-laws, but to a lesser extent.

Lessons learned:

- It is important to assess the likelihood of a returnee going back to terrorist-claimed territory, for example to join a spouse. In this case, this initially seemed quite likely, so possibilities to prevent her from travelling to Syria were discussed, such as taking her passport. It is important to have good formal and informal networks that can provide information about returnees.

- Reaching an agreement between the social services and the returnee can keep a family together. Here, there were concerns over the safety and security of the children. But the returnee worked with the social services, keeping to what had been agreed, and her children were not removed.

- It is important to look at the wider network around the returnees. One of the challenges in this case was not knowing what the influence of her in-laws was, as their second son had also left for Syria. It was feared they could have a bad influence on her and her children.

- Investing in many kinds of support and building a relationship helps practitioners to assess risk and to find

7.4.4   Family support

Whether with the biological family or in foster care, the direct social environment plays a crucial role in the rehabilitation process. Given that in the case of child returnees, the entire biological family is likely to have experienced conflict and trauma, this is a considerable risk to the child's wellbeing and stability. Therefore support and expert guidance (e.g. psychological, trauma, theological, pedagogical expertise) should be provided for these families as a unit to help them deal with trauma and present circumstances, and to make them aware of how they can help create a safe and stable environment for the child to grow up in. (See chapter 4 for more on family support.)

7.4.5   Role of (pre-) schools

Having access to education is of crucial importance in child returnees' rehabilitation process. This is a significant protective factor as it instils a sense of safety, normalises the child's day-to-day life, ensures exposure to cultural diversity and increases interaction with individuals outside of the home.[46] Discussions among practitioners in the RAN Education Working Group have led to important insights (summarized below) into how schools should be involved in the rehabilitation of child returnees without jeopardising the safety of other children, school staff and others directly involved.

Case study — Child returnee returning to school

In March 2014 a young male minor presented himself — with his father — at a school to register. After inspection in turned out the boy had been in Syria for three months and had just returned. He also followed the training program during his stay in Syria. He had appeared quite quickly in front of a juvenile court where the judge had decided that he should return to school as soon as possible. This decision was taken within a week of his return. The story of his return had several versions: 1. He escaped because he wanted to go home. 2. He went to Istanbul to buy warm clothing and then escaped. 3. He returned together with an older friend.

Because the school in question at that time was confronted with several radicalising youngsters, the principal decided to have a confidential meeting with some teachers to enquire about their reaction and whether they would be able to manage having this boy in their class. The teachers responded by panicking, some began to cry and some even wanted to resign. Based on this experience, the principal decided to refer the boy to another school, and confidentially contacted a colleague. Only the principal, the social worker, the religious studies teacher and the form teacher were informed. The juvenile judge also instated a personal coaching trajectory, and the family — in this case a single father — was given guidance. The reintegration process went well. The boy will graduate at the end of this school year.

- **Normalisation as the guiding principle:** The main principle, when dealing with returnees in educational settings, is to 'return to normal' as soon as possible. Schools should provide a safe and regulated space, where the child or youngster feels supported, where there are structure and rules, and stress is alleviated. The risk that the pupil is seen as 'different' should be minimised, and efforts to minimise attention taken.

- **Dealing with potential risks posed by child returnees:** Because of their background and personal experiences, there may be concerns that child returnees pose a risk to other children at the school; while unlikely, an awareness of trauma reactions (such as acting up and, in a minority of cases, interpersonal violence) and preparedness for dealing with these reactions should be part of the training process for teachers. As stated previously, a risk and needs assessment should be carried out before bringing the child into an educational environment.

- **Schools should encourage children to develop ideas and responsibility:** Children should be supported as they become positive members of the school community and are given opportunities to be successful. This is even more

---

46   Kia Keating & Ellis 2007; Hart, 2009.

important for children who perceive injustice and are angry or concerned about developments in their personal lives and in the world. Dealing with anger and perceived grievances and injustice is crucial to resilience against extremist risks.

- **Overcome the reluctance in some schools to take in child returnees:** Some schools will be reluctant to take in child returnees as they are afraid that extremist ideas may spread within the school, or even that terrorist acts may take place. This could create tensions in the school and wider communities. To overcome these challenges, a person / authority who is acceptable and trusted by school managers should be appointed to discuss, convince and negotiate with schools on cooperation.

- **Information sharing on the arrival of a child returnee:** It is important that the child does not just turn up at school unannounced. The school principal should be informed and the child should be dealt with according to the school's child protection procedures. While there might be some benefits from sharing information with the wider staff, it could lead to biases and stigmatisation that slow down the process of normalisation. It may be useful to have conversations with the family on what information should be shared with whom.

- **Schools should pay extra attention to how the new child is doing:** The school management should make sure the child receives special attention, and that they are kept informed of the child's activities and well-being. They can ask their staff questions, engage with the child or have a staff member monitor the child closely.

- **Develop a support structure for schools:** This is needed to make clear for schools who the experts are upon whom they can rely to deal with child returnees. In multi-agency cooperation, schools should cooperate with partners in childcare, social care, the police, mental health services, trauma experts, physical health services, youth workers, NGOs with relevant expertise and organisers of after-school activities to encourage integration.

- **Provide for an intermediate period of readjustment for the child:** This might help the child to start (over) in the school system (after having lived in a completely different setting). The period should be as short as possible. In some countries, children have to immediately enter the school system due to legislation / the set-up of the system. During the readjustment period it is important to build up trust and become connected to the child and his / her family. During this period, a needs assessment and tests on language, psychological well-being and intellectual ability might take place.

- **Find a good fit between the returnee child and the school:** Some schools may be a better fit for the child than others. The authority responsible for schools or a specialised centre could play a key role in identifying the most suitable schools. They should be given extra training, support and funding. Returning to the old environment and former school might not benefit the child and family. Relocation is in the child's interests, so that he or she – and the rest of the family – can make a new start without either stigmatisation or admiration. It is advisable to avoid registering these children in schools located near the sites of attacks in Europe due to the presence of traumatised or victimised children and staff members.

- **Dealing with publicity and press reactions:** Schools need to know that if they take in a returnee, this might cause publicity and tensions within the (school) community. Parents, press and politicians might start asking questions and raise concerns. A strategy is needed for this, and must make confidentiality paramount. Schools may be able use their crisis communication protocol. If they do not have a protocol yet, they might base it on how they manage children with criminal backgrounds returning to school. It is recommended that schools discuss their strategy with the local authority beforehand. Generally speaking, schools should not speak to the press.

- **Special programmes for child returnees:** As for any other sensitive issues involving children, young returnee children should not be isolated or identified for 'special' treatment. This does not however negate the need for tailored individual support programmes following a needs assessment. The assessment should be carried out with the involvement of the whole family and the support network that exists outside of the school. The results will help the school assess learning capacities.

- **Creating access to expertise on trauma and extremism:** Although in general school staff is trained to deal with vulnerable children, some additional training on extremism and the circumstances in which child returnees have lived is advised. The school should also have access to an expert team on these topics for help and support in challenging situations.

7.4.6 Trauma-informed practice

As clearly stated in the RAN issue paper on Child Returnees from Conflict Zones[47], trauma awareness is a skill that must be imparted to all front-line practitioners working with returnee children. The ability to recognise the signs and symptoms of trauma is essential for correctly interpreting a child's behaviour and designing appropriate interventions. The need for this ability has been reinforced by practitioners within the RAN Health and Social Care (H&SC) Working Group, who have also touched upon the necessity for 'trauma-informed practice' in working with child returnees.

Practitioners working with children who grew up in a radical environment (both in Europe and in current war-zone areas) need to ensure they understand the different nature of trauma and its impact. Trauma causes a **load-dependant response** — the more trauma children experience, the more likely they are to have psychological and physical issues. Resultant behaviours include a tendency to misinterpret conversations and become hyper-sensitive, as well as either over or under-reactions (or both) to stimuli. These children are often incorrectly diagnosed as having personality disorders, which highlights the need for professionals to share information on a child's personal history.

There is a need for practitioners to understand the 'survival brain' of these children in terms of the **flight / fight / freeze** response to trauma (natural responses from the lower brain functions. When perceived to be under threat, humans will either fight the threat, flee away from it or freeze in their response). This is the point at which the 'thinking brain' of these traumatised children is hijacked by the lower brain functions, which in turn go into 'survival mode'. Children in survival mode will find it difficult to engage because their initial response is to survive or 'react' rather than think 'rationally' and have dialogue with professionals trying to support them.

It should be understood that these children do not 'fail to engage' with services, as is commonly assumed, but rather that these children are 'unable to engage' because of a perceived threat. Professionals working to challenge extremist ideologies cannot do so when a child is in flight / fight / freeze mode because a child is not capable of 'thinking' at that point. It is important to ensure a child feels safe; the process of building a rapport and creating a welcoming and comfortable environment are key contributors to a child's **transition from the 'survival brain' to the 'thinking brain'.**

The process of creating a safe and stable environment and building a relationship with a child returnee can take several months. Although it is imperative to ensure effective engagement before work on counteracting extremist views can occur, some research argues that no meaningful therapeutic intervention should be attempted for at least six months, given the need for the child to physically and psychologically readjust to their new settings. That is not to say support should not be offered, but that children who have experienced severe trauma demonstrate particular issues with trust, and these may further hinder engagement in therapy.

To develop trauma-informed practice, RAN H&SC practitioners recommend working with children on the basis of a shared care-plan in which different authorities and care institutions have responsibility and provide different interventions, but one case manager ensures continuity of support. All partners involved should be aware of the presence of trauma and how to respond to it. This includes practitioners and front-line staff such as receptionists, who are often the first port of call when engaging with organisations. It is important that they understand the ways in which these children's and / or families' behaviours are linked to trauma (e.g. a child might be aggressive because they are in 'survival mode').

> **Further reading:** The _RAN H&SC ex– post paper of the RAN H&SC meeting on 'Children and youth growing up in a radicalised family/environment'_ deals with trauma and trauma-informed practice extensively and in relation to children.

7.4.7 Addressing extremist ideology

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, **practitioners should assume that child returnees have had some level of engagement with and exposure to Daesh's extremist ideology**. For adults, addressing the ideological component of radicalisation through interventions is usually referred to as 'deradicalisation'. Tailored deradicalisation programmes are however yet to be developed for child returnees. It is important to note that, in many cases, once the child is in a stable home and engaging regularly in school, and the family unit is reintegrating into society (e.g.

---

47 Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2016). Issue Paper: 'Child returnees from conflict zones'. Available at _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_.

employment or education for the parents), the issue of extremism may self-resolve. This is because identity is closely linked to day-to-day experiences for children who grow up in a conflict zone. A change in experiences is often accompanied by a change in what and who the child identifies with.

Extremism must be addressed, and must be done so sensitively through a nuanced and careful approach. Instigating deradicalisation programmes for youths that directly confront youngsters on issues of ideology and identity might lead to a **crisis of identity for the youngsters**, exacerbated by the normal identity issues that accompany the transition from childhood to adolescence. It is therefore important to work and rebuild an alternative worldview based on positive and varied day-to-day experiences. The family, schools, community and leisure organisations can play a positive role in re-establishing a child's view of society and their identity and role within it.

7.4.8 Building capacity to deal with child returnees

This manual provides guidance on how to respond to child returnees. Many EU Member States have however indicated that they do not yet have the right structures in place should the influx of child returnees be rapid. **It is key for Member States to start building this capacity**, and in particular in relation to:

- Developing knowledge and expertise on child returnees through development of an overview of expertise including experienced professionals on trauma (development and response), extremism, child development, education and risk assessment. This expertise should be easily accessible for first line practitioners dealing with child returnees and tailored to the local and national context the child returnees will be growing up in;

- Basic awareness training for practitioners in (direct) contact with child returnees (e.g. school teachers, social workers, members of leisure organisations). This basic training should at least cover:

  o information about the situation in Syria / Iraq to which these children have been exposed;

  o basic trauma awareness and response exercises when a child returnee shows particular behaviour;

  o how to report signs of concern and where to request additional support;

- Clear legal and organisational structures for dealing with child returnees;

- Existing child welfare and child protection services.

8 Cross-cutting Issues

This final chapter examines two broad topics of great relevance for those working with returnees: the different roles and motivations of female FTFs and returnees, and how to communicate — both with returnees and their families themselves, and with the communities to which they will return.

8.1   Gender differentiation

Across Europe, the majority of FTFs are men (80 %). While women constitute on average 20 %, there are regional variations — the proportion of women is lower in Italy and Spain (10 %), for example. Taking into account gender differences is important in prevent interventions for a number of reasons.

Motivations for joining jihadist groups must be understood to tailor responses to FTF returnees. For men, there is a strong focus on masculinity, life as a warrior and the glorification of martyrdom. A **sub-culture of jihadi cool fuses sensation-seeking youths with popular culture, propaganda and films**. Maintaining honour is reproduced through war and martyrdom. Researcher Evin Ismail has termed this "live fast die young masculinity" within Daesh. Often, young male recruits have a criminal background and **asocial psychological disorders** which means they have a range of difficulties, such as low impulse control, anger management issues, a propensity for violence as tool for power and control, metaphorical short sightedness etc. Trauma from having inflicted, experienced or witnessed violence must be addressed.

In contrast, the role of women in Daesh propaganda is projected towards **identity and belonging**, towards having active and vital roles in building the so-called Islamic State. If they fulfil their duties as wives and mothers, some may actively contribute as teachers and nurses, or to propaganda and recruitment. Often women are attracted by a romantic vision of living a pious religious life free from discrimination, and in which they become the bedrock of family and central to raising a new generation. For some female recruits, Daesh is an escape route from difficult identity issues, such as choosing between modern Western values and the retention of their families' traditional Islamic principles.

As such Daesh can offer perceived freedom from patriarchal traditions and cultural norms, for some it is an exciting prospect to select and marry a warrior and to have a supportive role. It also offers them the potential of being honoured as a martyr's widow — salafists regard women's role to bear children and raise them to become martyrs. Marriage is an obligatory institution, and protecting purity means that they are married between the ages of 9 and 17 years.

Female FTF returnees often return to give birth to children or to escape the hardship of conflict. **Women with children are often vulnerable and require significant support and commitment from social services**. Many of these women fear that they will lose their children due to child protection measures. Women returnees are often isolated and feel shameful *vis-à-vis* the rest of the community. This is compounded by the trauma they have experienced, together with their children, through exposure to the conditions of war and excessive brutal violence. It is essential that a risk assessment of these returnees and their children is conducted, and that trauma support is provided, including for those not convicted of a crime. Women having experienced horrific conditions and the reality of living under a terrorist regime are often disillusioned upon return.

The following measures are useful when dealing with female returnees:

- immediate home visits by social services and police (either independently or together) to assess the level of commitment to terrorist groups;

- an assessment of relations with family members;

- child protection, as well as different options for counselling;

- swift access to trauma treatment and mental health services;

- parent coaching for returnees alongside mentoring;

- establishing family networks, supported by local authorities / NGOs.

8.2   Communication and counter-narrative issues

This section contains information and tips for response options at the local level for two specific communication questions.

- How to respond to communication challenges at local level when dealing with returnees — Local Communication Strategy.

- How to respond to the negative narrative of terrorist groups about returning to EU countries — Communicating about Returning.

See Annexe 2 for Strategic Communication and Counter Narratives regarding returning foreign terrorist fighters a description of the elements to take into account when drafting communication strategies about returnees for national government.

8.2.1   Local communication strategy

General overview and issues

Handling communications concerning the challenges posed by returnees requires careful preparation. A potential threat combined a perception of that threat by the general public, as well as the general public's predictable concerns on rehabilitating a person who has returned from 'fighting' alongside terrorists, means **returnees are expected to generate a lot of media attention**. They may also become a *cause célèbre* for destabilising actors such as violent right-wing extremist organisations. Local authorities and their civil society and community partners need to prepare for increased or renewed media and political attention and pressure. It is therefore vital that a communications strategy is prepared for the entire approach for responding to returnees, ideally ahead of the arrival of the returnee(s) in the local community.

Why a communications strategy is essential

- It is a **controversial topic**. Communications around returnees is likely to draw maximum public attention.

- It is a divisive topic. Extremist and terrorist groups are deliberately deploying tactics and messaging designed to polarise and divide communities.

- In the short term, returnees pose a public **communications dilemma** for government and partners.

- In the long term, authorities and local communities need to work together to **resocialise or integrate** returnees into society.

- There is **no single profile of a returnee**. There are differences in motivations for leaving, and for returning. Communicating the nuance is crucial but challenging.

- Immediate public response to the issue is likely to be **emotional or based on mistaken assumptions**. In the short term, fear and anger will characterise some people's immediate responses to the issue and will need to be addressed. It will take time for facts and figures to rationalise the discourse around the topic.

- Returnees are a cross-cutting issue. The returnees phenomenon is **likely to provoke a debate or controversy around a range of other priorities**, such as radicalisation in prisons, community cohesion, de-radicalisation, and national prevention strategies.

Guiding principles when communicating about returnees

When devising a local communications strategy around returnees, there are several guiding principles to keep in mind.

- Prepare a local analysis early to determine how to be both proactive and defensive in communications work. The communications should be open and transparent.

- Ensure that the local returnees communications **strategy is dovetailed with all other relevant strategies**. It is very important that this work is aligned with other local and national strategic communications on radicalisation prevention, and communications strategies around radicalisation in prisons. A step wrong in handling just one returnee issue is likely to have huge repercussions for both areas of activity, and has the potential to become a disruptive narrative for prevention communications.

- The aim of communicating is to steer the discourse towards a space that is as **calm and as rational** as possible. Sometimes communications will need to address, in the first instance, the audience's emotions, concerns and fears.

Concrete methods

In its simplest format, we advise thinking through a communications strategy in seven steps.

5. Clearly **define the local issue** through research and understanding of community, media and wider stakeholder sentiment. In particular, focus on key target groups, such as those prone to radicalisation by right-wing organisations. In addition, ensure the communication strategy is integrated with other communication strategies — this issue will likely impact on other communications, and can also be inspired by them. What is the clear objective?

6. **Understand who you want to speak to** and how to speak to them clearly and in a way that makes sense to them. Who are the voices that resonate with the target audiences? What messages need to be conveyed, and how are these heard by the target audience?

7. Work creatively on campaigns and **work in partnership** with others, particularly between government (in the local multi-agency cooperation team), community and charity partners, and with the support of agencies (communications, design, media etc.), and where possible social media companies. Can potential creative partners be identified? The national returnee point of contact should be informed about communication plans and can provide additional information.

8. **Who are the community voices** and partners with whom to work? Can they share stories that could humanise the issue of returnees? Clear, concise campaigns are needed to put forward the facts, but wider campaigns will be needed that address the emotions that this issue is likely to raise, including (extreme right) hate speech or Islamophobia.

9. **How to reaching an audience** will depend on who they are, but the mainstream media is not always the most trusted. Community partners might be able to use social media to reach those most 'engaged' with the issue. Will this be organic reach or will it need to be supported by the paid-for advertising social media platforms provide? Will local community events help explain the issue? Initial research and analysis should have already answered these questions.

10. **Monitor the response** to any communication carefully. This is the primary feedback and can be used iteratively to inform work and adjust accordingly. This will also feed into an evaluation of the activity's overall success and provide insights into shortcomings.

11. **Report and discuss communications efforts** and success amongst the other stakeholders in the local multi-agency team. This work will help inform future preventative communications and policy development on returnees. Ensure results are made available and prompt further communications planning to build on the success.

> **Practice in action: Finland Community Seminars**
>
> In Finland, Community Seminars are organised at the local level. The seminars bring together different local actors from different public sectors (law enforcement, social services etc.), NGOs that specialise in working with vulnerable groups and have expertise in local prevention efforts, religious communities and community-based organisations, with grassroots access to citizens and their trust. The seminars function as a trust-building and co-creation platform for local preventive practices and initiatives. After a seminar, the local authorities receive support a local multi-agency team and action plan. The objective of this co-creation is to facilitate a transparent, inclusive and participatory process for all parties that also prevents stigmatisation and 'targeting', for example of Muslim communities. This is important also from the point of view of strategic communications — as polarisation around the topic of radicalisation, violent extremism and FTF returnees reflect a narrow and misleading image of the nature of violent extremism as phenomenon. For more information contact *Finn Church Aid and the Peacemakers Network*.

8.2.2   Communicating about returning

General overview and issues

Several practitioners have reported family members of FTFs saying that **Daesh has a specific narrative about returning** to discourage it (unless they intentionally want people to return). They claim that people returning from Daesh will get exceptionally bad treatment in EU countries. Returnees will be imprisoned immediately and for a long period, information about Daesh will be forced out of them during excessive interrogation sessions and returnees will never be accepted (again) by society. Apparently Daesh's strategy on forcing people to stay by severely punishing persons who try to leave Daesh-claimed territory,[48] is complemented by narratives about what will happen if they do leave.

These narratives are bleak — to say the least — aiming at convincing the potential returnee that going back to his or her home country is not an option. Returnees have to face the consequences of their actions. In reality, a return to society in their home country is possible; the general principles of the rule of law, health care, education and the welfare system will all apply. Since most returnees contact their family members before returning, these relatives are best-placed to inform the FTF about what will happen when they return. Those practitioners who are in contact with the families of FTFs can discuss with the families what happens and how their family member will be treated when he / she returns.

Guiding principle when communicating with families about returning from terrorist-claimed territory

- **Transparency:** Be realistic and transparent when discussing the consequences and situations the returnee will face when coming back. The returnee has after all joined a terrorist group and will have to face the consequences. Be transparent about prosecution, monitoring by police or intelligence services, imprisonment and child protection interventions. And be equally transparent about resocialisation, medical and / or mental health treatment, employment and educational support, and housing and welfare options.

---

48   Willsher, K., 'I went to join Isis in Syria, taking my four-year-old. It was a journey into hell', The Guardian, 9 January 2016. Retrieved from ***https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/09/sophie-kasiki-isis-raqqa-child-radicalised***.

References

Briggs Obe, R., Silverman, T. (2014), *Foreign Fighters Innovations in Responding to the Threat*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

Cialdini, R. (2006), *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Harper Business, New York.

Dodwell, B., Milton, D., Rassler, D., *Then and Now: Comparing the Flow of Foreign Fighters to AQI and the Islamic State* (Version of 8 December 2016). Available at *https://www. ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Then-and-Now.pdf*.

Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (2017), *Focus on Returnees*. Available at *https://english.aivd. nl/publications/publications/2017/02/15/publication-focus-on-returnees*.

Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (2016), Life with ISIS: the Myth Unravelled . Available at *https:// english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2016/06/17/ life-with-isis-the-myth-unravelled-available-in-arabic*.

Fazel, M., Reed, R. V., Panter-Brick, C., & Stein, A. (2012). Mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in high-income countries: risk and protective factors. *The Lancet*, vol. 379(9812), pp. 266-282.

Fergusson, D.M., Swain-Cambell, N.R. and Horwood, J. (2001) Deviant Peer Affiliations, Crime and Substance Use: A Fixed Effects Regression Analysis. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, vol.30 (4) pp. 419–430.

Ferguson, N,. (2016), Disengaging from Terrorism: a Northern Irish Experience, *Journal for Deradicalization*. Available at *http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/ viewFile/41/36*.

Gustafsson, L., Ranstorp M. (2017). *Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq; An Analysis of open-source intelligence and statistical data,* Center for Asymmetric Threat Study, Swedish Defence University.

Hair, N. L., Hanson, J. L., Wolfe, B. L., &Pollak, S. D. (2015). Association of child poverty, brain development, and academic achievement. *JAMA pediatrics*, vol. 169(9), pp. 822-829.

Hart, R. (2009). Child refugees, trauma and education: interactionist considerations on social and emotional needs and development. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, vol. 25(4), pp. 351-368.

Horgan, J. G., Taylor, M., *Winter*, C., From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (Volume 40, Issue 7, 2017).

Ingram, H.J. (2016), *Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda* (The Hague: ICCT).

Kaati, L.. (2017), *Det digitala kalifatet: En studie av Islamiska statens propaganda* (Stockholm: FOI (FOI-R—4429—SE).

Kia-Keating, M., & Ellis, B. H. (2007). Belonging and connection to school in resettlement: Young refugees, school belonging, and psychosocial adjustment. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 12(1), pp. 29- 43.

Kohrt, BA., Jordans, MJD., Koirala, S. et al (2014). Designing Mental Health Interventions Informed by Child Development and Human Biology Theory: A Social Ecology Intervention for Child Soldiers in Nepal. *American Journal of Human Biology*, vol. 27, pp. 27-40.

Lakhani, S., Ahmadi, B. (2016), Women in Extremist Movements: Not Just Passive Victims, (U.S. Institute of Peace). Available at *https://www.usip.org/blog/2016/11/ women-extremist-movements-not-just-passive-victims*.

Loeber, R., Farrington, D.P. and Petechuk, D. (2003), Child Delinquency: Early Intervention and Prevention. *Child Delinquency*, Bulletin Series (May). Available at http://www.forensiccounselor.org/images/file/Child%20 Delinquency%20Early%20Intervention%20and%20 Prevention.pdf.

Maher, S., Neumann P. (2016). *Pain, Confusion, Anger, and Shame: The Stories of Islamic State Families*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence

Mehra, T., (2016). *Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics and Policy Responses*, ICCT Policy Brief.

Mulder, E. J., De Medina, P. R., Huizink, A. C., Van den Bergh, B. R., Buitelaar, J. K., &Visser, G. H. (2002). Prenatal maternal stress: effects on pregnancy and the (unborn) child. *Early human development*, vol. 70(1), pp. 3-14

Moghaddam, F.M., *The Staircase to Terrorism; A Psychological Exploration,* Georgetown University 2005. Available at *http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/ikg/zick/ Moghaddam%20(2005)%20staircase%20model.pdf*.

Olidort J. (2016), Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State, *Policy Focus* 147

Orton, K. (2017), *Foreign Terrorist Attacks by the Islamic State 2002-2016*

Paulussen C., Nijman, J. and Lismont, K., (2017), *Mental Health and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: A Case Study from the Netherlands*, ICCT Report. Available at *https:// icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ICCT-Paulussen-Nijman-Lismont-Mental-Health-and-the-Foreign-Fighter-Phenomenon-March-2017.pdf*

Pressman, D.E., *Risk Assessment Decisions for Violent Political Extremism 2009-02*. Available at ***https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcs/pblctns/2009-02-rdv/index-en.aspx***.

Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), (2016). Issue Paper: 'The Root Causes of Violent Extremism'. Available at ***https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_root-causes_jan2016_en.pdf***

Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), Collection of Approaches and Practices. Available at ***https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices_en***

Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). (2016). Ex post paper, RAN YF&C and RAN H&SC: 'Working with families and safeguarding children from radlicalisation'. Available at ***https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-h-and-sc/docs/ran_yf-c_h-sc_working_with_families_safeguarding_children_en.pdf***

Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). (2016). Issue Paper: 'Child returnees from conflict zones'. Available at ***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***

Saklofske, D. H. Schwean, V. L., Reynolds, C. R. (2013) The Oxford Handbook of Child Psychological Assessment. Oxford University Press.

Theodore, L. (2016) Handbook of Evidence-Based Interventions for Children and Adolescents. Springer, New York

Willsher, K., 'I went to join Isis in Syria, taking my four-year-old. It was a journey into hell', The Guardian, 9 January 2016. Retrieved from ***https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/09/sophie-kasiki-isis-raqqa-child-radicalised***.

Winter, C., *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015.

Zelin, A. Y., *Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output.* (Version of 2015). Available at ***http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/445/html***

Annexe 1:

Overview risk assessment tools

This annexe contains basic background information on the various risk assessment tools that are used by governments. The four risk assessment tools described here should be judged for suitability on their own merits and in accordance with the returnees' circumstances. Most of these risk assessment tools are used in prison. Structured Professional Judgements require training for those administrating them.

A more general tool is the HCR-20 assessment tool, which is widely used to assess risk levels for violent behaviour. There is a significant evidence-base for this risk matrix, which can also be used — if adapted — for assessing the risk of violent behaviour among returnees.

Extremism Risk Guidelines ERG22+

The Extremism Risk Guidelines ERG22+ is the product of UK government studies into radicalisation processes and, has been adopted as an assessment tool by the NOMS Operational Intervention Services Group, and was launched in 2011. It is based on 22 primary factors of radicalisation and is used in the Channel Vulnerability Assessment (CVA) Framework. Each indicator is given equal weighting and indicates that there may be other factors observable beyond these 22 indicators (which are divided across three areas: engagement; intent; and capability factors.

IR46

The IR46 from Haaglanden Regional Safety House (Veiligheidshuis) Model is a Dutch monodisciplinary police model for the assessment of risk that is tailored to multi-agency risk assessment. It is based on four phases and on Moghaddam's *Staircase to Terrorism*.[49] It is divided into two columns: Ideologies (Intentions) and Social Context (Capabilities). All-in-all, this model provides 46 indicators that provide the basis for multi-agency risk assessments in which each indicator is evaluated through multidisciplinary, structured and professional judgement.

VERA-2

The VERA-2[50] risk assessment develops specific indicators that combine beliefs and attitudes to support ideology; historical background and events that shape the person's ideas and beliefs; commitment and motivational drivers and the capacity of the individual to plan and execute a violent extremist attack. These elements are then weighed against *protective indicators* that mitigate risk behaviour.

TRAP-18

TRAP-18 is a risk instrument that combines proximal warning behaviours (such as pathway, identification, fixation, and novel aggression) and 10 longer term distal characteristics (such as personal grievance, ideological framing and psychopathology). It is an investigative tool focused in particular on lone-actor terrorism.

HCR-20 – Assessing risk of violence

For aiding the judgement of assessors, many use the HCR-20, regarding it as an invaluable reference point for further pinpointing the causation and relevance of factors and case formulation, by including for example theories on personality, social cognition, social disorganisation, and decision-making.

Based on extensive literature on factors that lead to violence, the HCR-20 takes its name from three time scales — Historical, Clinical (present), Risk Management (future) — and from the number of items (20) that it measures. Each risk item is assessed according to a three-level rating structure (Low, Moderate, or High).

---

49 Moghaddam, F.M., *The Staircase to Terrorism; A Psychological Exploration,* Georgetown University 2005. Available at *http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/ikg/zick/Mogh-addam%20(2005)%20staircase%20model.pdf*.

50 Pressman, D.E., *Risk Assessment Decisions for Violent Political Extremism 2009-02.* Available at *https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcs/pblctns/2009-02-rdv/index-en.aspx*.

I. Historical Risk Factors	Degree of Risk: Low	Degree of Risk: Moderate	Degree of Risk: High
1. History of Violence			
2. Young Age at First Violent Incident			
3. Relationship Instability			
4. Employment Problems			
5. Substance Use Problems			
6. Major Mental Illness			
7. Psychopathy			
8. Early Maladjustment			
9. Personality Disorders			
10. Prior Supervision Failure			
II. Clinical Items (current factors)	**Degree of Risk: Low**	**Degree of Risk: Moderate**	**Degree of Risk: High**
11. Lack of Insight			
12. Negative Attitudes			
13. Active Symptoms of Major Mental Illness			
14. Impulsivity			
15. Unresponsive to Treatment			
III. Risk Management Items (future factors)	**Degree of Risk: Low**	**Degree of Risk: Moderate**	**Degree of Risk: High**
16. Plans Lack Feasibility			
17. Exposure to Destabilizers			
18. Lack of Personal Support			
19. Noncompliance with Remediation Attempts			
20. Stress			

Returnees: Communications and Counter Narratives

ESCN Advisory

May 2017

ESCN

Returnees:
Communications and Counter Narratives

1.   **General Overview**: **The communications challenge**

1.1   Daesh has already generated a paradigm shift in the quality of terrorist communications. But as the so-called 'caliphate' in Syria and Iraq collapses Daesh is having to adapt its messaging in order to remain relevant.

1.2   Daesh and its supporters are no longer asking people to make *hijrah* but are encouraging Western supporters, including returnees, to carry out domestic terror attacks in its name. Daesh has already begun to reframe its narratives by drawing more on the experiences of Muslims in the West to generate violent responses in those who have been unable to travel to the Caliphate and those who are returning from the conflict area.

1.3   Daesh 'official' communications are in decline, preferring instead to increase its use and dependency of 'unofficial' networks. Thee 'unofficial' networks draw more powerfully on the 'push' factors which reinforce the perception that you cannot live a reconciled life as a Muslim in the West. These unofficial networks are made up of fanboys and supporters, many of whom will be represented by those who have returned from serving Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

1.4   Daesh's new strategy is to 'divide, polarise and radicalise'. By deploying narratives which exploit a sense of discrimination, prejudice and inequality, fuelled by the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment in the West, Daesh is generating a strong sense of injustice and victimisation.

1.5   As a result Daesh is creating a global community of the faithful through a single narrative of oppression and revolt, portraying the humiliation and powerlessness of the 'ummah'. Returnees represent a core cadre of loyal supporters and advocates whose personal experiences will lend weight to Daesh influencing efforts.

1.6   The return of 'former fighters' who have abandoned Daesh and families who have witnessed life under Daesh – 'returnees' – therefore, play a significant role in determining the success of Daesh's attempt to reframe

ESCN

its communications strategy. Equally, and in equal measure, they represent an opportunity to draw on real life testimonies which can refute and reframe the legitimacy of Daesh official and unofficial communications efforts.

2   Strategic communications approach

2.1   A disciplined application of strategic communications principles can support the design and delivery of specific communications efforts in response to the 'returnees' challenge described above.

1.   Define the **Problem**

Member State approaches to returnees differ. To define the problem a research approach should be adopted process which defines what elements of returnees is of cause for concern within each jurisdiction, and how might communications might respond to this.

2.   Understand the **Audiences**

The research approach further ensures we understand what emotional and psychological drivers should communications address to ensure they resonate with returnees. How do we communicate with them? Through what channels and which voices resonate?

3.   Design the **Architecture**

Where rehabilitation and returnee programmes exist, though government led, are often carried out by civil society partners. Peer-to-peer interventions are almost exclusively delivered through partnership projects which draw on government and civil society experience in equal measure. A communications response should mirror that partnership approach.

4.   Build the **Partnerships**

In many cases Member States will be required to develop new civil society networks to fill the capacity needs of developing projects and delivering interventions. What existing relationships can be worked through? What element of industry support is needed to make this work effectively?

5. Deliver the **Campaigns**

Based on a clear understanding of the problems and audiences, and delivered through the right partners within appropriate new architectures, communications can be highly effective in addressing 'returnees'. This particular approach will require the introduction of innovative and bespoke campaign and products which can be deployed, often through interventions, to address returnees.

6. Measure the **Performance**

The original research also helps to measure the performance of campaigns. As well as assessing reach through communications analytics, further quantitative and qualitative data could be leveraged to show impact – but only against a baseline undertaken in the initial stages of research.

7. Report the **Success**

Reporting success, but also learnings, internally within governments and stakeholders, helps build will and confidence in the effectiveness of communications as a tool to address this issue.

3 Developing a Response

3.1 Designing a research-led approach

3.1.1 Research is the foundation for all good communications and represents the first step in developing a communications response to a strategic issue. A research lead approach to strategic communications ensures that communications efforts both define the communications problem and develop an understanding of the audience. If done well it ensures communications resonate with its intended audience, achieve the desired effect and provide evidence for its success.

3.1.2 However, while there is extensive research which has successfully developed an understanding of Daesh communications, research into 'returnees', though rapidly developing, is currently limited.

3.1.3 Research should be developed which better understands the emotional drivers and vulnerabilities of returnees to establish what communications would be needed to address these emotions.

ESCN

3.1.4 Equally, research which understands the power and impact of personal testimonies of those 'returning' to reduce the power of the Daesh brand to recruit new supporters should be further explored as part of this exercise.

3.1.5 European networks need to be encouraged to share experience and knowledge to devise better practice in the development of research approaches and inform an understanding of the problem and audiences.

3.1.6 Qualitative research represents the best approach to ensure a highly nuanced and personalised understanding of the issue is developed.

3.2 **Creating powerful content**

3.2.1 Research into the returnee phenomenon is highly individualised. The communications response needs to be too.

3.2.2 The communications challenge posed by Daesh is a profoundly emotional and psychological challenge, drawing as it does on the personal vulnerabilities of its intended target audience. Daesh communications increasingly draws on emotions in preference to ideology or theology.

3.2.3 The research approach, defined above, should aim to understand these emotional drivers at the heart of the returnee mind-set.

3.2.4 Current analysis points to four critically important, related and mutually supporting emotional characteristics which have to date defined the appeal for Daesh.
  I.   Innocent victim;
  II.   Justice or revenge;
  III. Pursuit of celebrity or fame;
  IV.   Shame or guilt.

3.2.5 By understanding these emotional characteristics, we can produce communications products which help either 'substitute them' or 'channel them towards different ends'.

3.2.6 This process of emotional engagement is designed to create a 'moment of doubt', designed to challenge those thinking of joining the 'caliphate' and those, including returnees, from carrying out acts of domestic terrorism.

3.2.7   This approach can be as much about 'positive alternatives' as 'counter-narratives' and the development phase of any approach should explore these options.

3.2.8   A strategic approach should therefore address relevant emotional drivers, by offering positive alternative world-views and raising sufficient doubt in the mind-set of returnees.

3.2.9   Focus should therefore be on delivering:

1.   Powerful communications which address the emotional drivers which are used to generate a response in returnees.

2.   Communications which builds relationships between individuals at risk and those able deliver relevant interventions;

3.   Communications which offers positive alternatives and channel individuals into more positive engagements;

4.   Communications which can be deployed in peer-to-peer engagements and generate effective online content.

5.   Communications which harnesses the voice of returnees where they are able to directly address the power of the Daesh brand influence through personal testimonies.

3.3   **Deploying personal testimonies**

3.3.1   'Returnees' represent an opportunity to draw on a range of real, powerful and personal testimonies to reveal the falsehoods about Daesh's narrative. The content should show Daesh claims to be false.

3.3.2   Returnees, therefore, if deemed 'non-criminal' and where deemed no longer of concern for the security services, can potentially be used as voices for wider prevention communications.

3.3.3   The stories of former fighters who abandoned Daesh or families who witnessed life under Daesh can be used to talk to those at risk of radicalization, particularly to the call to travel, to engage in violent struggle, or join an organization abroad.

3.3.4   It cannot be stressed enough how this must be done carefully, both to ensure they are trained properly, and are aware of the physiological pressures public discourse will bring. A duty of care to the individual must be maintained, and it may well yet be too soon for such endeavours.

3.4   **Addressing communities in a full-spectrum response**

3.4.1   Daesh's new strategy is to 'divide, polarise and radicalise'. By deploying narratives which exploit a sense of discrimination, prejudice and inequality, fuelled by the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment in the West, Daesh is generating a strong sense of injustice and victimisation within Muslim communities. Extreme right wing organisations are responding, by exploiting the perceived increase in domestic threats.

3.4.2   Governments and communities therefore must be prepared to address the negative communications from such groups who may increasingly capitalise on the issue of returnees to stoke community tension, fear and violence and further exacerbate the risk to community tensions.

3.4.3   In this context communications efforts aimed at reducing isolation, polarisation and stigmatisation need to be considered.