



Rehabilitation & Reintegration of Family Members of Foreign Terrorist Fighters: The Role of Cities and Other Local Actors

Webinar Summary | 3 February 2022

Overview

This webinar marked the inaugural Strong Cities Network (SCN) monthly webinar series, designed to provide a platform for the SCN's members and partners to discuss and share lessons, challenges and good practices on the most pressing issues and challenges they face with regards to addressing extremism, hate, and polarisation in their local communities.

This month's webinar focused on the challenges cities and their communities confront when they seek to support the rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of family members of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) returning from conflict zones. Although R&R, in large part due to national security sensitivities, typically falls under the purview of central government, it is often cities and local communities within them that bear the brunt of the processing burden, particularly when it comes to returning family members. Municipal authorities are the ones responsible for providing housing, counselling, schooling and job-training support for returnees, and contending with the negative perceptions of receiving local communities. In doing so, local leaders and actors face a myriad of challenges. These can include a lack of financial and human resources, including for effective coordination between stakeholders, inadequate support from the central government for the local level structures involved in these efforts, mitigating the stigma that can be associated with returnees and local practitioners who work with them and limited sharing of good practices within and among regions.

This webinar featured presentations from three practitioners: Dr. Stevan Weine (Director of Global Medicine and Director of the Center for Global Health at the University of Illinois, College of Medicine); Gulnaz Razdykova (Director, Center for Analysis and Development of Interfaith Relations, Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan); and, Noah Tucker (Non-Resident Senior Fellow, The Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, US). The practitioners discussed these ongoing challenges as well as the lessons and good practices that have emerged from the work they have been doing in Kazakhstan (and elsewhere in Central Asia), engaging directly with returning family members (primarily women and children) and local practitioners. While focused primarily on Kazakhstan, the experiences shared provided relevant lessons and insight for local and national authorities in the region and the international community as a whole.

Key takeaways

- 1. Ongoing R&R efforts in Kazakhstan and across Central Asia more broadly show that returning family members can be safely and effectively rehabilitated and reintegrated into society and highlight that the challenges to R&R can be overcome, thus strengthening the case for more countries to follow this path.** While many states are reluctant to take on the political and other burdens and risks of repatriating the family members of nationals who left to join extremist groups in other countries, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have so far repatriated around 1,300 people - more than any other region in the world. Kazakhstan alone has brought back 700 of its citizens since 2019 and has been unique in its commitment to bring back all of its nationals, including FTFs and their family members. Speakers highlighted the particularly successful efforts at the local level in Kazakhstan to reintegrate women. They

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said that the majority of female returnees have found employment, set up their own businesses, and some have shared their experiences that led them to travel to Syria with international audiences. However, it was also stressed that with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise in Islamophobia in the aftermath of the January political crisis in Kazakhstan, more work remains to be done to secure the stability and sustainability of the country's R&R programmes in the long run. These successes and challenges in Kazakhstan can provide important lessons and inform strategies for national and local governments within and without the region.

- 2. Devolution of R&R efforts from national to local actors in Kazakhstan has proven conducive to more effective and sustainable outcomes for returning family members.** Speakers pointed to an important shift in Kazakhstan's approach to R&R: the devolution of more responsibility from the central government to regional and local institutions and actors. Crucially, participants highlighted how the existence of a rehabilitation centre in Aktau, which brought together practitioners from cities from across Kazakhstan, meant that the infrastructure was already in place to make this shift and that there was a continuity of care and support services for women and children as they returned to their cities.

This shift to locally-led R&R efforts reflects the unique position of cities and local actors as the closest social service providers to citizens in areas that are relevant to the needs of returnees such as enrolling children into schools, reuniting families, providing women with training and job opportunities, and providing women and children with the necessary psychosocial support. Likewise, rehabilitation involves supporting returnees to feel part of society, engaged in civic participation and immersed in local cultural systems, all of which is most effective when led by municipalities and other local actors.

- 3. The Kazakh experience underscores that a person-centred, locally-driven, multi-actor, whole-of-society approach to R&R is critical, and one that should be adopted in different geographical contexts with the relevant stakeholders.** Panellists highlighted how the experiences of returning family members and R&R needs are complex and therefore requires the collaboration of institutions, experts and actors from across the local spectrum. As noted, this includes mobilising a range of local social services and actors such as school teachers, psychologists, health services, civil society organisations (CSOs) and local police. Speakers emphasised that such a multi-actor approach allows for R&R programmes to address the diversity of needs of returnees and be "person-centred". This approach contributes building individual self-esteem through strengthening social networks, family relations, financial stability, mental health, and employment opportunities. In particular, it was noted how religious institutions in Kazakhstan play an especially important role in providing effective and sustainable support for returning family members, including for building trust and strengthening social connections with the wider community. However, participants cautioned that this focus on religious ideology in Kazakhstan may not necessarily be transferable to other contexts. In addition, speakers underscored the importance of having practitioners to look beyond religious ideology and identify the much more complex and varied factors that led them to join Islamist extremist groups so that all drivers of radicalisation can be addressed at the individual level over the long-term. Discussions also highlighted how CSOs, like religious actors, have been pivotal in supporting the needs of returning family members.



It was noted that the full scope of the challenge includes repatriation, resettlement, reintegration, rehabilitation, and resilience building; all which demand different practises and need to be analysed as well as understood. Thus, the term ‘rehabilitation and reintegration’ may be too limiting and not reflect the multidimensional challenges involved in repatriating family members of FTFs.

- 4. Trauma-informed mental health care and broader psychosocial support are critical to the successful and sustainable R&R of returnee children and other family members.** Participants noted that the most effective R&R programmes are those rooted in a deep understanding of the particularities of trauma and radicalisation as experienced by the social groups they are targeting. It is crucial, speakers said, that practitioners frame symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, apathy and depression in both their family relationships and extremist networks as natural reactions to the violence that returnees have lived through. When it comes to women and children, the panellists highlighted the need to understand the gendered nature of domestic violence many of them have experienced even prior to their departure, and to incorporate this into R&R programming to help build and sustain long-term coping mechanisms. It was emphasised how this support needs to be complimented with community-level efforts to secure a sense of belonging, which, as the panellists have learned through their interviews with returnees, prove particularly important for individuals who have been socially ostracised for a long time. It was noted, however, that returnees themselves have an important role to play in their own re-immersion into society, highlighting success stories of women who have achieved their own collective social reintegration through volunteering in charity campaigns, orphanages, or food distribution centres. Speakers detailed how, as a result of the R&R programmes they have been involved in, returnees in Kazakhstan have reported their symptoms of trauma, depression and their PTSD symptoms are progressively decreasing. This experience offers lessons for central and municipal governments from the region to draw on, where less emphasis is placed on providing psychosocial support to returning family members.

Nonetheless, panellists noted the precariousness of the social wellbeing of returnees and the ongoing work that needs to be done to secure this, as the recent rise in anti-returnee and Islamophobic sentiment in the aftermath of Kazakhstan’s political crisis in January 2022 brought to light. One of the good practices speakers highlighted was programmes that protect the anonymity of resettled women and children, which is critical to protect their well-being and avoid stigmatisation in the community.

- 5. Networks and other mechanisms to facilitate the sharing (whether within a country, region, and/or globally) of locally-led lessons from and good practice for local R&R efforts are important for ensuring locally-led efforts are evidence-based and informed by good practice.** Speakers pointed to the lack of national, regional and international structures to facilitate the sharing of expertise and experiences among local practitioners, as one of the biggest barriers to more sustainable and evidence-based R&R work. While there are increasing interactions among local practitioners working on R&R, this is happening on a largely ad hoc basis. The structures for enabling more consistent and strategic interactions, whether at a country, regional, or global level are not in place. Speakers stressed that the establishment of such structures should therefore be a priority as a way to enhance and elevate the good practices and lessons of cities and local actors when it comes to R&R efforts. Moreover, monitoring, evaluation and learning mechanisms and outcome indicators for R&R



efforts need to be developed so that successful work can be adopted and replicated in other contexts. The panellists acknowledged the tremendous headway that Gulnaz Razdykova and her team on the ground in Kazakhstan have made in developing good practises, measures, and training that could be applicable and should be shared beyond the Kazakh context.

Resources

[Processes of Reintegrating Central Asian Returnees from Syria and Iraq](#) (2021), *United States Institute for Peace*

[Rehabilitation and Reintegration Path of Kosovar Minors and Women Repatriated from Syria](#) (2021), *Shtuni, A.*

[The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of ISIS Associates in Central Asia, Report](#) (2021), *Bulan Institute*

[Non-custodial Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: A Guidebook for Policymakers and Practitioners in South-Eastern Europe](#) (2020), *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)*

[Rapid Review to Inform the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Returnees from the Islamic State](#) (2020), *Weine, S., Brahmbatt, Z., Cardeli, E. and Ellis, H.*

[Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Child Returnees from ISIS](#) (2020), *Weine, S. and Ellis, H.*

[Rehabilitating the Islamic State's Women and Children Returnees in Kazakhstan](#) (2019), *Weine, S.*