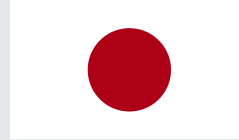




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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**THE EXPERIENCE OF THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN
AND THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC IN THE DESIGN,
DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF RETURN,
REINTEGRATION AND REHABILITATION
PROGRAMMES FOR THE NATIONALS OF THESE
COUNTRIES FROM CONFLICT ZONES**

NUR-SULTAN 2020

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including UNDP and UNODC, or United Nations Member States.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

EU	European Union
FGD	Focus group discussions
FTF	Foreign terrorist fighters
IO	International organizations
IS/Daesh	Terrorist organization “Islamic State”
LSA	Local state administration
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
PVE	Prevention of violent extremism
PWD	Persons with disabilities
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSC	UN Security Council

Kyrgyz Republic

CPC	Community prevention centers
KR	Kyrgyz Republic
LSG	Local self-government
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoI	Ministry of the Interior
MTC	Ministry of Transport and Communications
SCNS	State Committee on National Security
SCRA	State Commission on Religious Affairs
SCS	State Corrections Service
SRS	State Registration Service

Republic of Kazakhstan

CCP	Code of Civil Procedure
CNS	Committee of National Security
MoD	Ministry of Defense
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoI	Ministry of the Interior
MLSPP	Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Population
RK	Republic of Kazakhstan

INTRODUCTION

The terrorist organization “Islamic State” (IS or Daesh, earlier the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant or ISIL) and other terrorist organizations active in the Middle East have been the largest recruiters of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in recent decades. According to a recent assessment, the number of FTFs and their accompanying family members (including deceased) in Syria and Iraq as of July 2019 totaled between 44,279 and 52,808 individuals from 80 countries, one quarter of whom were women and children.¹ Rough estimates indicate that as of 2017, 2–4,000 individuals or 5–10% of the total FTFs number in the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq were nationals of Central Asian states.²

As terrorist organizations gradually lost control of the invaded territories in Syria and Iraq, the international community came to face the challenge of post-conflict relief in the territories affected by the activity of terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq, including the returns of FTFs and their family members to their countries of origin. A key issue for the states whose nationals participated in some capacity in the creation of the terrorist organization “Islamic State” and other terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq was the nature and extent of the threat posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters. This issue has been raised in international forums since at least 2014. The debate intensified following the series of terrorist acts in Europe since 2015.³ In general, even though most researchers are skeptical about the risk of mass influx of FTFs from Syria and Iraq into their countries of origin, it is noted that it would be unwise to ignore potential threats posed by FTFs returnees.⁴ Another, no less important challenge lies with returns from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq of accompanying family members of FTFs, including children, both those taken to conflict zones in the Middle East and those born there. This category of returnees may also pose a potential security risk and also requires addressing their re-integration and deradicalization needs.

1 Cook J., Vale G. From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate//CTC Sentinel.—2019.—Vol 12 (6).—P. 30–31.

2 Barrett R. Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees.—New York: The Soufan Center, 2017.—40 p.

3 Lemon E., Mironova V., Tobey W. Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia: Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?—Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2018—44 p. The authors note that Central Asian state nationals were involved in a relatively small proportion of terrorist acts perpetrated globally from 2014–2017, i.e. 1 out of 65 terrorist acts in the European Union, 1 out of 77 in Turkey, 1 out of 27 in the U.S. and 1 out of 153 in Russia. Worldwide, from 2008–2017 Central Asian state nationals were involved in 68 out of the total of 48,546 terrorist acts (0.14 %) registered in the Global Terrorism Database, save for those that were perpetrated in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

4 Lemon E., Mironova V., Tobey W. Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia: Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?—Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2018—44 p.; RAN Manual. Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families.—Brussels: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017; Lynch T., Bouffard M., King K., Vickowski G. The Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism Policy.—Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2016.

Child detainees pose a special concern. Some estimates put the overall number of children in Iraq's prisons in March 2019 at over a thousand.⁵ In Iraq, in 2018 alone 616 foreigners were tried and convicted for IS membership. The sentences ranged from various terms of imprisonment to life imprisonment to death penalty. The convicted individuals included 108 children, 466 adult women and only 42 adult men.⁶ Most women convicted for their affiliation with IS arrived to the conflict zones from Turkey and former Soviet Union countries.⁷

Finally, the situation of FTF-affiliated individuals placed in refugee camps in northern Syria—where nationals of at least 42 states are held—begs a solution.⁸ Only the largest camp, Al Hol, in 2019 held 12,000 FTF-affiliated individuals, including 4000 women and 8000 children.⁹ According to the most recent estimates, in 2020 Al-Hol camp held some 65,000 people, including about 28,000 Syrians, 30,000 Iraqis and some 10,000 other foreigners of many nationalities. Among them are nearly 40,000 children from more than 60 countries, according to the information of UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) quoted by Aljazeera.¹⁰ At times Al-Hol camp has been home to more than 70,000 people, including family members and supporters of the Islamic State.¹¹

In the case of children born in the territories under the IS control at the time of their birth, lack of identity documents and de jure statelessness limit children's access to short-term allowances and aid on the camp premises.

Researchers note that women's roles in conflict zones in Syria and Iraq run an exceptionally wide gamut: from victims coerced to travel to conflict zones to highly violently radicalized persons, often involved in IS-perpetrated atrocities.¹² IS-affiliated women are also noted to be diverse in age. This refutes the once-widespread stereotype of affiliated women as young girls deceived by recruiters.¹³

5 Jalabi R. Special Report: Forgotten victims—The children of Islamic State// Reuters.—2019.—21 March // <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-islamicstate-children/>

6 Cook J., Vale G. From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate// CTC Sentinel.—2019.—Vol 12 (6).—P. 30–45.

7 Iraq sentenced 616 foreigners for ISIS links in 2018//News 24.—2018.—December 31//<https://www.news24.com/news24/world/news/iraq-sentenced-616-foreigners-for-isis-links-in-2018-20181231>

8 CTED Analytical Brief: The repatriation of ISIL-associated children.—New York: The United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, 2019.

9 Cook J., Vale G. From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate// CTC Sentinel.—2019.—Vol 12 (6).—P. 30–45.

10 Aljazeera, Kurdish-led authorities to remove Syrians from al-Hol camp, 5 Oct 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/5/kurds-to-allow-is-linked-syria-families-to-quit-al-hol-camp>

11 Voice of America, Jeff Seldin, Displaced Syrians Heading Home From Notorious al-Hol Camp, October 14, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/displaced-syrians-heading-home-notorious-al-hol-camp#&gid=1&pid=2>

12 Cook J., Vale G. From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate//CTC Sentinel.—2019.

13 Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), Gender dimensions of the response to returning foreign terrorist fighters: research perspectives (RESOLVE Network, 2019).

Expert estimates as of July 2019 put the number of adult female and child returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq at 7712 to 8202 persons, most of them returned to South-East Asian countries (approx. 33 %) and Western Europe (approx. 28–29 %) ¹⁴. These data are likely incomplete, since not all of the returning individuals are included in official statistics. ¹⁵

In Central Asian states, returns of nationals “who have not yet committed crimes, could not participate in or operate as part of terrorist groups,” ¹⁶ from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq have been on the debate agenda since 2014, when Central Asian nationals started to travel to the armed conflict zone in the Middle East. In the beginning, this challenge was primarily debated in the context of threats posed by returning IS fighters, who would be likely to engage in terrorist propaganda and commit terrorist acts, so the discussion was limited to developing mechanisms to prevent such returns and detect and detain the returnees. One complicating factor was the fact that departees from Central Asia were actively used for IS propaganda purposes. ¹⁷ From at least 2017, the debate took on the dimension of ensuring targeted and centralized returns of nationals who were not suspected in direct involvement in terrorist operations, in order to ensure their rehabilitation and reintegration. ¹⁸

Year 2018 saw a number of Central Asian states set up dedicated working groups on returning nationals from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, tasked with tracing the departees with the support of their relatives on the ground and repatriate them along with their families. ¹⁹

The shifting approach to individuals who left their countries to participate in hostilities abroad resulted in growing return flows to Central Asian states. In 2019, Kazakhstani authorities launched four *Zhusan* operations, which aimed to return Kazakhstani nationals from armed conflict zones in Syria and Iraq; as a result, 595 people were repatriated, including 33 men, 156 women and 406 children, including 32 unaccompanied children. ²⁰ At the end of November 2019, 14 more children were returned from Iraq through the

14 Cook J., Vale G. From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate// CTC Sentinel.—2019.—Vol 12 (6).—P. 30–45.

15 Cook J., Vale G. From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate// CTC Sentinel.—2019.—Vol 12 (6).—P. 30–45.

16 National Security Committee plans to return Kazakhstani nationals from Syria through peaceful negotiations.—KTK TV, 23 October 2013. See: <http://www.ktk.kz/ru/news/video/2013/10/23/24951>

17 Wyke, Tom and Darren Boyle (2014) ‘ISIS release shocking new video of child soldiers from Kazakhstan being trained with AK47s’, Daily Mail, 22 November.—<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2845531/ISIS-release-shocking-new-video-child-soldiers-Kazakhstan-trained-AK47s.html>

18 Moldabekov, Daniyar (2017). 350 Kazakhstani children in Syria and Iraq conflict zones.—Vlast’, 12 December. See.: <https://vlast.kz/novosti/26079-v-zonah-boevyh-dejstvij-v-sirii-i-irake-nahodatsa-390-kazahstanskih-detej.html>

19 Tajikistan explains delayed returns of fighter wives, children from Syria.—International news agency Fergana.—18 August 2018. See: <https://www.fergananews.com/news/32107>; Bondal K. Kazakhstan intensifies national returns from Syria, Iraq.—Karavansaray, 4 December 2018. See.: http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2018/12/04/feature-01

20 Zhusan humanitarian operation.—Official YouTube channel of the CNS of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 5 February 2020. See.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSOLFTyq2l0&feature>

Rusafa operation.²¹ Additionally, the Ministry of Information and Civic Development of Kazakhstan reports on 7 women and 26 children returned from Turkey and Syria in the fall-winter 2019. In February 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan also announced the return of 4 men, 1 woman and 7 children from Syria. The KNB designated this operation as *Zhusan-5*.²²

Tajikistan conducted a one-off return operation at the end of April 2019, repatriating 84 children from the conflict zone in Syria.²³

Uzbekistan has been organizing returns under the *Mehr* humanitarian operation, ongoing since the end of May 2019. Its first phase resulted in the returns of 155 people (48 women and 107 children) from the armed conflict zones in the Middle East.²⁴ The second phase in October 2019 brought home 64 children.²⁵ Some of the repatriated children have mothers serving sentences in Iraq, and these children were returned to Uzbekistan in consultation with the mothers. Overall, 261 Uzbekistani nationals—mostly women and children—have been returned from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.²⁶

The government of the Kyrgyz Republic has also treated national returns from Syria and Iraq as a priority. In June 2019, the Kyrgyzstani MFA circulated the first report on the completion of the identification of its nationals, conducted jointly with the authorities in Iraq and Syria, and the start of the planning of the repatriation.²⁷ However, open sources give no estimates of the numbers of identified Kyrgyzstani nationals. The human rights center Kylym Shamy has since May 2019 identified 350 Kyrgyzstani nationals (121 families) held in three camps in northeast Syria and 11 women with children in Iraq's prisons.²⁸ In September 2019, media reports surfaced that the Kyrgyz Republic government had arranged for 78 Kyrgyzstani national children to return from Iraq. Moreover, the official Government website announced the development of an action plan to rehabilitate and reintegrate the child returnees, with support by relevant experts,

21 Prilepskaya A. Scorched by war.—Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, 9 December 2019.

See: <https://www.kazpravda.kz/articles/view/opalennye-voynoi2>

22 CNS of the Republic of Kazakhstan. “Zhusan-5” operation.—Official YouTube channel of the KNB of the Republic of Kazakhstan, February 5, 2021. См.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3oTnhk8Oro>

23 Tajikistan returned home dozens of children from Iraq—Karavansaray, 1 May 2019. See: https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/newsbriefs/2019/05/01/newsbrief-01; <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/29913924.html>

24 «Меҳр» операциясида Ўзбекистонга қайтарилган аёлларга қанча ёрдам пули берилгани очиқланди, March 03, 2020. See: <https://kun.uz/news/2020/03/03/mehr-operatsiyasida-ozbekistonga-qaytarilgan-ayollarga-qancha-yordam-puli-berilgani-ochiqlandi>

25 Operation Mehr-2: 64 children repatriated from Iraq to Uzbekistan.—Uzreport, 11 October 2019.

See: <https://uzreport.news/society/operatsiya-mehr-2-64-rebenka-vozvrascheni-iz-iraka-v-uzbekistan>

26 Operation Kindness: Return to peaceful living.—Pravda Vostoka, 6 March 2020.

See: <https://pv.uz/ru/newspapers/operatsiya-dobro-vozvraschenie-k-mirnoj-zhizni>

27 Kyrgyzstan working on Kyrgyzstani national returns from Syria, Iraq.—Radio Azattyk, 16 July 2020. See: <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/29980199.html>

28 Interview with A. Abdirasulova, Chief Executive of the Kylym Shamy Center.

including theologians.²⁹ According to the MFA statement, on 16 March 2021, 79 child nationals of the Kyrgyz Republic were repatriated from Iraq in the framework of the Meerim (Mercy) humanitarian operation.³⁰

The repatriations of women are fraught with risks and challenges, which are not only due to the state's limited possibilities in repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration of this category of individuals, but also the roles played by women in terror groups. Despite the recommendations to view women and especially children as victims³¹, the role of women in the terror propaganda machine in Syria and Iraq cannot be underestimated.

This study is a situation analysis of the experience of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic in the conceptualization, development and implementation of return, reintegration and rehabilitation programming, and aims to support Central Asian states in the development and implementation of comprehensive and context-aware strategies of return, rehabilitation and reintegration of FTF family members returning or traveling from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq to their countries of origin or nationality (hereinafter referred to as “returning nationals”).

The study pursues the goal of identifying gaps in policies, knowledge and practices, and the development of recommendations for Central Asian states to support their efforts to return, rehabilitate and reintegrate returning nationals and their family members.

29 Kyrgyzstan's Government made arrangements for Kyrgyzstani national children's return from Iraq.—Official website of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 5 September 2019. See: <https://www.gov.kg/ru/post/s/kyrgyzstandyn-okmt-irak-respublikasyndagy-kyrgyz-respublikasynyn-zharandaryn-baldaryn-aly-p-kel-maselesin-ishtep-chykty>

30 Kyrgyzstan returned 79 children from Iraq.—PreventionMedia.—16 March 2021. See: <https://prevention.kg/?p=9956>

31 In footnote 14 to Good Practice 3 of Neuchâtel Memorandum on Good Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context noted that “in any situation where a child has been recruited by an armed group he or she should be treated first and foremost as a victim of a violation of international law, and health and social support interventions should be explored”.—Neuchâtel Memorandum on Good Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context.—The Global Counterterrorism Forum. See: <https://theij.org/wp-content/uploads/English-Neucha--tel-Memorandum-on-Juvenile-Justice.pdf>). See: The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism Report of the UN Secretary-General from 24 December 2015. UN: https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674; The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), arts. 38, 39 and 40 on protecting children who are victims of armed conflict. Handbook Children affected by the foreign-fighter phenomenon: Ensuring a child rights-based approach. See: https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/ftf_handbook_web_reduced.pdf

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study primarily employed the methodological approach of level assessment, based on a three-tier analysis of the problem:

1. Individual level: Analysis of individual strategies and behavioral patterns of audience covered by the focus group, i.e. women returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. This included the identification of push and pull factors, radicalization causes and resocialization potential;
2. Community level: Analysis at the level of local communities where reintegration of returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq is occurring, including the identification of community attitudes towards returnees and the assessment of local community potential in reintegration;
3. National (state) level: Analysis at the level of state policymaking in the area of violent extremism prevention and risk management in respect to return, reintegration and rehabilitation of FTF-affiliated persons from conflict zones in Iraq and Syria.

Data collection involved a desk review and field research. In Kazakhstan, in-depth interviews were conducted with 31 women returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. In-depth interviews were treated as confidential. Each informant was approached prior to the interview to establish personal rapport. The engagement/explanatory part of the in-depth interview included detailed information on the goals and objectives of the study. A number of potential informants declined the invitation to be interviewed, however, most showed interest and, as assessed by the interviewers, showed openness and trust during the interviews.

At the time of conducting this research The Kyrgyz Republic had not yet decided on an operation to repatriate women and children from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. This said, in the Kyrgyz Republic 16 interviews were conducted with informants whose family members are held in camps in Syrian territory or in Iraqi prisons (14 women and 2 men). Additionally, 1 interview was conducted with a woman who returned from Syria on her own.

FGD were conducted in Kazakhstan's regions and localities where, according to official statistics, most departees to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq originated from, and where most returnees relocated, i.e. Atyrau region (Atyrau), Karaganda region (Karaganda, Satpaev, Zhezkazgan) and Almaty region (Taldykorgan, Kaskelen), as well as the metropolitan areas of Nur-Sultan and Almaty. Discussion participants were selected through random sampling. FGD participants did not include political scientists, sociologists, scholars in religious studies, imams, theologians, or individuals who have participated in qualitative studies over the past 6 months.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, FGD were held in all the seven regions in the nation (Chuy, Naryn, Talas, Issyk-Kul, Osh, Jalal-Abad, Batken), as well as in the cities of Bishkek and Osh. The discussions involved local residents as well as representatives of community prevention centers (composed of representatives of women's councils, chairs of precinct committees, elders' courts etc.). An additional FGD in Bishkek brought together media representatives.

The study informants included experts directly involved in return, reintegration and rehabilitation programming, representatives of local executive authorities, scholars in religious studies, academics in the area of prevention and countering terrorism and violent extremism, as well as representatives of relevant NGOs and human rights defenders. Additionally, interviews were conducted with theologians involved in return, reintegration and rehabilitation programming, as well as with journalists who have covered these topics in Kazakhstani media.

In Kazakhstan, meetings also took place with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Information and Civic Development, Ministry of Justice and the Committee of National Security of the Republic of Kazakhstan. In Kyrgyzstan, difficulties arose with interviewing state officials. The only interview out of the planned 9 that actually took place was with the KR State Committee on Religious Affairs.

1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The activities of states in countering violent extremism and terrorism at the global level are based on the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted by the UN General Assembly on 8 September 2006.³² The UN General Assembly reviews the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy every two years to reflect changing priorities and it is a unique global instrument to enhance national, regional and international efforts to counter terrorism, including by strengthening cooperation between all key actors at the global, regional and national levels. In its preamble, the Strategy reiterated ‘strong condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever purposes, as it constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security’.³³

Countering of violent extremism and terrorism should be conducted in accordance with the international human rights, refugee rights and international humanitarian law. The strategy involves a wide range of measures aimed at tackling the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, building states’ capacity to counter terrorism threats, strengthening the coordination role of the UN system in counter-terrorism activities, ensuring universal respect for human rights and the rule of law as the fundamental basis for the fight against terrorism.

The legal frameworks in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on the issues of repatriation of individuals from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, their rehabilitation and reintegration largely comply with the applicable international standards, with some specifics and outstanding gaps that need to be addressed. In particular, in the issues of nationality determination and its deprivation as well as the right to return to own country, the legislation establishes the grounds based on which the nationals (former nationals) can be limited in their return to their homeland. The legislation of both countries provide for the possibility of loss of nationality by some individuals: in Kazakhstan for “having committed a terrorist offense, as well as for having caused other grave harm to the vital interests of the Republic of Kazakhstan,”³⁴ and in Kyrgyzstan “due to the enrolment in military or intelligence service of a foreign state; undertaking of overseas training aimed to acquire skills for committing terrorist or extremism crimes; participation in armed conflicts or hostilities in foreign states except for cases when required to do so for the performance of official duties to maintain international peace and security.”³⁵ Kazakhstan’s legislation specifies that an individual may be stripped of his/her nationality by a court ruling, whereas in Kyrgyzstan the mechanism for the loss of nationality remains undetermined.

32 UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 60/288 on 8 September 2006.—UN official website: <https://undocs.org/ru/A/RES/60/288>.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Article 1 of the RoK Law dated 20 December 1991 No. 1017-XII ‘On the Nationality of the Republic of Kazakhstan’.—Adilet Legal Database: http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z910004800_

35 KR Law dated 21 May 2007 No. 70 ‘On the Nationality of the Kyrgyz Republic’.—KR Centralized Legal Database: <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/202103>

It should be noted that neither Kazakhstan nor Kyrgyzstan particularize the issue of children's return to their homelands, which creates certain gaps in the legislation. For instance, Kazakhstan has introduced the possibility of stripping individuals of their Kazakhstani nationality; however, the issue of the nationality of the children of such individuals remains legally uncertain. The current laws in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan fail to regulate the issue of separation of a child from a parent in a foreign state for the purpose of his/her repatriation. Although, in general, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the legal proceedings and criminal prosecution provide for gender- and age-specific differentiation and while the Criminal Code establishes the minimum age of criminal responsibility as 16 years, there are a range of offenses (including some terrorism related offenses) for which children can be prosecuted from the age of 14.

The most problematic area in the legal frameworks of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is the regulation of the rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals affected by terrorism. The national legislations of these countries mainly focus on the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities and, to some extent, domestic violence survivors. However, there are some jurisdictional differences here as well. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, unlike Kazakhstan, the presence of a child in a conflict zone is considered by the law as a disadvantage (*"difficult circumstance"*), which creates a legal basis for the application of rehabilitation practices.

Both countries lack provisions to facilitate reintegration.

The issues of rehabilitation of individuals affected by terrorism are finally being introduced into the national legislations, but often lack consistency and required level of detail (for instance, Kazakhstan enacted relevant amendments in the legislation in May 2020).³⁶

³⁶ RoK Law dated 13 May 2020 No. 326-VI ZRK 'On amendments to some legal regulations of the Republic of Kazakhstan on issues of maternity and childhood protection'.—Adilet Legal Database: <http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z2000000326>

2. REPATRIATION, REHABILITATION AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES: INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

2.1. Repatriation practices in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Republic of Kazakhstan

The information about centralized return of Kazakhstani children from conflict zones in the Middle East first appeared in December 2017, when the NSC of Kazakhstan reported that “as of today 63 children have been returned to their homeland, approximately 50 more children are expected to arrive.”³⁷ Later, in 2018, a special working group to return Kazakhstani nationals who left for conflict zones in Syria and Iraq was established³⁸. The Zhusan humanitarian operation became the result of that work covering a period from 2019 to the beginning of 2020 within which 595 people were repatriated to Kazakhstan. At the first stage of operation, 47 individuals (6 men, 11 women, 30 children) were evacuated, at the second—231 (16 men, 59 women, 156 children, including 18 orphans). At the third stage: 246 returnees (8 men, 67 women and 171 children, of which 9 are orphans), at the fourth stage—71 individuals (3 men, 19 women, 49 children, including 5 orphans).³⁹ At the end of November 2019, the Rusafa operation was conducted resulting in the return of 14 children from Iraq.⁴⁰ Additionally, according to Ministry of information and social development of Kazakhstan, in the fall and winter of 2019, 7 women and 26 children were returned from Syria and Turkey. In February 2021, Kazakhstan’s MFA announced the return of 4 men, 1 woman and 7 children in the frameowkr of Zhusan-5.⁴¹

The motivation for a series of repatriation operations was voiced by the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Commenting on the first stage of Zhusan operation, he noted that female returnees were victims “fraudulently taken to conflict zone in Syria... We, as a state, will support those who came from Syria, we will help them... Those who came will probably later tell us about an endured suffering they experienced”⁴² Asylbek Izbaïrov, director of Institute for Geopolitical Research (Nur-Sultan), in this regard, has opined that “the fact that an individual has left for Syria or Iraq does not mean that individual has committed a terrorist crime; an individual may be called a criminal after killing someone or taking a part in hostilities.” Moreover, in his

37 D. Moldabekov. There are 390 Kazakh children in war zones in Syria and Iraq.—Vlast, 12 December 2017 See: <https://vlast.kz/novosti/26079-v-zonah-boevyh-dejstvij-v-sirii-i-irake-nahodatsa-390-kazahstanskih-detej.html>

38 K. Bondal. Kazakhstan has stepped up efforts to return its nationals from Syria and Iraq.—Caravanserai, December 4, 2018 See: http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2018/12/04/feature-01

39 NSC of the Republic of Kazakhstan. “Zhusan” humanitarian operation.—Official YouTube channel of the NSC of the Republic of Kazakhstan, February 5, 2020. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSOLFTyq2l0&feature>

40 A. Prilepskaya. Scorched by the war.—Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, December 9, 2019. See: <https://www.kazpravda.kz/articles/view/opalennie-voinoi2> See: <https://www.kazpravda.kz/articles/view/opalennie-voinoi2>

41 NSC of the Republic of Kazakhstan. “Zhusan -5” humanitarian operation.—Official YouTube channel of the NSC of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 5 February 2021. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3oTnhk8Oro>

42 What is known about the return of dozens of Kazakhstanis from Syria?—Radio Azattyk, January 9, 2019. See: <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-syria-return/29699493.html>

opinion, many “radicalized” nationals left for war zones together with their wives and children, who “basically have nothing to do with terrorists.”⁴³

The Zhusan humanitarian operation consisted of three stages, with the first one focused on the search and identification of Kazakhstani nationals in conflict zones; the second one—on a set of measures to create conditions to evacuate Kazakhstani nationals from conflict zone (including negotiations to repatriate Kazakhstani nationals from Syria and Iraq, resolve safety and security issues and determine conditions for a transfer based on certificates of return to Kazakhstan); and the third one covering the repatriation to Kazakhstan.

Analysis of the in-depth interviews with women confirmed that their repatriation from Syria had been carried out on a voluntary basis. In most cases females were initially in areas invaded by the terrorist organization Islamic State, later they ended up in Kurdish camps, from where representatives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan took them home. Women mentioned that official representatives of Kazakhstan carried out explanatory work with them in camps, made lists of those wishing to leave, and then arranged their transportation.

There were a limited number of cases of an independent return of women to Kazakhstan, often carried out with a help of parents or other relatives. Official data show that, in total, 125 nationals independently returned to Kazakhstan before the start of Zhusan operation⁴⁴. As interviewees said leaving conflict zones on their own was difficult. This primarily concerned leaving areas controlled by IS. Discussing plans to leave IS controlled territories was life-threatening, especially given a widespread practice of denunciations. Anyone wishing to break ranks with Terrorist Organization “Islamic State” could have been immediately executed. Furthermore, intermediaries asked for USD 8–20,000 to assist in returning to homeland.

The situation changed after the defeat of IS lead forces. As a result, a significant number of foreigners who previously were in areas controlled by IS ended up in special camps or, if there had been an evidence of participating in IS activities were convicted in Syria and Iraq and are now serving their sentences in penitentiary institutions of these countries. As majority of female interviewees said, many of their compatriots with children remained in the camps for different reasons and refused to return. Among returnees, there is a small group of women who are extremely critical of those who did not want to return to Kazakhstan. They expressed an opinion in favor of stripping those individuals of their Kazakhstani citizenship. At the same time, women explained that the refusal to return

43 K. Bondal. Kazakhstan has stepped up efforts to return its nationals from Syria and Iraq.—Caravanserai, December 4 2018. See: http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2018/12/04/feature-01

44 Decree by RK Government dated of 15 March 2018, no. 124 “On the approval of State Program for countering religious extremism and terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2018-2022—”Adilet” legal information system for legislative and regulatory acts, RK. See: <http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P1800000124>

may have been due to the fear of facing prosecution in Kazakhstan, or by those who remained and shared IS ideology.

After the return of Kazakhstani nationals and their children from conflict zones ministries and state agencies of Kazakhstan keep working with those individuals based on functions and authorities stipulated by law.

The NSC also monitors the process of rehabilitation and reintegration, analyzes information about returnees, and provides recommendations to state bodies on how to work with returnees. Local executive authorities (akimats) and commissioners for human rights and child rights protection contribute at all stages the process.

Kyrgyz Republic

As instructed by Kyrgyzstani government interdepartmental working group consistent of officials from MFA, SCNS, MoI, MLSD, MTC and MoH was established in June 2019. In a subsequent order of the government, MoES and the State Commission on Religious Affairs under the President of KR⁴⁵ were included into interdepartmental working group. It should be highlighted that interdepartmental working group does not include representatives of local authorities and civil organizations that could have facilitated reintegration of returnees into local communities.

Should a decision to separate the family and have child repatriated without a parent a court resolution on separation and guardianship may be needed to be obtained; articulating an importance of roles judiciary supervisory authority (prosecutor's office) and Akyikatchy (Ombudsman) including its special department protecting rights of children, women and families, play in this process. Judicial involvement is also expected in case of a DNA testing. Supervisory authorities should be involved in the process of ensuring confidentiality of repatriated individuals' personal data.

2.2. Rehabilitation and reintegration practices in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic

The UN Security Council Resolution 2396 (2017) emphasizes the importance of applying a nation-wide approach and recognizes a role civil society organizations including health, social welfare and education related, can play in facilitating rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees and repatriated foreign terrorist fighters and their family members, as civil society organizations' knowledge, contacts, and level of engagement

45 Government of KR elaborates on returning children being KR nationals from Republic of Iraq.—Official website of the KR Government, 5 September 2019. See: <https://www.gov.kg/ru/post/s/kyrgyzstandyn-okmt-irak-respublikasyndagy-kyrgyz-respublikasynyn-zharandaryn-baldaryn-aly-p-kel-maselesin-ishtep-chykty>; Kyrgyzstan Elaborates on returning Kyrgyz nationals from Syria and Iraq.—Radio "Azattyk", 3 July 2020. See: <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/29980199.html>

with local communities can meet objectives of countering recruitment and violence generating radicalization.⁴⁶

Nationals returning from conflict zones can be divided into four groups:

- adult nationals that participated in hostilities or are currently being active participants of propaganda operations of terrorist organizations;
- adult nationals who had been in hostility zone but were not engaged into combat;
- child nationals of Central Asian States who have reached the age of criminal responsibility and have committed prosecutable terrorist offenses;
- other children.

Usually, the first group is a subject to criminal prosecution. Guided by a principle of unavoidability of punishment for terrorism guaranteed by the international law 31 male and 12 female returnees were convicted in Kazakhstan. 14 more individuals are under pre-trial investigation on grounds such as: propaganda of terrorism or public calls to commit an act of terrorism, participation in the activities of terrorist organizations, incitement to social, national, tribal, racial, class or religious hatred, etc.⁴⁷

Adult nationals who were in zone of hostilities, but did not take part in hostilities, and children of nationals who have been in conflict zone, have undergone rehabilitation and reintegration procedures.

Individuals who have undergone rehabilitation in Kazakhstan including women and children live under police supervision.⁴⁸ According to the NSC, this agency has also worked on deradicalizing and ensuring further rehabilitation for women not engaged in terrorist activities and children.

As of today, under the auspices of the MoES of Kazakhstan, the development of regulations for the social rehabilitation of child survivors of terrorism is underway⁴⁹. Success criterion for rehabilitation and reintegration of a returnee is a disengagement from radical views reported by theologians, psychologists, educators and other individuals involved into the process. In terms of enhancing rehabilitation and reintegration programs, respect to human rights has been a focus while working with this category of nationals as well as at the conceptual level ensuring a balance in different working dimensions.

46 UN Security Council. Resolution 2396 (2017) dated 21 December 2017.—Official website of the UN. See: [https://undocs.org/ru/S/RES/2396\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/ru/S/RES/2396(2017))

47 NSC of Republic of Kazakhstan. “Zhusan” Humanitarian Operation.—Official YouTube channel of the NSC, RK, 5 February 2020. See.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSOLFTyq2l0&feature>; D. Adilbekov. 14 ISIL fighters got condemned in Kazakhstan. Who are those people and how did they make it to Syria?—Informburo, 11 December 2019. See: <https://informburo.kz/stati/v-kazahstane-osudili-14-boevikov-igil-kto-oni-i-kak-popali-v-siriyu.html>

48 Zh. Zhanagul. The returned from Syria regrets about leaving for Khalifate.—Radio “Azattyk”, 14 June 2019. See: <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-zarina-young-woman-evacuated-from-syria/29998735.html>

49 Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated September 4, 2020 No. 382. Registered with the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan on September 4, 2020 No. 21172

To date, Kyrgyzstan continues to discuss options for organized return of its nationals from conflict zones. A few nationals, who have returned on their own, faced criminal prosecution. They received suspended sentences or were amnestied, live at their previous place of residence under supervision of law enforcement agencies. Such individuals have also been involved in radicalization prevention as participants to explanatory discussions in mosques, educational institutions and community centers arranged by law enforcement agencies and local authorities.⁵⁰

Kyrgyzstan has already accumulated some expertise in the field of development and implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programs on other issues similar to rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq (victims of violence, trafficking). Role of the local authorities is important as returnees will live in their own communities.

50 N. Ryskulova. War that did not happen. How Kyrgyz people who returned from Syria live?—BBC, 19 February 2019. See: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-47281602>

3. CHALLENGES, RISKS AND CONSTRAINTS IN IMPLEMENTING REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS

Repatriation of women and children from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq and, most importantly, their rehabilitation and reintegration, are accompanied by challenges and risks that stem from a need to strike a balance between ensuring human rights and public security, as well as the state's institutional capacity for repatriation and rehabilitation, and the attitude and willingness of the local population and local authorities to reintegrate these individuals into the community. The analysis of these challenges and risks is based on interviews and focus group discussions, and is separated in this report into individual, local and national levels.

Evaluation of rehabilitation and reintegration programs

The main objective of rehabilitation and reintegration programs is to change the behavior patterns of people returning from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

According to experts involved in the rehabilitation and reintegration of people returning from conflict zones, they are not a single uniform group. Each returnee has their own goals and values and, accordingly, the development of any rehabilitation and reintegration mechanisms will be successful if rehabilitation and reintegration measures are sufficiently personalized.

The challenges identified in the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programs at the individual level are as follows:

- stigmatization of repatriated persons by society, including on the basis of their cultural and religious practices, which may differ from those in local communities;
- the formation of a sense of debt in the returnees (“we saved you and forgave you, we accepted you”);
- unstable psychological and emotional states of returnees, some of it caused by being submerged in an ideology of violence (e.g., children “calmly reacting to death”);
- language barrier in children;
- justification of and a calm attitude to violence, most commonly expressed in children;
- additional scrutiny of returnees' lives from law enforcement agencies, which may even violate their right to privacy, creating psychological tension and a sense of insecurity.

Push factors are mostly of social and economic nature:

- Unfavorable financial situation, including situational issues, for example, an employer's refusal to pay wages;
- lack of work (including temporary work);

- resentment against the government and society for lack of opportunities for self-realization.

Push factors, according to experts, also include being brought up in dysfunctional families.

According to experts, a big factor for people leaving the country was that they were looking for answers to key questions in life, including self-identification crises. They were unable to find answers in both secular and religious environments. According to other experts, this situation was connected to rigidity and formalism in the work of imams, as well as their low professional competence. Experts also noted that those who left for conflict zones did not have sufficient critical thinking and had low media and information literacy.

Pull factors include:

- material support from religious communities linked to terrorist groups in conflict zones in Syria and Iraq;
- the promise of material well-being in areas controlled by terrorist groups;
- a desire to help brothers and sisters in faith who have been persecuted by “infidels”;
- a desire to participate in the construction of the Caliphate, as it was perceived as a “sacred duty of a Muslim”, for which a spiritual reward awaits;
- the reasons stated above and other reasons were used by ideological recruiters;
- influence from spouses who were about to leave or had already left for conflict zones (mainly husbands).

At a fundamental level, returnees’ resocialization and reintegration success is associated with a need to maintain a constant dialogue amongst government, society and returnees from conflict zones. This study has demonstrated that government agencies tend to objectify society, local communities and returnees. This generates to a number of practical complexities, first and foremost—society and local communities do not have a clear answer to the questions: “Why people have been or will be returned from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq? Why should state budget be spent to rehabilitate and reintegrate returnees?” This, in its turn, leads to a risk of stigmatizing returnees from conflict zones, forming an image of “an eternal debtor” or “a potential threat to hosting community”.

A serious challenge to implement rehabilitation and reintegration programs for female returnees from conflict zones is that they usually do not touch upon or relate to an extremely limited number of socio-economic factors serving as a foundation for women to leave Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan:

- financial situation and a lack of desired employment;
- lack of effective “social lifts” and opportunities for self-realization

Alternatively, if rehabilitation and reintegration programs include components aimed at improving material well-being of returnees from conflict zones (providing housing, job, and other taking measures), this creates a risk of growing discontent in local communities.

Hence, following risks have been found while implementing rehabilitation and reintegration programs in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan:

- social stigmatization of both returnees and their relatives;
- a chance for returnees to end up in social circles they have earlier been radicalized.

Challenges faced by rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returnees from conflict zones include: a lack of verification mechanisms to assess results of the programs, especially in terms of alienating rehabilitated individuals from violent extremism ideology. For a sake of a success of such programs it is crucial to develop and utilize appropriate indicators.

Additionally, according to experts at a present time it is not possible to talk about an existence of any type of state-run common rehabilitation and reintegration program. It would be more accurate to speak about a set of ongoing measures related to returnees.

An absence of a common program has led to the fact that not a single state body neither in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan (those who returned themselves including individuals convicted in Kyrgyz Republic for terrorist crimes) has a general concept on rehabilitation and reintegration.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

1. Potential for the design, development and implementation of programs on rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

Kyrgyzstan's legislation does not regulate parent-child separation abroad for the purpose of the child's repatriation. Another problematic aspect in the legislation of the Kyrgyz Republic is the public nature of the Consolidated Sanction List, which includes individuals convicted for terrorist and violent extremist crimes, which risks stigmatizing the persons listed and their families.

Legislative treatment of the rehabilitation and reintegration of victims of terrorism remains a pressing issue. Provisions on the rehabilitation of victims of terrorism are often incorporated in legislation without requisite detail and specificity. Legislation of neither country includes provisions on reintegration.

The status of children who lost their nationality is not regulated.

Kazakhstan clearly determines the scope of responsibility of individual stakeholder ministries and agencies, and has a functional interagency coordination mechanism on working with returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. In Kazakhstan, the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the framework of a dedicated working group takes the lead on the oversight and monitoring of rehabilitation and reintegration. Oversight and monitoring of rehabilitation and reintegration activities at the regional level is conducted by local executive bodies. Agency taskings are divided depending on the returnee age:

- The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population leads on general returnee population;
- The Ministry of Education and Science leads on child returnees.

Rehabilitation and reintegration in the Republic of Kazakhstan is conducted through a network of rehabilitation centers, which have prior experience working with people in difficult circumstances. Rehabilitation and reintegration work at all stages involves civil society organizations. At the same time, it remains unclear which state body is responsible for the rehabilitation and reintegration program (comprehensive package of activities) appraisal as a whole.

In Kyrgyzstan, the working group on returns from conflict zones, which was established in 2019, still has not provided a report on its outputs. It remains unclear if, as a result of the working group's activities, returns would be organized and if so, on what terms.

Barriers faced in obtaining information from state authorities in the Kyrgyz Republic for this study are demonstrative of unjustified securitization of the issue at hand. The classified

nature of the activities in question does not permit determining the lead body nationwide on rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees. The working group that has been set up consists exclusively of state representatives. Experts and representatives of organizations working with women and children who have faced difficult circumstances or been victimized by crime did not make the list.

At the same time, neither Kazakhstan nor Kyrgyzstan have mechanisms for training requisite professionals in place. Shortage of professional workforce is extremely acute. Adult-oriented rehabilitation practices in Kazakhstan are mainly implemented through the deployment of theologians, whereas international best practices show that best results with this target group are achieved through using psychologists and social workers.

Capacity limitations of the two countries in the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programming may be due to non-availability of long-term financing. Currently in Kazakhstan these programs are financed through public procurement tenders on an annual basis. In the Kyrgyz Republic, the sources and forms of funding have not yet been determined. Their outsourcing to non-governmental organizations under Kazakhstan's extant legislation implies regular tendering, which puts the sustainability of work with returnees at risk. Funding difficulties are also due to the delegation of reintegration tasks to local authorities: resources allocated to returnee support vary by region, which affects the quality of rehabilitation and reintegration activities.⁵¹ Despite public awareness activities that accompany return operations, there is need for increased public outreach to address local community concerns, misconceptions and misunderstandings.

2. Key challenges, risks and limitations in the implementation of returnee rehabilitation and reintegration programming, implemented by Kazakhstan, are primarily due to the fact that society at large, including local communities, is insufficiently involved in public policy development in this area, especially at the local level.

In Kyrgyzstan, the issue of returns from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq remains on the Government's agenda, and public opinion is taken into account. However, to what extent it will play a part, and if the public's stance may be of decisive importance, is unclear.

Differences between the state and society in the perception of repatriation engenders a number of practical challenges, including, first of all, lack of a public vision: why there is need to return nationals from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, and why their rehabilitation and reintegration must be financed from the state budget. The public is especially sensitive to financial support of returnees from conflict zones (allocation of housing, provision of employment, etc.). This, in turn, risks stigmatizing the returnees, forming an image of a "permanently indebted" person or a "potential threat to host community."

⁵¹ The implementation of the Regulations and Terms of Social Rehabilitation of Child Victims of Terrorism, approved by a decree of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan on 4 September 2020, is expected to present a solution to a vast majority of challenges pertaining to the financing of children's rehabilitation.

A serious challenge for the implementation of returnee rehabilitation and reintegration programming is the failure to address or insufficient addressing of structural socio-economic push factors for their departure from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

This said, some of the risks inherent in the rehabilitation and reintegration programming include the following:

- Stigmatization by society, both of returnees from conflict zones and of their relatives;
- Secondary stigmatization of returnees, including law enforcement pressure;
- Risk of returnee reinsertion in environments where they were originally radicalized or where they found themselves under pressure to travel to conflict zones (including influence by religious groups following radical interpretation of Islam, persistent financial and emotional dependence of women on their families and husbands);
- Potential conflicts between returnees from conflict zones and their families with local communities, possibly to a point where the formers would be expelled from the community (such incidents have occurred in Kyrgyzstan);
- Insufficient volume of state financing of rehabilitation and reintegration programming.

Challenges facing returnee rehabilitation and reintegration programming also involve lack of mechanisms to verify program outcomes in terms of rehabilitation subject disengagement from violent extremism. The approaches in place in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan do not include relevant indicators.

A key aspect in the development of efficient and effective rehabilitation and reintegration programming involving all relevant stakeholders is their planning and content development based on the assessment of risks, challenges and advantages of specific modes of work with returnees. A primary challenge in this respect lies with ensuring maximum individualization and introducing ongoing modifications to achieve specific success metrics. Planning of such programming should also be scenario-based.

The study has determined that in Kazakhstan returns and subsequent rehabilitation and reintegration were launched without a serious preceding expert discussion of in-depth long-term rehabilitation and reintegration actions. All key decisions were made at the top level by the authorities. This has resulted in contradictions in respect of return, rehabilitation and reintegration actions within society and among relevant professionals. Attitudes range from complete rejection of such programs to their unconditional support. Note that similar situations, marked by lack of long-term rehabilitation and reintegration planning, are characteristic also of other countries that have initiated returns, rehabilitation and reintegration of their nationals from conflict zones. This stresses the importance of analyzing lessons learned on returns, rehabilitation and reintegration and using them in future planning.

The public does not have clear idea why the nationals from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq were returned with the assistance from the authorities. This creates room for stigmatizing returnees from conflict zones as “potential threats for host communities.”

Even supporters of state programming cannot justify their stance, and cling to the stereotypical view that the country cannot leave its nationals to their own devices. Even experts lack deeper understanding of the issue, and sometimes do not realize the risks inherent in uncontrolled returns from conflict zones.

The situation in Kyrgyzstan is largely similar. Local authorities and the public are not necessarily supportive of the state policy on returns from conflict zones, and see it as a source of potential security threats. This attitude is reinforced by demonizing everyone with links to terrorists, including their family members. Public trust in state authorities teeters precariously on a brink as far as risk assessment, security guarantees and long-term rehabilitation planning are concerned.

Despite intensive public outreach to support the policy of Kazakhstani national returns from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, its impact proved limited. This is largely due to the focus being disproportionately on returns as such, while the more complex components such as resocialization and reintegration have so far been insufficiently covered. The general public continues to rely primarily on informal communication sources of information (word-of-mouth exchanges with families and neighbors, social media discussions, etc.), which are often dominated by a discourse of fears and perpetuate stereotypes about the returnees, which increases stigmatization risks. There is need for more openness and greater involvement of local communities in activities on returnee rehabilitation and reintegration.

Recommendations

International experience in the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from conflict zones, primarily women and children, has been insufficiently time-tested to determine unequivocal best practices. The analysis of the lessons learned shows that the success of such programming depends on the local context, including the position of both the state and local communities. Moreover, each case is unique and subject to individualized treatment. This approach is applicable not only to the returnees but also to their relatives and the host communities. Successful practices are also contingent on institutional capacities of the state (both centrally and locally), civil society organizations, religious associations, general social sustainability and the potential for socio-economic integration.

The key premise of return, rehabilitation and reintegration programming is the openness of the state to dialogue with all stakeholders concerned, first of all at the level of local communities.

Rehabilitation and reintegration programming targeting returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq may incorporate lessons learned from rehabilitation and reintegration of vulnerable categories, including psychological, religious, social, creative, educational,

vocational, sports and other interventions. The existing lessons learned in rehabilitation and reintegration demonstrate counterproductivity of unidisciplinary approaches, especially those focused on counternarrative propaganda. Moreover, program success depends on the existence and extent of coordination mechanisms, including interagency coordination, state-civil society coordination, and coordination with international intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

The analysis of global experience shows that at this stage the Central Asian states may benefit most from a rehabilitation and reintegration concept based on positive prevention, which implies targeted support at individual and group levels. It is recommended that the focus be on approaches that do not exclusively target deradicalization, but include also support to returnees in overcoming social barriers, psychological trauma (including from exposure to violence), development of social skills, vocational training and language skills, where this is needed to integrate in local communities. In other words, preventive activity, including social reintegration, needs to focus on building knowledge and skills that promote law-abiding behavior in a human value-oriented society.

In order to be effective, the rehabilitation and reintegration approach should incorporate the following elements:

- Long-term character, focus on prevention or resocialization rather than on quantitative success metrics such as the number of events held or participants involved;
- Orientation at local level of project development and implementation, which implies that each community should have its own model of working with vulnerable groups depending on the capacities available (local authorities, NGOs, religious associations) and human resource capacities of the professionals working with returnees;
- Continuous monitoring and tracking qualitative changes at individual, within vulnerable groups and local community level.

This approach implies that the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programming should involve a changed paradigm of state authorities and law enforcement practices in dealing with returnees. Under the current circumstances in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan trust may be substantially increased through collaborative mechanisms, which in turn requires a work-in-progress approach, whereby the stakeholders involved would collectively determine shared interests and objectives (such as local community safety and security); conduct monthly meetings, joint briefings, joint training and workshops with the participation of social workers, NGO representatives, law enforcement and other state authorities, as well as training for religious leaders.

Local communities need to be confident in their social sustainability, which would help address the problems of returnees and the risk of re-radicalization. The fear of negative influence should give way to confidence, which would facilitate the resocialization of those who strayed from the right path. These communities must be prepared and aware

of the fact that their active participation in reintegration processes would result in a win-win situation, where both the community and the returnees would be the winners. The local community needs to be involved in an active player status. In this connection, it is recommended that consensus-building activities involving local population, experts, state officials, and returnees from conflict zones be prioritized.

On the conceptual level, it is recommended that:

- Interagency coordination mechanisms be designed and put in place both among state bodies and between state bodies and local civil society and communities; as well as local context-aware action plans be developed. These mechanisms should have a clearly designated lead, to which all other stakeholders would report. There should also exist a mechanism whereby the lead agency would be accountable to the government and the public and regularly report on the implementation progress and the milestones achieved;
- A system for monitoring and evaluation of rehabilitation, reintegration and violent radicalization prevention programming be developed;
- A mechanism for raising public awareness on nationwide and local strategies and actions on rehabilitation, reintegration and violent radicalization prevention be put in place, which would involve both traditional and social media. Public awareness mechanisms should be context-specific: while in some regions they would involve social networks as communication channels, in other regions it would be local TV or print media;
- Approaches focus on social cohesion and prevention of the stigmatization of specific groups and individuals. Security considerations should not encroach on human rights and the rule of law. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs should clearly indicate the limits of the permissible and the prohibited at the legislative level;
- Capacities of frontline professionals working with individuals and risk groups (corrections officers, social workers, teachers, medical practitioners, psychologists) be built, and programs to build capacities of religious and community leaders be implemented to ensure that they understand the process of violent radicalization, requisite responses as well as risks and challenges inherent in returns, rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals from conflict zones. Considering that such capacity building is taking place in Kazakhstan, there is need to focus more on its quality and effectiveness;
- Strategies be developed and implemented for the systematic involvement in prevention activities targeting returnees of local police, civil society institutions, local community leaders, religious leaders, local community organizers, etc.;
- Effective and efficient communication mechanisms be put in place between all stakeholders in rehabilitation and reintegration processes, result-based management, shared responsibility of stakeholders, gender sensitivity and human rights-based approach be used as a basis to ensure transparent decision making.

On the practical level, the recommendations for change are limited to the Kazakhstani experience, as, unlike its neighbors, it is already implementing its programming, therefore both the strengths and weaknesses of the Kazakhstani approach can be analyzed and assessed. However, the lessons learned may provide inspiration to the Kyrgyzstani authorities in shaping their own programming.

It is recommended that Kazakhstan implement the steps to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its programming:

1. Provide for a clearer, program management cycle-based approach, with clear objectives and expected outputs and outcomes, and supported by detailed work plans broken down by each profession and institution involved in rehabilitation and reintegration.
2. Rigorously appraise performance, which implies the development of performance indicators for each stage.
3. Provide for a clear job description of each professional, first of all for multidisciplinary professions (psychologists, social workers), and ensure seamless working-level coordination.
4. Introduce an interagency coordination mechanism involving all stakeholders in rehabilitation and reintegration processes, through setting up a dedicated working group under the Commissioner on Human Rights and the Commissioner on Child Rights, to promote human rights mainstreaming into rehabilitation and reintegration programs.
5. Implement an evidence-based approach to program development, informed both through program evaluation and conducting regular sociological surveys among returnees from conflict zones and potential host communities. The evidence-based approach should also incorporate taking stock of the activities implemented to identify positive and negative outcomes and their causes.
6. Launch mobile professional teams to ensure nationwide outreach, since not every region where returnees have settled has requisite professional capacities.
7. With regards to the rehabilitation and reintegration programming targeting children, prioritize the development of critical thinking skills rather than theologian-led “religious literacy”.
8. Ensure sustainable long-term financing of rehabilitation and reintegration programming.
9. Prioritize quality and effectiveness in capacity-building activities for professionals, targeting practice-oriented skills in returns, rehabilitation and reintegration. This experience may be helpful also in the development of post-penitentiary probation programming.

On the legislative and regulatory level, the recommendations for both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan include the following:

1. Incorporate in legislative and regulatory acts of detailed provisions on documenting child nationals who reside abroad and are not in possession of documents attesting to their nationality;
2. Incorporate in the national legislations the concepts of rehabilitation and reintegration, which should have not only medical but also social relevance.
3. Revisit the provisions that permit stripping individuals of their nationality for terrorist and/or other crimes, due to their repressive nature and the distance they create between the state and the key issues of national and global security.
4. Develop and adopt through relevant regulations holistic methodologies for age verification, as well as legislate for the presumption of child status in dealing with children in conflict with the law, including those exploited by terrorist groups.



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