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## ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL FORUM FOR EXPERT EXCHANGE ON COUNTERING ISLAMIST EXTREMISM (INFOEX)

InFoEx is a joint project of the Research Center for Migration, Integration and Asylum of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). In the course of 2019 and 2020, InFoEx brings together best practices and scientific findings from tertiary prevention in Germany and abroad. The aim of the project is to gather empirical findings on (de)radicalization processes, with a focus on their practical applicability for deradicalization work. To this end, the BAMF Research Centre initiated a network of research fellows who are embedded at local advice centers and research institutions partnering with the BAMF Advice Centre “Radicalisation.” Together with counselors working in these local advice centers, these research fellows represent the core members of InFoEx.

## ABOUT THE WORKSHOP IN BERLIN, DECEMBER 5-6, 2019

Among the 30 participants were network partners of the BAMF Advice Centre “Radicalisation” from civil society and government institutions, as well as practitioners and academics from Belgium, France, and Germany. To align the workshop with the needs of its stakeholders, research fellows embedded at local advice centers in and at research institutions in Germany shared – in agreement with practitioners at their local advice centers – specific information needs and questions regarding counseling work in tertiary prevention prior to the workshop.

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# Executive Summary

More than 5,000 people have left Western Europe since 2012 to join jihadist organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq (Renard & Coolsaet 2018). By now, about one third have returned to their countries of origin. This illustrates the international dimension of what it means to prevent violent extremism. The group of “IS returnees” is heterogeneous and includes men, women, and children or adolescents. Some have committed crimes while abroad and need to be considered radicalized even after their return. However, due to the difficulty of obtaining evidence, many perpetrators receive only short prison sentences. Dealing with returnees is of great relevance for the field of tertiary prevention of (violent) Islamist extremism<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, it poses new challenges for the actors. Exchanging knowledge at an international level is thus essential to enable an effective and sustainable response.

An international workshop in Berlin in December 2019, which took place as part of the International Forum for Expert Exchange on Countering Islamist Extremism (InFoEx), addressed the issue of reintegrating returnees from Syria and Iraq. The conference was organized by the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in cooperation with the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and included about 30 participants from Belgium, France, and Germany. The workshop offered insights into the importance of having a structured and trusting cooperation between all relevant actors, providing returnees with access to psychotherapeutic treatment, giving children and adolescents special consideration, and working with highly radicalized returnees. This issue paper presents challenges and good practices for each of these aspects discussed during the workshop. The paper also offers practical recommendations from experts and some exemplary projects.

From these findings, the following key recommendations for actors dealing with returnees from Syria and Iraq emerge:

# Key Recommendations

- 1** Strengthen the overall case management and, depending on the case, involve other relevant actors such as teachers or youth welfare offices
- 2** Make the relevant actors, including in particular the staff of youth welfare offices and the prison system, aware of the various issues linked to returnees.
- 3** If needed, enable returnees’ access to psychotherapeutic treatment.
- 4** Take into account the complexity of possible traumas and strengthen long-term protective factors, especially for children and adolescents in puberty.
- 5** Avoid stigmatization, e.g. at school, so as not to hamper reintegration.
- 6** Neither underrate nor overrate female returnees, but take into account commonalities as well as gender-specific differences, for example concerning their role in the structures of the IS.

<sup>1</sup> In the context of InFoEx, tertiary prevention of (violent) Islamist extremism is understood to mean all measures designed to support (violent) extremists in prison and in society in their efforts to leave their milieu, deradicalize, decriminalize, and reintegrate into society.

# Introduction

More than 5,000 people have left Western Europe since 2012 to join jihadist organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) (Renard & Coolsaet 2018). By now, about one third have returned to their countries of origin, which poses unusual and complex challenges. Three aspects are of particular relevance for the field of tertiary prevention of (violent) Islamic extremism<sup>2</sup>: First, in addition to male combatants, there is a relatively high number of women and minors among the returnees, including very young children. Second, many of these people became radicalized while still in Europe and can be considered radicalized even after their return. Some have committed violent crimes or other serious offences in the IS territory. However, in many cases they do not receive long prison sentences because it is so difficult to obtain evidence of their crimes. Third, depending on the country of origin, the laws on criminal liability differ, e.g. for leaving the country to travel into a war-zone, or for joining or supporting a terrorist organization. Countries also have different practical approaches to dealing with returnees.

Clearly, a holistic approach is required for dealing with these returnees; just as clearly, the returnee issue shows that the prevention of extremism has an international dimension. There is a great demand for exchanging views and information about the special challenges in dealing with this group at local, regional, national, and international level and for identifying good practices. This issue paper presents the results of expert opinions and debates from the fourth InFoEx workshop which took place in December 2019 to facilitate the international exchange of knowledge on the reintegration of returnees from Syria and Iraq. Some 30 participants from Belgium, Germany, and France attended the event in Berlin to discuss experiences and good practices. In a needs-based approach<sup>3</sup>, they focused on four main issues: stakeholder cooperation; access to psychotherapeutic treatment as opposed to psychosocial counseling<sup>4</sup>; how to handle children and adolescents; and how to deal with highly radicalized returnees. In addition, the participants identified areas where additional experience and knowledge for dealing with returnees are needed. The paper follows this structure, with each chapter summarizing

the main points of the expert discussion and then providing either practical examples or recommendations for practitioners in the field of tertiary prevention.

## REINTEGRATION – OF WHOM?

Despite the difficulty of collecting reliable data (which may, for example, be due to different national categories or to the uncertainties in war zones), the following figures illustrate the dimension of the issue: According to Thomas Renard of the Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations in Belgium, since 2012 some 5,000 to 5,500 adults have travelled from Western Europe to Syria and Iraq to join a jihadist group, in most cases the IS<sup>5</sup>. A study by Joana Cook and Gina Vale of King's College London shows that between 1,400 and 1,650 minors either were taken by their parents when they left the country or were born in the territory of the IS (Cook & Vale 2019, p.36). Depending on the source, there is evidence of about 500 to 600 minors who were actually born locally.

Based on the available data, experts generally refer to the “rule of thumb” of the three thirds: One third of the European “foreign (terrorist) fighters” (FTF) died; the second third are still in situ (either in captivity or camps in Syria and Iraq or still involved in fighting). Coolsaet & Renard (2019), for example, estimated in October 2019 that about 1,200 people, including at least 700 children, are being held in captivity mostly in Syria (Coolsaet & Renard 2019).

The last third is the group of so-called IS returnees: About 1,800 to 1,900 people have come back to Europe, including almost 200 children and 200 women (Cook & Vale 2019, p.36). There is no agreed definition of either the term “foreign (terrorist) fighter”<sup>6</sup> or “returnee,” which makes it difficult to compare the few data that are available. At the same time, the following aspects illustrate the heterogeneity of this group and the wide range of challenges:

In contrast to other jihadist emigration movements, a relatively high proportion – about 15 to 20 per cent of Western Europeans who joined the IS – is female (Cook & Vale 2019, p.36). As the people leaving were of different ages, there are both adults and minors among the returnees, including young children born in situ. Some of those who left came

<sup>2</sup> In the context of InFoEx, tertiary prevention of (violent) Islamist extremism is understood to mean all measures designed to support (violent) extremists in prison and in society in their efforts to leave their milieu, deradicalize, decriminalize, and reintegrate into society.

<sup>3</sup> To prepare the InFoEx workshop, research fellows embedded with local advice centers were asked to share – in agreement with practitioners – specific information needs and questions on the topic. This input was used to develop the workshop's format and content, as well as to select relevant international speakers.

<sup>4</sup> While psychotherapeutic treatment is a protected term for specially trained professionals who diagnose and treat mental illness, psychosocial counseling refers to counseling in a more general sense, e.g. by social workers, for people in difficult life situations.

<sup>5</sup> Based on explanations given by Thomas Renard at the InFoEx workshop on December 5-6, 2019, in Berlin

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) defines “foreign fighters” as “individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict” (UN Security Council 2014, S.2).

back relatively quickly and were disillusioned; others remain highly radicalized even after their return. The latter include perpetrators acting from conviction who actually wanted to stay in the IS area until their death. Whether a person is considered highly radicalized, whether he or she receives a prison sentence, and whether he or she is interested in exit counseling has an impact on their possible reintegration. It can also be assumed that some of the returnees will need psychotherapeutic treatment.

Proving before a European court that a crime was committed in Syria or Iraq is not easy. It is therefore likely that not all returnees are charged and convicted for the crimes they committed (such as war crimes). In Belgium, for example, according to Thomas Renard, 70 per cent of returnees who could be tried – meaning that they were neither being held in prison in Turkey nor were they minors or had already died – were sentenced to an average of 5.8 (women) and 6.6 (men) years. In France, 113 convicted returnees received an average prison sentence of 7.5 years. Most returnees are not convicted of war crimes but of membership of or support for a terrorist organization, which results in these relatively short prison sentences. In countries such as Sweden and the United Kingdom, fewer people have been convicted to date, for example only 40 of the 400 returnees in the United Kingdom. Moreover, female returnees have been sentenced less often in Europe than male returnees.

There has been a debate in the media as well as in professional circles for several years now about the reasons why women radicalize and decide to join the IS, what role(s) women actually play in the IS structures, and what legal means, for instance in international law, can and should be used in dealing with IS returnees<sup>7</sup>. The question whether returnees hold residency rights or even citizenship also plays an important role. Some European countries, such as the UK, have made use of citizenship revocation schemes.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the political debate also focuses on what to do with the several hundred European (alleged) IS supporters and their children who are still being held in camps of the majority Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Syria or in Iraqi or Turkish prisons, hoping to return to their countries of origin.

In order to deal with this diverse group in a sustainable manner, deradicalization and reintegration measures must complement repressive measures. Tertiary prevention programs and projects thus play an important role.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

by Thomas Renard, Senior Research Fellow, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, Belgium

- Most countries in Europe have developed a relatively robust and comprehensive approach to dealing with returning combatants. However, in several countries, prisons do not seem to be fully prepared for the return of large numbers of women (limited number of places, lack of infrastructure for young children, lack of separation between prisoners, lack of trained staff, etc.). Prisons should prepare as quickly as possible for the possible return of more female foreign fighters, whether they return from Syria on their own or through repatriation procedures.
- Some foreign fighters have already served their prison sentences; others will be released from prison in the coming years. Therefore, monitoring them after their release from prison is very important. This also concerns persons with a suspended sentence or those who have agreed to join an exit program. In this context, the (security-relevant) information should be discussed in joint case conferences involving all relevant actors, including those engaged in exit counseling.
- Recidivism rates for terrorist offenders, including returning combatants, are very low (less than five percent in Belgium)<sup>9</sup>. This figure illustrates the need for tailored and expert approaches for every returnee during and after detention. While a lack of proper monitoring can facilitate further attacks, excessive security measures run the risk of alienating people who are on a positive path to disengagement from radicalism.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Woldin (2020) about the case of Omaima A (Woldin 2020).

<sup>8</sup> See for example Bowcott (2020) in the case of Shamima Begum (Bowcott 2020).

<sup>9</sup> See study by Thomas Renard (2020) on recidivism among terrorist offenders.

## STAKEHOLDER COOPERATION

Relevant actors who work with returnees from Syria and Iraq include security authorities such as police and criminal investigation departments, courts, prison authorities and probation officers, civil society and governmental advice centers and project management agencies, youth and social services, but also psychotherapists and psychologists. Cooperation between these many actors with their different priorities, approaches, and organizational cultures can sometimes be difficult.

### Selection of results from the expert discussions

Cooperation between actors dealing with returnees mostly raised the same challenges as deradicalization work in general. The workshop participants reported that they often needed to address questions of responsibility and competence, coordination, and communication, as well as the flow of information, and the handling of sensitive and personal data. In addition, media reports on current cases of returnees and the perception that no political strategy exists also caused difficulties. Finally, there was a question of sustainability concerning the reintegration of returnees. To meet these challenges, the following approaches were considered helpful after initial experiences in cooperation:

- Establishing and maintaining comprehensive network structures which consist of all relevant actors was especially important to ensure effective cooperation between civil society and official actors at different administrative levels. Some participants found a more hierarchical cooperation to be conducive to achieving the desired results; others were positive about an exchange on an equal footing, e.g. with the social and youth welfare office.
- Establishing a structured information exchange was necessary to create the ability to act confidently and effectively, to identify contact persons, and to clarify responsibilities. One public official reported that after initial coordinating difficulties with the police, the experiences with reporting channels and responsibilities were now very positive. One participant said that case conferences were very helpful as all the actors got to know each other personally which reduced mistrust.
- Expectation management was also considered important. A public official stressed the relevance of a common understanding of issues. To counteract prejudices, for example, the police should be informed about how social workers deal with a case and vice versa.
- In any event, workshop participants said, an individual assessment of each case was necessary to identify the relevant actors and involve them in good time – for exam-

ple when faced with an imminent repatriation. Necessary measures should be discussed before the person concerned was repatriated. In particular, local actors and their specific knowledge, e.g. of the social environment or local peculiarities, should be included.

- Several participants said it was important to raise awareness for the different aspects of the issue. For example, media reports about returnees could be counterproductive for their reintegration. Therefore, relatives should be made aware of the returning process and of ways to deal with the media. One exit counselor also spoke out in favor of making security authorities more aware of the client's development and needs.
- Several participants stressed that special attention should be paid to the social environment (e.g. family, school, or community). If possible, returnees should not return to the same environment, where they might be exposed again to the same dynamics that had led to their radicalization in the first place. One exit counselor spoke about his perception that access to traditional social work, for example drug help or assistance in finding accommodation, was sometimes hampered by reservations about returnees. It was therefore particularly important to involve staff working within such structures – youth welfare offices, social welfare offices, or school boards – in case conferences. In addition, one could make kindergarten places available to returnees for their children, which would facilitate access to the children as well as their possibly radicalized parents (see also Chapter 3).
- Participants also called for a more comprehensive information strategy to explain government measures. This would require a common political line and a structured flow of information between the various departments also at the federal level. The guidelines for dealing with returnees from Iraq and Syria could be considered a first step (see p.17).
- Finally, in addition to case-related meetings, participants called for a regular and institutionalized exchange of information to identify developments and discuss possible responses. In the long term, common approaches and target agreements could be established for example for issues of data protection. One public official noted, however, that it was enough to use already existing (informal) structures and only clarify responsibilities. One exit counselor also expressed satisfaction with the informal communication channels used so far, as they did not create any constraints.

## **EXAMPLE:** INITIAL EXPERIENCES WITH THE PILOT PROJECT RETURNEE COORDINATION

### **by Armin Laaf, Returnee Coordinator in Hesse**

The model project Returnee Coordination was initiated in Germany in 2019 by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. It is financed by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community. In six German states to date (seven from 2020), returnee coordinators act as central information interfaces for actors working with returnees from jihadist combat zones. These include security authorities, civil society organizations, and governmental structures at local, state, and federal level. In Hesse, two returnee coordinators, co-financed by the State of Hesse, are engaged in strategic networking and operational case management. The establishment of resilient networks and the central pooling and coordination of information enables a demand-oriented exchange of information at all levels. It also ensures that cases are handled in a holistic manner that is geared to the individual case. This framework was also tasked with identifying challenges and creating specific expertise.

### **The experience gained so far has led to the following initial approaches:**

- 1.** The Returnee Coordination is engaged in a demand-oriented exchange with all relevant actors; the competences and areas of responsibility of the actors are preserved.
- 2.** It is available to the actors as a central specialist contact at state level, raising awareness of the issues surrounding the returnees and providing support when needed.
- 3.** Stakeholders are involved and informed in a demand-oriented manner to avoid stigmatization. The motto is: as many actors as necessary and as few as possible. Joint meetings make it possible to find out how to deal with different scenarios as well as past and future action planning.
- 4.** Deradicalization measures initiated in individual cases by advice centers are followed up by the returnee coordinators.

The fact that returnee coordinators and network structures provide a central perspective enables multi-professional cooperation from which all case-related actors benefit in terms of content and structure. The returnee coordinators of the different federal states regularly exchange information with each other and with the BAMF, which means that the project is constantly being reflected upon and developed.

## ACCESS TO PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC TREATMENT

According to many stakeholders, ensuring access to psychotherapeutic treatment when needed can play an important role in the rehabilitation of returnees. The workshop participants discussed the following challenges and good practices linked to this issue.

### Selection of results from the expert discussions

Individuals who left Western European countries to join the IS had supported the terrorist organization in various ways. Some were directly involved in organizational structures; others made an indirect contribution to the IS by living in the territory it controlled.<sup>10</sup> From the point of view of one participant, these individuals had become perpetrators, witnesses, and often victims of violence, including massive and ideological violence. It could therefore be assumed that a large proportion of the returnees – men, women, and children or adolescents – were traumatized to varying degrees. This had consequences for their future life, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

At the same time, Germany and many other countries were unable to provide enough psychotherapeutic care for people with complex traumas. According to some participants, there were too few psychotherapists and too few practices, which led to long waiting lists. One participant observed that IS returnees were a new group for most psychotherapists (as well as for social workers) who therefore lacked the necessary experience. Also, the expertise needed for psychological-psychotherapeutic counseling and treatment of people who have been traumatized in war and crisis situations – as perpetrators or victims – was not given enough attention in initial and further training. For this reason, psychotherapists often did not feel confident about treating members of this group and reject them. Shortages in the area of child and youth psychotherapeutic care were perceived as even worse.

The following initial findings and recommendations result from the experiences made so far:

- Much patience was needed to build up access to returnees. Practitioners observed that returnees often could not imagine doing therapy, even though counselors may find it helpful. Outside prison, it was particularly difficult to convince returnees of the benefits of therapy. In prison, access was easier; after some time, the individuals concerned were more likely to agree to therapy. Some returnees also asked for therapeutic support on their own initiative. Counseling centers could help to put returnees into contact with appropriately trained psychotherapists. One counselor reported that many clients talked to her about their personal history for the first time ever. This represented an opportunity to jointly identify the client's need for coming to terms with the situation.
- In many cases, the scope of exit counseling was limited due to the severe traumatization of the person concerned. It might not be possible to deal with the dynamics of radicalization in a biographical context in the beginning. In those cases, the focus should be on stabilizing the person concerned. Stabilization could also be achieved by suitable educational or social education specialists with appropriate expertise, e.g. in a counseling center. According to one participant, psychosocial supporters of returnees should have at least basic knowledge of how to deal with trauma. It was also important for social workers to keep in mind that some returnees had been exposed to multiple traumatic experiences. They did not represent a homogeneous group: In some cases, the experience of having been a perpetrator was mixed with an experience of having been victimized, at least in terms of self-perception.
- Mutually complementary, multi-professional, and interdisciplinary approaches: The S3 guidelines<sup>11</sup> for the treatment of people with post-traumatic stress disorders were supplemented in 2019 to take multiple traumas into account (Schäfer et al 2019). The guidelines emphasized the need for multimodal support. While trauma-focused psychotherapy was the most important element, complementing this therapy with a psychological-educative approach or with social work and family help could be useful. Several German counseling centers already had a psychologist as part of the team; others were in the process of setting up multi-professional teams. An alternative could be to establish a close cooperation, especially with psychotherapists. As psychopharmacological co-treatment might also be necessary, depending on the nature and the severity of the symptoms, cooperation with psychiatrists was an additional option. This would require the use of already established networks and communication channels. Cooperation could thus significantly improve the relationship with the client and ensure that counseling and treatment complement each other.
- According to several participants, creating and expanding specialized networks was important to facilitate cooperation and provide access to the necessary expertise. A round table consisting of representatives of the youth

<sup>10</sup> For the different roles of foreign supporters of the IS, see for example Bakker & de Bont 2016 and Vale 2019.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to the S3 guideline, which deals with the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD, i.e. simple and complex trauma sequelae), an S2K guideline was also developed in 2019, which describes early intervention up to the third month after acute trauma and serves to avoid or prevent symptoms (AWMF 2019, Schäfer et al 2019).

welfare offices, counseling centers, and psychological and psychotherapeutic professional groups could be helpful to reach and involve relevant actors (professional associations, working groups, chambers of psychotherapists, etc.). Counseling centers should also proactively identify contact persons who can be asked for support in specific cases.

- In the view of some participants, the training and continuous education of psychotherapists was also important to reduce uncertainties and ensure the appropriate care. One participant suggested developing a qualification module for dealing with returnee children and adults. Others said that basic training in the field of trauma-focused psychotherapy and trauma-sensitive help for traumatized or ideologized children was also needed. Professional associations for psychotherapists at the national level could offer training and thus create nationwide networks.
- Finally, participants discussed the question of intercultural competence, i.e. to what extent, for example, European psychotherapists had a “Western” understanding of dealing with trauma and therapy. Some participants advocated fostering intercultural and interreligious awareness and training psychologists and psychotherapists in order to develop new approaches to treatment. This would particularly help to reach male returnees, who might otherwise refuse psychotherapeutic treatment because they see it as “unmanly.” In this context, it had proven useful to work with Muslim therapists. In any case, however, the returnee should be free in his or her choice of therapist.

### EXAMPLE: CENTRE FOR EXTREMISM AND PSYCHOLOGY IN GERMANY

**by Kerstin Sischka, psychological psychotherapist**

In Germany, the Centre for Extremism and Psychology has developed a model of cooperation between actors in tertiary prevention and psychotherapists. The projects NEXUS (since 2018) and TRIAS (since 2020) as well as a nationwide network are at the center of this model. Social workers who work with returnees receive advice on their cases. A psychotherapeutic consultation service was set up to give recommendations and, if necessary, psychotherapeutic support to returnees. The center is part of a nationwide network of psychotherapeutic professional associations (such as the German Society for Psychoanalysis, Psychotherapy, Psychosomatics and Depth Psychology (DGPT), which operates more than 50 outpatient clinics in Germany) and contributes to the transfer of knowledge through specialist articles and lectures. Psychotherapists who work with adults, children, and adolescents receive advice from colleagues in the same field.

**According to Kerstin Sischka, the following recommendations and good practices result from the work done so far:**

1. The group of returnees (with children) is heterogeneous, with widely differing biographical experiences and mental health challenges. To provide an individualized treatment offer, a cooperation with the outpatient clinics of psychotherapeutic institutes should be established.
2. Psychotherapeutic care for returnees with children (possibly after their release from prison) should be provided close to the place of residence. Depending on the case, locally established psychotherapists for adults, children, adolescents, or families can provide some help. They should receive advice from colleagues in the field.
3. Psychotherapeutic education and further training should include getting to know the field of “psychotherapy in rehabilitation or distancing and exit support.” Participants should learn to advise and treat clients under supervision. Institutes and outpatient clinic management should support this.

## RETURNED CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN SELECTED EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

4  
UNITED KINGDOM

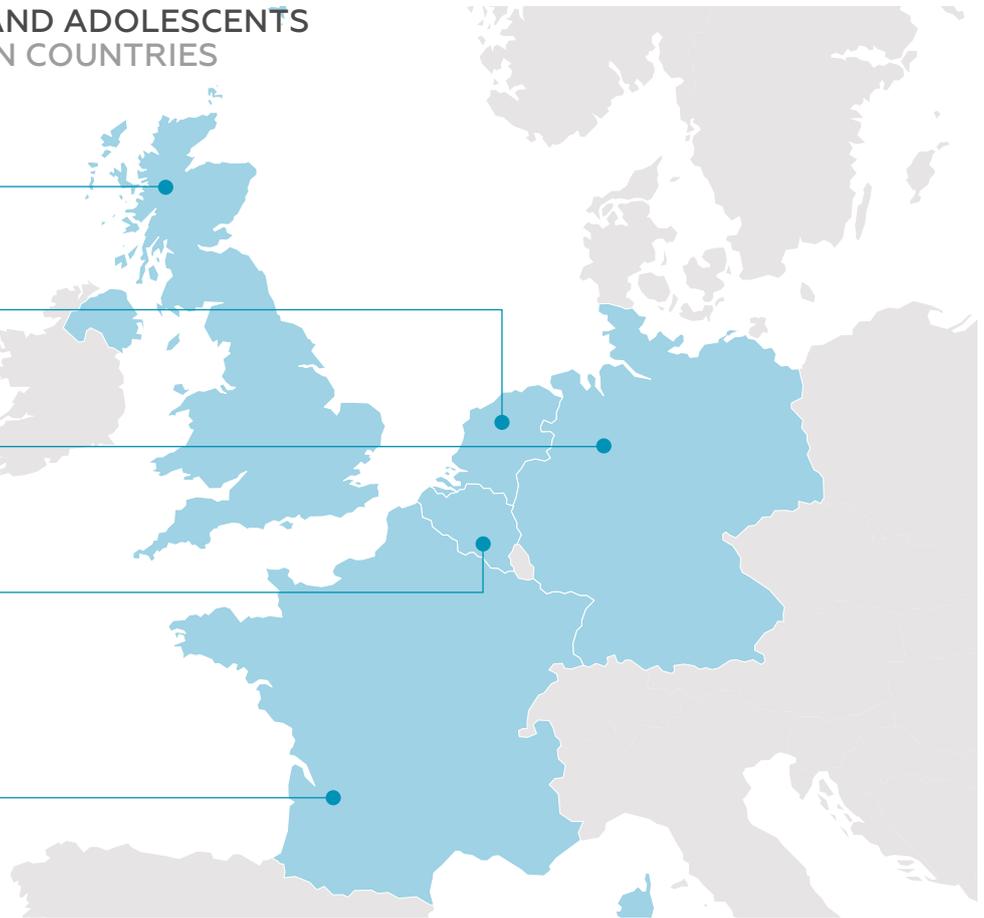
12  
NETHERLANDS

19  
GERMANY

25  
BELGIUM

107  
FRANCE

Status July 2019  
Source: Cook & Vale 2019



## CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

At least 1,400 minors traveled with their parents from Western Europe to Syria and Iraq or were born in the IS territory. By now, almost 200 of them are back in Europe (Cook & Vale 2019, p.6). While some are still with their parents – especially their mothers – many others have been placed in the care of their relatives since their arrival back in Europe. In some cases, the parents died; in others, they were not allowed to leave Iraq or Syria or were remanded in custody upon arrival. Dealing with under-age returnees poses new challenges for prevention work.

### Selection of results from the expert discussions

Some countries, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, have developed support systems for returned children.<sup>12</sup> However, according to one participant, there was often a lack of coordination and of a holistic strategy, meaning too ma-

ny actors were involved, some of whom did not have sufficient understanding of the specific situation of children. Many of the children were traumatized and showed behavioral problems. Some exhibited externalizing (and therefore rather conspicuous) behavior; other children had developed self-protection mechanisms to avoid “trigger situations.” Due to fear (e.g. of (additional) traumatization), they could appear very conformist under certain circumstances, i.e. show avoidance behavior.<sup>13</sup> Counselors also reported that some children were lagging behind in their psychological and physical development, possibly also due to malnutrition. At school, the children were often behind in the beginning because they had not received a comparable school education – if any – during their stay in the IS area.

In addition, the question arose whether these children should be considered radicalized and if they represent a security risk. There are many examples of children who were deliberately indoctrinated with IS ideology during their stay,

<sup>12</sup> In the Netherlands, the Child Care and Protection Board (RvdK) and the National Coordinator for Security and Counter Terrorism (NCTV) have drafted guidelines for dealing with returning minors (RvdK & NCTV 2019).

<sup>13</sup> On this issue, the book „Trauma and Development. Adolescence - Early Traumatizations and their Consequences“ by Annette Streeck-Fischer was recommended (2nd, revised edition from 2014 at Schattauer GmbH).

or of boys who received weapons training from the age of about nine years, sometimes even earlier (see also Vale 2018). A social worker reported that this was also true for some of the children who returned to Germany. According to one researcher, three of the 30 minors returned to Belgium were admitted to juvenile detention centers (mainly as a preventive measure) and have since been released. No crimes or violent incidents had been reported so far, and the children seemed to reintegrate well. However, according to the experience of one advice center, attention from the media and the public could disturb the process of reintegration.

In view of these challenges, should actors such as social workers and employees at youth welfare offices stick with their previous approaches for minors at risk or should they develop measures that are targeted to this group? The following initial findings and recommendations emerge from the experience gained to date in dealing with returned children and young people:

- In dealing with this group, systemic counseling, i.e. counseling of the entire family or entourage, seemed promising. However, many of the families had lost confidence in the authorities, which made it difficult to establish contact with them. Advice centers should first build up trust and communicate that they wanted to offer help to parents and children. Access to mothers was particularly important. One participant pointed out that in order to keep families from being asked the same questions over and over again, the actors involved should coordinate closely with each other.
- In kindergarten or school, teachers should be made aware of the situation. This would make it easier for them to treat affected minors properly, for instance in a situation where reports in the media have led to stigmatization and over-reaction by other children, their parents, or teachers. In the experience of one public official, it was helpful to have a school director take part in case conferences. That way, schools could better understand the problem and receive support to enable them to react appropriately.
- Practitioners should also have a basic understanding of mental health issues, especially in relation to trauma. They should, for example, receive training in dealing with traumatic experiences. It should also be noted that young children who were socialized in the IS area might be re-traumatized by their return. A German returnee coordinator reported that of the few children returned so far, most showed abnormalities. Compared to their peers, many also had deficient gross motor skills due to malnutrition. Such children should be given support by the school system. They should also receive help in the long term to avoid the risk of becoming radicalized at a later stage.
- The gender and age of the child should be taken into account, especially with regard to possible security risks. At kindergarten age, children often only repeated their parents' statements; access to these parents became even more important. In addition, according to a German counselor, it would make sense for the Youth Welfare Office to treat children of returnees separately from their other cases. For example, the Office should take into account whether a child had been in a war zone and had been using a gun. It was important to raise awareness and train the staff of the Youth Welfare Offices and judges. While one participant mentioned that it might be possible to draw on experience in dealing with former child soldiers, no concrete example was given.

## EXAMPLE: COUNSELING NETWORK GRENZGÄNGER (IFAK E.V.) IN GERMANY

**based on an interview with Dr. Vera Dittmar (Deradicalization Research Unit/FORA) and Nina Jacobs (trauma therapist)**

Grenzgänger is a counseling network which currently has an eight-member team accompanying twelve children aged between 1 and 13 who have returned from Syria and Iraq. The organization bases its systemic counseling work with returned children on an appreciative attitude. A wide range of methods gradually promotes trust in the counselors and strengthens the children's self-confidence. Since some of them have school deficits, the counselors prepare an individual screening. As a result, the counselors can offer help in dealing with schools, kindergartens, and official bodies and make additional support available, which will make the children more resilient. This positive development, as well as the increasingly close relationship with the counselors, often also enables better access to parents.

**In addition to promoting development, the program aims to support the distancing from an extremist ideology. Often, parents are only open to this after a longer period of adjustment. In its work, Grenzgänger made the following experiences:**

**1.** In all cases, cooperation with the Youth Welfare Office was open and productive. The Grenzgänger counselors indirectly support the activities of schools and kindergartens by boosting the children's resources. This helps

the children act in an emotionally stable manner within these organizations. After consultation with the parents, the counselors do not reveal the children's past in the IS to preempt stigmatization processes. However, any new experiences that the children make outside the family context are closely monitored during the counseling process.

**2.** Parents are often skeptical about therapeutic treatment of their children. They fear, among other things, that the child might pass on information relevant to criminal investigations. Counselors therefore explain the advantages of the treatment in detail. So far, the treatment of traumas and referrals to experts have worked well. In addition, trauma therapy with relatives can represent a protective factor for the children.

**3.** The older the children are, the more likely they are to have adopted an extremist ideology. It is helpful to talk to the children empathically about their and one's own values and to provide them with food for thought.

**4.** In contrast to their parents, children do not represent a security risk. However, difficult identity-finding processes can occur during puberty. Therefore, strengthening the children's protective factors is an important long-term task of counseling.

For a successful reintegration of returnee children, socio-pedagogical counseling is important. It can help to stabilize the children emotionally, to show them alternatives to their previous experiences within the IS, and to strengthen their resilience against extremist tendencies.

## HIGHLY RADICALIZED RETURNEES

In addition to the difficulties mentioned so far in dealing with returnees from Syria and Iraq, some cases are particularly challenging for tertiary prevention. These include returnees who are considered highly radicalized and who refuse to cooperate with governmental and civil society actors.

### Selection of results from the expert discussions

The workshop participants started out by discussing how to gain access to highly radicalized returnees. Cooperation with persons outside the prison system was proving to be particularly difficult for advice centers. The question also arose of how to use risk assessment tools to identify highly radicalized returnees. While some participants were primarily interested in assessing the “danger to society,” others focused on identifying a “person in danger.” One employee of an advice center also said that while the result of a risk assessment was in fact relevant to the consultation, it was important to approach the process as impartially as possible. Finally, several participants emphasized that the greatest security risk comes from people who were prepared to use violence. These individuals did not necessarily need to be highly ideological.

Counselors doing exit work faced particular challenges when dealing with highly radicalized female returnees. A counselor reported from France that female returnees, who had been proven guilty of crimes, now received similar prison sentences to men (in contrast to Germany). The number of female inmates in French prisons had increased from two to 22. However, due to the lack of appropriate infrastructure, it was often not possible to isolate highly radicalized female inmates, as several European countries did in the case of male inmates.

Based on previous experience in dealing with male and female highly radicalized returnees, the following findings were discussed during the workshop:

- In general, patience and empathy were of great importance. According to one counselor, this was especially true when dealing with people with a so-called “fused identity,” who perceived their own and their group’s identity as one.<sup>14</sup> In this counselor’s experience in prison, such persons initially used a specific narrative to portray themselves in the way they would like to see themselves. Little by little, however, this story began to show cracks, and a reflection on the person’s self-representation became possible. A German advice center reported that the first contact with potential clients was usually established by the prison staff. However, it was left to the inmates to decide whether and when to take advantage of counseling. Experience showed that some individuals did not want to talk to the counselors initially but would contact them after a few months. The willingness to seek counseling depended on their reason for returning to Germany.
- Concerning risk assessment, one participant said, it was necessary to weigh up how the information would be used. Another participant reported that he included the results of the risk assessment (VERA-2R) in his work with clients, because he considered them a useful tool for addressing personal risk factors. An important part of distancing work was to make clients understand why society considers them to be dangerous. A transparent approach to risk assessment could be helpful in this regard. In the view of one counselor, the most important factor for successful exit counseling was the attitude of the person concerned: whether he or she was intrinsically motivated to change his or her ideological convictions. In the view of one public official, the obligation to participate in an exit program could nevertheless be a starting point for building a relationship of trust. One participant recommended to take a wider view of the problems of extremist prisoners. Beyond the ideological issues, they should be integrated into regular programs (e.g. anti-violence or anti-aggression training). Meetings with other people with similar problems could prove very helpful.
- In the beginning, one should focus not on examining the ideology, but rather on stabilizing the person concerned. Several counselors agreed, for example, that clients could neither permanently dissimulate nor fake their motivation to participate in the long term. Counselors should always communicate this transparently when preparing reports and expert opinions.
- Furthermore, it depended on the case whether group or individual discussions were more useful. One counselor recommended integrating radicalized persons into treatment groups whenever possible. Giving extremist prisoners special treatment could gain them the displeasure of other prisoners. At the same time, this counselor recommended one-on-one interviews if a group held only one highly radicalized person who might be monopolizing attention. Inmates, who were considered radicalized, were often not allowed much interaction. They therefore tended to perceive every opportunity for conversation as positive, which opened opportunities to build up a relationship. Counselors should communicate transparently from the outset that they did not work for the judiciary or the secret service but had to report on the conversation. French returnees or people who were arrested on their way to Syria had to

14 For the term “fused identity,” see for instance Gómez et al 2017.

participate in an assessment group, for example. They were aware that their sentence could be more severe if they did not participate in counseling.

- Once returnees were released from prison, counselors' experience showed that the persons affected were faced with major difficulties because of the wide array of programs and competences. While competences often ended "at the prison door," it was particularly important for returnees to ensure that counseling was continued outside prison. At the very least, there should be a handover to make sure that existing progress could be built on.
- In the experience of several counselors, highly radicalized returnees were particularly difficult to reach outside prison. One possibility could be to establish contact with family or friends and thus reach out to the relevant person. In the opinion of one counselor, there was usually at least one person in the potential client's environment who would like to support the exit process. Talking to this person could thus be a starting point.
- There were additional difficulties in dealing with highly radicalized female returnees, especially since in Germany, for example, they usually received no or only short prison sentences. Many of these women returned home with children, but in German prisons, children were only allowed to remain with their mothers until the age of three. Even outside the prison system, returnees could lose custody of their children or be denied contact with them. Such a separation between mother and child, according to participants, could lead to severe emotional and psychological strain. In contrast, in cases where children remained with their mothers, access to returnees could be built up through support in dealing with schools and authorities (see also Chapter 3).
- When offering exit counseling to returnees outside the prison system, one German advice center had decided to give the client the choice between counseling by a man or a woman. To be accorded such a choice was seen as positive by the clients. In the experience of one counselor, women with a traditional image of the family tended to choose a male counselor.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

by Mathieu Nicourt, Interregional Directorate of the Paris Prison Service, France

- Take into account the returnee's search for identity, i.e. the need to feel part of a community, even if this community is not the community of origin. Help the returnee identify and understand particularities and deal with identity in relation to the country of residence.
- Consider the returnee's quest for meaning, for example the desire to fight for something that is considered important and noble. Help the returnee find motivating and valuable goals within society.
- Consider the returnee's need to find and appreciate his or her place in society. Help the person to find an area or areas where he or she can excel and receive recognition for his or her abilities.

## FURTHER NEEDS CONCERNING THE REINTEGRATION OF RETURNEES

In dealing with returnees from Syria and Iraq, the actors of tertiary prevention may be faced with further questions. In the course of the workshop, participants were given the opportunity to point out deficits and requirements that were considered essential for sustainable counseling and reintegration of returnees. This can be considered a step towards talking about needs in a transparent way and jointly developing practical solutions.

### Selection of results from the expert discussions

The situation of refugees or persons without German citizenship was described as particularly complex. Without an assured residence status and livelihood in Germany, they would find life much more difficult. This could create additional hurdles for counseling and possibly increase the risk of renewed radicalization. In dealing with this particular group, the legal base for both counselors and returnees was not always transparent and should therefore be clarified before the start of an intervention, if possible.

According to several participants, establishing sustainable access to returnees was the greatest challenge as well as the key to successful prevention work. Counselors could only influence the process of deradicalization if they could establish a positive relationship with the returnees. Counseling should be voluntary, so that returnees could speak without feeling pressured. Asking questions was considered helpful to learn more about the motivation for radicalization and return. In the counseling process, biographical methods (“biography work”) were important to understand what had happened in the life of the person concerned. The essential questions were those that encourage reflection, such as “Why am I here at this point in my life?” One German counselor said that access to potential clients was usually easier in prison. There, she could build up a relationship with the client that could be continued voluntarily after the person had been released. Outside of prison, she said, it was not always clear to those affected why they should go to a counseling service. Furthermore, counseling should under no circumstances end with release from prison. It should be understood as a process and ideally be continued by the same counselor.

The point in time when contact to a returnee was established was also considered relevant for the counseling process. It should be done as soon as possible. If, for example, the advice center did not contact the returnee immediately after his or her return but only two months later, it would be difficult for that person to understand the reason for the contact. Therefore, it was also considered important to ex-

plain why an intervention was being offered. This was particularly true for women who were not in prison and therefore saw no reason for counseling.

Dealing with media reports and making journalists aware of the issues linked to returnees continued to be an important issue (see Chapter 1). Several projects were mentioned in this context: Monash University in Australia (under the direction of Virginie André) and the Egmont Institute in Belgium organized an exchange for representatives of security authorities and the press, which was positively received by both sides. The aim was to improve mutual understanding, e.g. with regard to the impact of rumors. Another example was a planned new master’s degree course in Belgium, which trains journalists in reporting on topics such as terrorism, foreign fighters, and the effects of stigmatization. Reference was also made to the UNESCO Handbook on Terrorism and the Media for Journalists (Marthoz 2017).

Further needs were identified which also generally apply to tertiary prevention work: quality standards (e.g. for cooperation in the network through clearly structured case management and information exchange); training or further training on Islamist (de)radicalization (also e.g. for actors in youth welfare and the prison system); security measures for social workers (e.g. if they have to testify as witnesses in court or are threatened by their client or his or her acquaintances and relatives), cultural or linguistic access to the client (since, for example, many advice centers did not have counselors who speak Farsi or Kurdish); and sustainable access to resources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

by Feride Aktaş, Violence Prevention Network, Germany

- Counselors always need a concrete assignment and a basis to be able to get in contact with so-called index persons
- Counselors cannot take over the tasks of the security authorities and do “investigative work.” It is important to define roles, competences, and also responsibilities together with the other stakeholders involved in a case.
- Counselors should not lose sight of the pedagogical objective of “enabling the persons concerned to be independent.”

### EXAMPLE: GUIDELINES FOR A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO RETURNEES IN GERMANY

Milena Uhlmann from the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community (BMI) presented the ministry's guidelines for a holistic approach to returnees. These guidelines were developed against the background that for about half of the persons who have returned to Germany, there were concrete indications that they had taken part in hostilities and continued to pose a security risk. Yet there was not sufficient evidence to prosecute many of these individuals. Also, it was understood that one could not deal with these individuals by repressive measures alone. Therefore, measures of deradicalization and reintegration had to be included and applied. To this end, cooperation with other relevant actors – authorities at the state and local level, such as youth, social, school, health, and local police authorities – had to be promoted.

Following the conference of interior ministers at the state and federal level in autumn 2018, the Federal Ministry of the Interior, in cooperation with the Länder, drew up "Recommendations for sustainable, interdisciplinary and cross-actor cooperation in dealing with returnees in a holistic manner" (BMI 2019, p.2). According to these guidelines, returnees were categorized according to their risk assessment and whereabouts and the associated priorities for action. For example, a distinction was made between persons who had already returned and persons whose return might be imminent. Furthermore, the special needs of children and adolescents had to be given special consideration, and these cases needed to be treated with great sensitivity. The guidelines also defined the roles of the actors, including participating authorities at the federal and state level, governmental structures at the state and local level, and actors responsible for deradicalization and intervention work. Depending on the actors involved, there was a recommendation for specific approaches and the coordination and monitoring of measures. The guidelines thus complemented other measures such as the model project "Returnee Coordination" (see p.8). The aim of the guidelines was to raise awareness of the actors responsible for dealing with returnees. In addition, they served as an impulse for the federal states to develop practical guidelines of their own.

## Conclusion

The people who left Europe to join jihadist organizations in Syria and Iraq and have now returned – or intend to return in the foreseeable future – present a wide variety of challenges, some of them new, to those involved in tertiary prevention. Above all, the heterogeneity of this group calls for intensive and trusting cooperation between the relevant stakeholders to find the appropriate measures to support these persons in their deradicalization, distancing, decriminalization, and reintegration. Dealing with this group is even more difficult since there is still relatively little empirically based knowledge about the processes of radicalization and, above all, deradicalization among returnees. At the same time, politicians and society have high expectations of prevention. As a result, the reintegration of returnees is a European, if not international challenge that many countries will have to face for the foreseeable future. The answer, many actors say, does not necessarily lie in developing new methods. They consider it much more important to establish networks between existing projects and initiatives in Germany and Europe to exchange information and find the right answers together.

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