DGAP REPORT

InFoEx Workshop, April 21-22, 2021

Issue Paper:
Women and Minors in Tertiary Prevention of Islamist Extremism

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and Teuta Avdimetaj

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

InFoEx is a joint project of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and the Research Center for Migration, Integration and Asylum of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). InFoEx brings together good practices and scientific findings from tertiary prevention of (violent) Islamist extremism in Germany and abroad. The aim of the project is to compile empirical findings on radicalization and deradicalization processes with a focus on their practical applicability for prevention work. To this end, the BAMF Research Centre initiated a network of research fellows, called FoPraTEx, 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, the FoPraTEx research fellows represent the core members of InFoEx.

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP ON APRIL 21-22, 2021

The 8. InFoEx workshop in the spring of 2021 focused on work done with women and minors in tertiary prevention of Islamist extremism. The ongoing restrictions imposed because of COVID-19 made it necessary to organize the workshop in a virtual format. Among the almost 30 participants were network partners of the BAMF Advice Centre on Radicalisation from civil society and government institutions as well as practitioners and academics from Germany, Kosovo, the United Kingdom, and Sweden. To align the workshop with the needs of its stakeholders, research fellows embedded at local advice centers and at research institutions in Germany (FoPraTEx) shared – in agreement with practitioners at their local advice centers – specific information needs and questions prior to the workshop. At the workshop, participants were able to share their experiences and views of the challenges and good practices concerning their work with women and minors, for example returnees from Syria and Iraq.

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Executive Summary

Over the past years, the role of gender issues in addressing and preventing Islamist extremism has received increased attention. Since the fall of the 'caliphate' of the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS), most of the returnees to Western European countries have been women who had joined ISIS and other Jihadist organizations. Many travelled with children who had been brought along on the initial journey or who were born abroad; a few women also returned pregnant. In many cases, the husband and father did not accompany them because he had reportedly been killed, was detained, or had vanished.

Working with women and minors, especially returnees, has become one of the main challenges for actors in tertiary prevention of Islamist extremism. To address this challenge, this issue paper presents the results of a workshop of the International Forum for Expert Exchange on Countering Islamist Extremism (InFoEx) in April 2021. The workshop was organized by the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in cooperation with the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and its governmental and civil society network partners. Practitioners, researchers, and public officials from Germany, Kosovo, the United Kingdom, and Sweden came together to discuss key challenges and good practices when working with women and minors. Special emphasis was given to returned women and minors as well as women in prison.

The findings lead to the following key recommendations for those working with women and minors:

Key Recommendations

1 Take a gender-specific approach to tertiary prevention of Islamist extremism.

2 Think about which radicalization and deradicalization factors differ according to gender and which do not.

3 Improve facilities in penitentiary institutions to allow regular contacts between parents and their children, which will help rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

4 Assist statutory bodies like youth welfare offices in developing expertise concerning former Islamist extremists, especially with regard to separating children from their parents.

5 Consider speeding up procedures that have an impact on children, for example pre-trial detention or decisions about child custody.

Introduction

Over the past years, the role of gender issues in Islamist extremism and its prevention has received increased attention (for example Sjoberg 2018, Cook & Vale 2018, Pearson & Winterbotham 2017). In particular, the realization that 15 to 20 percent of Western Europeans who joined the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq were women has focussed attention on the role of women in extremist structures (Cook & Vale 2019, p.36).[1] Also, between 1,400 and 1,650 minors were either taken by their Western European parents to Syria and Iraq or were born there (ibidem). Actors in tertiary prevention of Islamist extremism[2] now not only have to address cases of minors in Islamist and Salafist families but are often faced with cases of returning women and children.

As of 2021, significantly much more is known about women's radicalization, deradicalization, and disengagement as well as about children raised by extremist parents than several years ago (RAN 2019a,b, 2021, Weine et al 2020). While many actors, from law enforcement officers and prosecutors to civil society social workers, are developing a more nuanced view of these groups, practitioners[3] from several countries agreed at the workshop that there still was a need for more sensitivity. Some stressed that there was little difference between men and women regarding the mechanisms of recruitment, retention, and mobilization. For example, a general unhappiness with the status quo in combination with personal grievances, which can drive a person to seek self-empowerment, were considered radicalization factors for both men and women. However, extremist organizations tended to use different issues and locations for recruiting men or women. While either sex would be promised appreciation, women might be targeted for example with narratives around motherhood or emancipation from Western social expectations. Also, while men and boys were mostly approached by recruiters in public spaces, women and girls would often be recruited through online platforms like chat groups. Differences were also apparent between men and women who had been convicted of crimes: After release, female convicts had higher unemployment rates and were most often the ones having to deal with child custody issues (RAN 2019b). Both differences and similarities between

men and women must thus be considered for tertiary prevention to be effective.

Since the military defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, it is mostly women who have returned or will return to their countries of origin in Europe. Many travel with children, having either brought them along on their initial journey or given birth abroad. In many cases, the husband and father is not with them, because he has reportedly died, been detained, or simply vanished. Finding ways of effectively dealing with these returnees is one of the main challenges concerning women and minors in tertiary prevention of Islamist extremism (RAN 2021).

This issue paper presents the results of an InFoEx workshop in April 2021, where practitioners, researchers, and public officials from Germany, Kosovo, the United Kingdom, and Sweden discussed their experiences in dealing with women and minors in tertiary prevention. The first three chapters summarize their insights into challenges and good practices, including from their work with women returning from Syria and Iraq and women in detention. The fourth and fifth chapter focusses on (returned) minors.

Some of these challenges and good practices apply specifically to returnees, others are more widely relevant to women and minors in tertiary prevention. While this paper does not go into the more general aspects of exit work, practitioners did mention some good practices that are not exclusive to dealing with women. Finally, it is not always easy to decide when to discuss women and their children together and when to address their cases separately. While this paper discusses both women and minors, it is important to stress that they are of course distinct groups which raise different issues.

Before going into the challenges and good practices that were discussed during the workshop, it is important to look at recent research on the role of women and children affiliated with the ISIS and what it means for tertiary prevention.

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1   See Koller (2020) for an overview of challenges and good practices regarding reintegration of returnees from Syria and Iraq in general.

2   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 milieus, deradicalize, decriminalize, and reintegrate into society.

3   In this context, "practitioners" are understood to mean all those who have hands-on experience from working directly with (potential) clients, for example as exit counselors from a governmental or civil society advice center, employees of a youth welfare office, or probation officers.

THE INTERGENERATIONAL THREAT POSED BY WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE ISLAMIC STATE

by Dr. Gina Vale, Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), King's College London, United Kingdom

The territorial collapse of Islamic State's (IS) 'caliphate' in 2019 has drawn a second wave of scholarly and policy attention to the thousands of (foreign) women and minors affiliated with the group. Once described as naïve schoolgirls 'lured' by recruiters or as 'coerced' wives forcibly taken to Syria by their husbands, headlines now refer to these women as 'terror widows' and 'jihadi mums' to children viewed as 'ticking time bombs.' What has changed? How has research shed light on the activities and roles of these women and their children, and what are the implications for response efforts?

One factor in this linguistic shift is the acknowledgement of women's agency. Research has elucidated the motivating factors in their radicalization and shown that women are driven to extremist movements (across the ideological spectrum) for reasons beyond the purely personal or emotional. The social media accounts of IS-affiliated women reveal their desire for belonging and adventure or even a thirst for vengeance and ideologically justified violence.

Women have held diverse roles to support IS. Enlisted as medics, teachers, bureaucrats, and internal policing officers, women were integral to the group's state-building efforts. Moreover, from October 2017, women's activism also evolved to active combat. Scholarly debate ensues as to the motivations for IS women's operationalization, with arguments ranging between empowerment and tactical desperation. Irrespective of the reasons for their militancy, battle-hardened women must now be recognized as a credible security threat.

However, IS' strict anonymizing female dress code and exclusion from official propaganda has left little evidence of individual women's activities within the group's territory. Many of the women now detained in camps in North-eastern Syria echo IS' narrative of the primary role for women: They were 'just housewives.' Whilst this explanation is currently employed as a line of defense, women were and continue to be critical to the intergenerational challenge posed by IS because of their domestic roles, particularly through procreating and populating the 'caliphate.'

The family unit plays a prominent role in indoctrination, education, and informal recruitment. Exploiting the bonds and trust between relatives, ideological teachings and behavioral norms frame family life and the upbringing of young children. Unlike cases of child soldiering, youth within IS were raised as active contributors to the group's newly fashioned society in highly gendered roles. Girls were deemed eligible for marriage from the age of nine years, and their education centered on homemaking and preparation for motherhood. Desensitized to violence through military training from a young age, boys were raised as combatants, weapons manufacturers, and even executioners.

Now in detention, women and children face the short-term consequences and stigma of their IS affiliation. As authorities seek to leverage national and international legal tools to prosecute members, a significant challenge regarding IS-affiliated women is to reach the evidentiary threshold for conviction. To overcome this, authorities need to diversify their sources. One possibility is the testimony of local communities which interacted with IS-affiliated women directly. While many Iraqis and Syrians may never achieve justice for individual crimes or wrongs committed by IS-affiliated persons, the provision of public testimony would facilitate important truth-telling and give them international recognition of their experiences and suffering.

Two years after the collapse of the 'caliphate,' inaction is damaging. The camps are the site of a large-scale humanitarian crisis, with occupants suffering poor sanitation and security, limited educational opportunities, and high infant mortality rates. In order to prevent further indoctrination of children, their welfare and developmental needs should be prioritized. In practice, this means removing children from an insecure environment and an echo-chamber of IS' ideology and ensuring that they have the right psychological, educational, and social support and tools to turn away from the malign influence of IS.

Working with women in tertiary prevention

In general, several practitioners said they found it more difficult to engage with potentially radicalized women than with men. As women received prison sentences less often than men, access tended to be more difficult. The women were also facing greater social stigmatization for having been involved in political violence, especially in countries with a strongly patriarchal society like Kosovo (see also RAN 2019b).

A family of origin that is dysfunctional or overwhelmed by its relative's return could also have a negative influence on reintegration efforts. Women who were still living with their family might have to look for a new place to stay, creating additional instability. Finally, returning women, like former sect affiliates, would sometimes lift narratives of exit processes from books or other media and adopt the self-perspective a victim would have.

The following good practices were shared by participants regarding tertiary prevention work with women:

• **Do not make it a rule that only women should counsel women.** Several practitioners argued that it depended on the case whether the counselor should be female or male, and that in most cases, a male counselor would not hinder the counseling process but might actually prove beneficial.
• **Differentiate between women's roles** and check whether your client had a more active role (for example 'power woman') or behaved in a more passive way ('follower'). In Kosovo, for example, many men were able to pressure their wifes to travel with them more easily, since women were often financially dependent. In other countries, most women were not forced to travel with their husbands but accepted to accompany them or even decided to join extremist groups on their own. Practitioners also stressed that extremists used different narratives to target women according their regional and local background.
• **Support women in making a clear cut with their former online life.** As many women were recruited by other women in female online chat groups, it could be helpful to stay off-line, delete personal accounts, and get a new mobile phone number. This could help create a distance during the exit process, which is a time of particular vulnerability.
• **Work on your clients' understanding of women's social roles in society.** It was considered crucial to strengthen the women's self-esteem and self-confidence, especially when working with young girls or when providing counseling for couples. Counselors that helped start a process of reflection on abuse and injustices were then in a good position to also reflect with the client on radicalization.

Working with returned women

According to counselors, the cases of women who had travelled to Syria and Iraq and returned or might return to their home country tended to be especially complex and presented a specific set of challenges.

Several practitioners agreed that the longer women stayed in the Kurdish-administered camps Al Hawl or Al Roj in North-eastern Syria, the more they started thinking of themselves in terms of victims. In addition, when formally indicted of looting some argued that they had had no choice when their husbands or the ISIS administration decided to move them into a house or apartment belonging to a local family. Some also complained that they were now being treated as criminals when they had only stayed at home or indeed had been raped by their husbands. Several practitioners reported that the camp experiences contributed to some of the women thinking of 'the West' and their country of origin as their main enemy instead of seeing only the Kurdish camp administration in such terms. Many female returnees felt treated unfairly, which made it difficult to establish a counseling relationship. In addition, German practitioners reported that ISIS networks still existed both in the camps and in Germany and tried to prevent 'sisters' from disengaging and deradicalizing.

Other challenges related to criminal prosecution. While counselors were concerned about stabilizing the returnees' psychological state, prosecution authorities were reportedly pushing to have female returnees interrogated as soon as possible. Investigations were often complicated, which meant that women could be spending years waiting to be charged or tried with a possible prison sentence "hanging like a Sword of Damocles over their heads." In this situation, according to practitioners, it could be impossible for clients to achieve the degree of stabilization necessary to engage in exit work. Establishing a relationship of trust with a counselor was also made difficult, since counselors might be obliged to testify against their own clients in court. In some countries, for example in Kosovo, most female returnees tended to receive probation sentences, making it more difficult for counselors to gain access to them. Female returnees who were not placed in custody often did not see any point in getting counseling.

Practitioners also reported that if a woman did not receive support from her family, or if she went back to the same situation that had pushed her to leave the country in the first place, there was a real danger that she might turn to ISIS networks as a 'substitute family' again. At the same time, supporting a relative by transferring money to the camps in Northern Syria could be considered to constitute support for a terrorist organization. Counselors said that such "criminalization of families" was counterproductive for their work. The same was true if the family home was searched in connection with criminal investigations of the returnee.

In addition, several practitioners argued that many of the women they were in contact with were overwhelmed by the demands of a modern Western society. Given their difficulties in finding a place in that society, the narratives and the clear attribution of male and female roles in extremist groups like ISIS were attractive to them. After their return, they were likely to experience new difficulties concerning their role in society. Female returnees were often also interested in working with children or in the social sector, but given their background, it was highly unlikely that they would be given such jobs.

Finally, negative experiences stemming from media coverage or state and non-governmental actors could also lead women to be reluctant about participating in exit counseling. Then again, certain women were simply not willing to disengage and deradicalize. As they represented a potential security risk, some practitioners were reluctant to work with them.

Apart from recommending a sensitive and individualized approach, the following good practices were identified to adequately address cases of returned women:

• **Establish contact**[4] **with the woman and/or her family before her return.** While phones were normally forbidden in the camps in North-eastern Syria, counselors were in some cases able to establish an initial contact with the woman, communicating on WhatsApp or SMS either directly or via their family. According to the workshop participants, the woman's family would usually be overwhelmed by the situation, and counselors were often the only contact the women had outside the camp. A researcher reported that it had been very helpful to do a needs assessment prior to a woman's repatriation with her family members in Kosovo in order to understand specific challenges and

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4   Some counselors recommended the following practices to establish contact and a relationship of trust with potential clients: 1) listen without judging, 2) let the client talk about things that interest and fascinate her, 3) focus on positive aspects and follow up on them, 4) irritate with questions and generate doubt regarding the extremist worldview, 5) stay authentic as counselor and 6) accept setbacks in the counseling process and learn from them.

needs. It also helped if a woman knew that the counselor was helping her parents. Many female returnees wanted to return to a normal life as soon as possible but were quickly overwhelmed by the situation back home. It was considered important to have offers of intensive counseling immediately available to counter extremist groups which were also interested in re-engaging with returning women.

• **Understand the woman's situation at the time of her return**, for example whether she is alone or accompanied by her husband and/or her children. Workshop participants added that counselors also needed to understand the general nature of the person's relationships and to know whether she had experienced (sexual) abuse. A female German psychotherapist stressed that it was important not to generalize and to assume that "everyone needed psychotherapy." Yet in some cases, it had proven helpful to proactively offer mental health support to women who might not actively seek out this kind of help. Ultimately, starting therapy should be part of a bottom-up process and based on a relationship of trust. It should take place if the client was suffering from psychological instability and was motivated to undergo treatment.

• **Make stabilization the priority.** Several practitioners stressed that it was beneficial to give a recently returned woman some time to process her return as well as the possible separation from her children or the reunion with her family. She should be provided with pragmatic support, for instance to access documents such as birth certificates, DNA evidence, or proof of paternity. The (re)building of a social existence and some planning for the future were also important first steps. Once a relationship of trust had been established, the actual disengagement work would ideally be provided by the same actor who had helped the woman in the beginning.

• **Work with the whole system.** Several practitioners had positive experiences working with both parents of the returned woman, if that was possible and the woman desired it. In many cases, relatives could be an important positive influence. However, a family with a very control-oriented attitude was considered a risk factor. Having a daughter who had left home to join ISIS could cause tensions. Systemic counseling was mentioned as a good approach to understanding the complex roles of a returned woman within her social environment. Often, the whole family needed support to address trauma.

• **Develop a realistic future perspective:** It was considered important to manage the returnee's expectations and frustrations as institutions working with children or in the social sector were unlikely to accept her job applications. Such women needed help to develop alternative and more realistic plans.

Prison management for (returned) women

While the penitentiary process itself does not differentiate between women and men in European countries,[5] participants reported that they could draw on far fewer experiences when working with potentially radicalized women than with male inmates. A female German practitioner observed that female returnees tended to be much more "reserved and better adapted to their environment" than other female inmates. Prison staff tended to have difficulties interpretating this behavior and would hesitate to engage with these women.

Prevention counselors also stressed that during the lengthy period of pretrial detention, they could not discuss any aspects with their clients that might be relevant to the investigation to avoid a situation where they would have to incriminate the client. Counselors could be caught in a role conflict if a court called on them to conduct disengagement talks with a client as they could still be obliged to give testimony about their client. Obviously, this would make it very difficult to establish a relationship of trust. Other difficulties arose if women had lawyers with an extremist background who gave them the advice "Don't talk to anyone." While penitentiary staff were often grateful to exit workers who work closely with inmates, some employees reportedly took their presence as a reason to reduce their own engagement.

According to workshop participants, penitentiary institutions often lacked the resources to adequately deal with female returnees with children. Even if there were mother-child facilities[6] to allow mothers to keep small children by their side, bigger children could not live at the prison and needed to be accompanied for their visits. A German practitioner explained that in some cases, a mother would see her children only once a month because there was not

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5   In Germany, the penitentiary process consists for example of pre-trial detention, an induction department to decide on a detention plan, and finally placement in standard detention, a socio-therapeutic ward, or an open prison, where convicts can leave the prison during the day to go to work).

6   For example, penitentiary institutions in ten out of sixteen German states allow children up to the age of six to live with their mothers. In Belgium, the age limit is three years and in France 18 months (AFP 2018, Damaschke 2018, Sudinfo 2020). The participants' experiences suggest that demand for mother-child units still exceeds existing offers.

enough staff to accompany them for more frequent visits. In addition, due to the restrictions regarding COVID-19, visitors were cordoned off behind by a glass plate which further strained the mother-child relationship.

The prison management's approach depended to a large extent on its previous experiences. For the first female returnees, a prison would usually establish much stricter security measures than later on. Practitioners reported that it was largely up to the penitentiary institution if and how prevention counselors were proactively involved in planning for a returnee's detention. Especially the restrictions due to COVID-19 made it difficult or even impossible to visit the prison. In addition, there was a lack of access to imams in penitentiary institutions for women, and some Muslim detainees were even turning to Christian pastoral workers for support. Finally, it was challenging to continue intensive exit work once clients had completed their sentence because many of them would decide to terminate the counseling then.

Finally, there was simply not enough psychotherapeutic support available to returning women, especially trauma therapy. Qualified staff was often reluctant to work with these clients. This exacerbated the difficulties experienced by female inmates who had been separated from their children. One female psychotherapist also pointed out that in comparison with Britain, there was a lack of basic forensic psychotherapeutic training in Germany.

The following good practices were shared by participants to work with (returned) women in prison:

• **Start the counseling during (pre-trial) detention.** Prison time increases the level of psychological stress and reduces the role of external influences. Female clients could therefore be more willing to participate in exit programs during detention than after release. One practitioner said he had been able to start working with clients during their pre-trial or standard detention. This made it easier to assist the client in coping with the transition to life outside prison and had a stabilizing effect. To build trust, German practitioners found it useful to get permission to visit the client alone. A permanent visit permit was also considered particularly helpful.

• **Focus on practical questions first.** Workshop participants recommended talking to a client about practical matters first, for example how to get access to a lawyer. Another good first step was to discuss the client's biography and help her avoid further incrimination. Counseling that included the family often only started once women were released but then the (close and extended) family could be important to facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration.

• **Enlist the help of prevention and integration officials to establish contact with your clients.** In Germany, according to practitioners from North Rhine-Westphalia, the officials in charge of integration and prevention at the state's penitentiary institutions had proven very helpful in lowering the threshold for clients to talk to a counselor. They also smoothed the transition process for inmates who were not yet ready to seek out exit counseling directly.

• **Establish networks to ensure continuous access to relevant expertise, for example offender support and trauma therapists.** A female German psychotherapist said that in her experience, a well-established cooperation between penitentiary institutions and external experts was necessary so that prison staff could provide access to external psychotherapists. Instead of a visit once a month, continuous and regular sessions were important in both exit work and psychotherapy. The non-profit organization Treffpunkt *(in English: meeting point)* in Southern Germany was mentioned as a good example for additional support (Treffpunkt 2020). For 30 years, Treffpunkt has been working with the relatives of inmates to give support to mothers and fathers serving prison terms and make detention easier on families. They also offer support for families, inmates, and young people, for example through systemic counseling, mediation concerning criminal cases, and training.

• **Bring together social work and psychotherapeutic expertise:** Practitioners from Germany and Sweden found it beneficial to complement approaches and have a team consisting of a social worker and a psychotherapist talk to clients.

Working with returned women and their children

Actors working in tertiary prevention with women who have returned or may return to their country of origin together with their children faced some specific challenges.

Workshop participants underlined that a returned woman accompanied by a child always needed to be counseled in her role as a mother, too.[7] Considering the child's needs added complexity to the counseling situation, especially if the father was absent. An important part of the counseling work was to help mothers deal with being separated from their children.

In many countries, child endangerment investigations were launched when returnees with children were met by security officials at the airport. Depending on national legislation and on factors like the child's and the parent's condition, institutions such as the youth welfare office decided on whether a child should be separated from its parent. Counselors in Germany observed that such decisions could vary widely depending on existing multi-professional cooperation and the individual officials involved. In some cases, counselors also had the impression that officials might lack intercultural competence or entertain prejudices toward Islam. Female clients could experience that as a confirmation of their victim's narrative. They could feel that they were not taken seriously in their role as mothers and fall back into extremist ways of thinking. In other cases, staff appeared insecure when dealing with returnee cases because of "false compliance": Some returned mothers claimed to be disillusioned with extremism and expressed remorse, but youth welfare staff were unsure if they were telling the truth and afraid of the risk of leaving the child with its mother. However, if the decision was made to leave the children with their parent, working with the family could be challenging if the returnees were not cooperative and still adhered to radical beliefs.

Regarding prosecution, some countries, including Germany, attempted to charge returning women with crimes related to their children, for example child abduction (such as travelling with a child without the father's consent) or failure to fulfill their duty of care and education (such as taking a child into a war zone). However, a Swedish practitioner reported that Swedish female returnees were often well informed about the legal situation and able to avoid such charges, which meant that they had to be released.

Numerous other difficulties could arise, workshop participants said. Women with children might not be able or willing to return to their former homes. Also, they might not have official documents such as birth certificates anymore. They would then need a DNA test to prove their right to their children. In other cases, the relationship between returned women and children and their family deteriorated after a first 'honeymoon phase' and led to the family experiencing feelings of shame.

Finally, while affiliates of Jihadist organizations had arguably made the choice themselves to travel into a conflict zone, studies suggest that war survivors were often traumatized and suffered from depression (Morina et al 2018). One female practitioner pointed to the terrible effects this could have on the mother-child-relationship: Before their return, many of the women lived for several years under dreadful conditions in camps in Northern Syria. Given the violence in the camps, mothers underwent processes of emotional and moral brutalization which also shaped their attitude toward their children. In response, those children often developed defense mechanisms including numbness. Other counselors confirmed that female returnees and their children often needed psychotherapeutic support. Even infants demonstrated behavioral problems. However, there was a lack of adequate institutions to take care of such families. Also, some psychotherapists who worked with asylum seekers did not want to counsel returnees at the same time. The stigma of being an ISIS returnee also hindered (re)integration efforts.

The following good practices were identified by participants to address these challenges:

- **Consider the whole family when working with returning women and their children.** Practitioners considered it crucial to assess the women's and children's situation before their return and to find out together with the youth welfare services if there were relatives who could take care of the children. Practitioners also reported that in many cases, the families of returnees felt helpless, had many questions, and were grateful for being involved in the counseling. It could also be useful to offer mental health support to the entire family.

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7   In contrast, most men returned alone (and might not even be in contact with their children). In those cases, exit counselors could concentrate on the male client.

• **Establish networks to ensure continuous cooperation with relevant actors such as the youth welfare office.** Several civil society and governmental actors from Germany agreed that in the case of returnees with children, the youth welfare service was the most important partner. In those particularly sensitive cases where a decision would need to be made to take away the children, a preparatory case conference with the youth welfare service was helpful. Practitioners stressed that close coordination between the relatives and friends of the returnee, the youth welfare services, the security services, and the returnee coordinator[8] was crucial. Practitioners from several countries added that according to their experience, a female returnee who had lost custody of her child would usually be very eager to cooperate with exit counselors and governmental actors. Practitioners from Kosovo also observed that female returnees tended to comply and cooperate more closely if they were on probation.

• **Approach returnee management as a learning system.** A female practitioner stressed that challenges would often arise if there was a lack of communication or trust between actors. In such cases, it was thus crucial to analyze the case management afterwards to improve the system.

Working with minors

In the context of tertiary prevention of Islamist extremism, working with minors can refer to children growing up in Salafist families in Europe. Other cases concern children who were taken by their parents to join Jihadist organizations in Syria and Iraq or who were born there and have returned or may still return to their parents' country of origin. Practitioners stressed that in most Western countries, it was not illegal for parents to hold an extremist ideology and bring up their children accordingly. However, a parent's radicalization could lead to child endangerment. One of the main challenges was to balance pedagogical, psychosocial, and security concerns. Also, a child might have to be separated from its parents to enable a positive development and prevent harm.

Yet the decision to separate a child from its parents did not necessarily lead to a positive development. After their return from Syria and Iraq, children were often separated from their mothers (in pretrial detention) and in some cases placed in families that could not handle them. A Swedish psychiatrist noted that some children, who were already suffering from severe and complex traumas, withdrew from social interaction.

A German practitioner said that youth welfare officials had been very cautious in some of the returnee cases and kept mothers in prison from seeing their children for half a year. As explained in Chapter 3 (p.9), some penitentiary institutions lacked the necessary infrastructure to allow the children enough visits with their mothers. Before returning to their home countries, many mothers had been the sole reference person for their child. Some children, when they were deprived of that contact after their difficult experiences abroad, displayed acute behavioral problems and aggressive behavior (including toward other children) and became re-traumatized. Separation and disruption of ties was considered especially problematic as it could lead to severe psychological illnesses.

Another challenge in this context was to decide whether the family's influence was a protecting or a risk factor. Exit workers and youth welfare tended to have different approaches to cases of minors. For example, in Germany, an

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8   In seven German states, returnee coordinators act as the central information interface for different actors working with returnees from jihadist combat zones. See also Koller 2020, p.8.

exit worker might argue that the mother was credible about distancing herself from an extremist ideology and was competent to take care of her child. If they were kept separated, this might exacerbate the child's trauma and hinder the mother's exit process. In contrast, youth welfare institutions would focus on preventing child endangerment and security risks related to (Islamist) extremism. Youth welfare officers might argue that a traumatized child should be separated from its mother because she was not able to act appropriately. Given the public's and the media's low tolerance for mistakes, they tended to decide to take the children away from their mother. Independently of the outcome, practitioners criticized that it could take the youth welfare offices and courts several months to decide on a returnee's ability to act appropriately as a parent. This was frustrating for all parties concerned. Some German counselors also had the impression that youth welfare institutions were often reluctant about sending their staff to returnee families. According to these reports, there were some cases when they did not seem interested in working with exit counselors. A lack of trust between the security services and other actors such as the youth welfare office could also hinder constructive cooperation.

Finally, several participants stressed that additional challenges could arise once children were older and asked about their background. Also, trauma could manifest later in life, especially during puberty.

The following good practices were identified by participants to address these challenges:

• **Establish a functioning network,** round table, or task force with all relevant actors, including the youth welfare and child protection services, the kindergarten or school, and the health sector. Experience so far showed that close and continuous cooperation was crucial to allow for long-term follow-up and stabilization, especially for returned children reaching puberty. Preparations should be made to provide support for returning minors from the moment of arrival. Ideally, the same person would remain in charge for the entire process.
• **Strengthen the resilience of young children and their family and relatives.** Several practitioners explained that they were working with the whole family. The most important thing for a child was to have the family stay together and receive support. It was considered crucial for the child to have a 'normal' life as early on as possible and experience feelings of belonging and participation.
• **Differentiate according to age.** Depending on their age, children could be given different roles and tasks in extremist groups, for example receiving weapon training.

A practitioner stressed that cognitive abilities and hence experience also differed. For example, pre-school children (under the age of six or seven) could show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Yet if they could live in a structured and safe environment, they were usually more resilient. Older children over the age of nine and especially teenagers were more self-aware; a ten-year-old who lost two siblings could develop a serious and complex form of PTSD. Some practitioners argued that it was preferable for children in the age group between two und four years to stay with their mother under supervision to prevent further traumatization.
• **Prioritize stabilization when addressing possible mental health issues.** Several practitioners argued that it was best to let the returned minor settle and develop a routine first instead of directly bringing up mental health issues. According to a female psychologist, children were often very resilient, and it was best to simply let them take part in normal kindergarten and school activities. Usually, trauma manifested later once a child was settled and felt safe. A Swedish practitioner added that returned children could receive a psychological assessment, depending on their age, their resilience, possible protective factors in their social environment, and whether they had lived through moments of danger. Especially young children were often able to adapt to their new environment within two or three months if negative factors related to extremist ideology or a violent environment could be eliminated. Practitioners pointed out that it would be counterproductive to assume that every returning child had a trauma.
• **Avoid treating the minor as a 'problem' within a group.** Practitioners reported that for example schoolteachers were advised to support and work with the whole class while taking different cultural norms into account. This was much more helpful than focusing on an individual child's stigma because he or she grew up in a radicalized family. Institutions like the German NGO Liberi were helpful in providing support in these cases.[9]

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9   The German NGO Liberi has, for example, published the results of a study on children and youth from families characterized as Islamist or Salafist. For that study, Liberi cooperated with the Turkish Centre of Schleswig-Holstein, a civil society counseling institution (TGS-H 2020).

GOOD PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM KOSOVO FOR WORKING WITH WOMEN AND MINORS IN TERTIARY PREVENTION OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

By Teuta Avdimetaj, Researcher at the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS), Kosovo

Kosovo's institutions repatriated 110 citizens in 2019 (four men, 32 women, and 74 children) and 11 in 2021 (ten men, one woman) thanks to US support (Avdimetaj & Coleman 2020). According to estimates, more than 255 individuals returned to Kosovo from foreign conflict zones in Syria/Iraq using both formal and informal channels. Despite the myriad challenges associated with returnee management, a number of good practices emerge from Kosovo's experience:

• **Heightened focus on rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) programs** – Kosovo has prosecuted most returnees (men and women) except for children, who are primarily considered victims. Women returnees, including those on probation, undergo reintegration programs to ensure their safe return to the community.

• **Establishing coordinating mechanisms –** The Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Persons (DPRRP) was established within the Ministry of Internal Affairs to deal exclusively with returnees. Its officials closely cooperate with law enforcement agencies, relevant ministries, the Kosovo Correctional Services, the Kosovo Probation Services, and civil society organizations (CSO). DPRRP has been instrumental in coordinating institutional efforts to mobilize resources, provide services, and align programs in the R&R response toward women and children returnees.

• **Doing needs assessments for returnees and the communities that take them in –** Often, women return to an environment that is not conducive to their reintegration process (because of deprivation, exclusion, or stigma, for example), which may exacerbate grievances. An early comprehensive assessment of the returnee's psychological, medical, social, and economic needs is important to inform the DPRRP and other relevant institutions of the person's social environment. On this basis, interventions can be tailored to prevent further radicalization and facilitate reintegration.

• **Strengthening partnerships with local and international CSOs –** Institutions such as DPRRP have limited resources and capacities. By entering into partnerships with CSOs, they are able to expand R&R services to women and children returnees (for example, vocational programs for women, mental health support, resocial-ization activities for children, or capacity building for frontline workers). CSOs can also raise public awareness of the importance of R&R and the prevention of violent extremism.

• **Involving family members to assist R&R efforts –** Working closely with family members has been central to Kosovo's R&R approach as most families have welcomed the returnees. This significantly alleviates the institutional burden. Given the importance of social networks in (de-)radicalization, the role and level of the family's engagement is determined on a case-by-case basis.

Conclusion

The role of women in Islamist extremism and terrorism is receiving increasing attention. At least 15 per cent of Western Europeans who joined Jihadist organizations such as the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq were women. In many cases, they brought their children with them or had children during their time abroad. After the military defeat of IS, most of those returning to their countries of origin were women and minors. Hence, working with women and minors in the context of tertiary prevention of Islamist extremism has become more and more important.

This paper highlighted some of the most important challenges and good practices when working with women and minors, including in a returnee context. Some aspects of prevention work are relevant to all target groups, for example providing individualized interventions, understanding motivations to join extremism groups, or favoring stabilization and multi-professional approaches. Other aspects are more specific. At the InFoEx workshop, participants said that it was crucial to help female clients make a clear cut from their former online lives since recruiting tended to happen through online chat groups. Also, cooperation between prison and probation personnel, exit workers, and psychosocial support staff needed to be intensified, particularly if the institutions did not have much experience in dealing with potentially radicalized female inmates. Penitentiary facilities in some European countries like Germany or France were still not sufficiently family-friendly, with neither enough mother-child units nor enough staff to make it possible for children to visit their mother in prison frequently. In cases of possible child endangerment, closer cooperation, and communication between actors with different objectives, such as exit counselors, youth welfare officers, and prosecutors, would allow for a better balance between psychosocial and pedagogical aspects on the one and security concerns on the other hand. Finally, prolonged stays under dire conditions in Syria and Iraq, either in ISIS territory or in camps, often caused lasting damage to the self-perception as well as the mental health of returning women and children.

It is worth stressing that this topic will be relevant for tertiary prevention work for years to come. Participants spoke of difficult challenges in the future when returned children come into puberty and experience the re-emergence of traumas. In addition, they warned of a tendency toward an increased radicalization of girls barely into their teenage years.

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