



BULAN INSTITUTE
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Lessons Learned from Kazakhstan’s Repatriation and Rehabilitation of “Foreign Fighters”

Sarah Wolfe and Cholpon Orozobekova

In 2019 Kazakhstan repatriated 595 citizens from camps and detention centres in Syria through Operation Zhusan¹. Operation Zhusan was a unique effort among the actions taken by states globally to address the issue of so-called “foreign fighters” remaining in the region. The majority of repatriates brought back over five phases of the Operation were children who returned alone or were accompanied by a smaller number of women, and a limited number of men. Thirty-three men who were repatriated were immediately arrested and charged with terrorism offences, 13 women were also charged with terrorism offences and supporting propaganda. The women and child returnees who did not face criminal charges, who were in the majority, were made the subjects of a rehabilitation and reintegration programme involving a minimum of a month-long stay at a dedicated rehabilitation centre, followed by support in the community which is ongoing. The international community is observing the results in Kazakhstan from a distance, although the long-term outcomes may not be known for many years. The issue of people being held in camps and prisons in Syria by Kurdish forces who are non-state actors is an issue that cannot be ignored indefinitely². The following analysis highlights some of the lessons learned so far from Kazakhstan’s experience of taking a pro-active rights-based approach.

Shaping the Narrative

Former President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev attempted to temper any anxiety held by the public regarding repatriation of “foreign fighters” by framing Operation Zhusan as a humanitarian mission³. He described how those remaining in Syria and Iraq at the outset of Operation Zhusan had been deceived by ISIS and other terrorist groups and subsequently held against their will. The children in particular were explicitly defined as victims, reflecting their true status as conflict-affected children in the eyes of international

¹ Kazinform, “Zhusan Operation: 595 Kazakhstanis repatriated from Syria”. February 6th, 2020. Accessed May 3rd, 2020: https://www.inform.kz/en/zhusan-operation-595-kazakhstanis-repatriated-from-syria_a3611674

² Yee, Vivian, “Guns, Filth and ISIS: Syrian Camp Is ‘Disaster in the Making’”. *New York Times*, September 3rd, 2019. Accessed May 3rd, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/03/world/middleeast/isis-alhol-camp-syria.html>

³ Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations. “Kazakhstan: repatriation of 595 citizens from Syria”. April 23rd, 2020. Accessed May 3rd, 2020: <https://bulaninstitute.org/kazakhstan-repatriation-of-595-citizens-from-syria/>

law and United Nations (UN) guidance on rights-compliant responses⁴. Religious leaders in the community echoed Nazarbayev's narrative, as did his successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

Whilst the experiences of each man, woman and child who lived under ISIS and other terrorist groups are unique and complex, Kazakhstan's approach helped to move away from the emphasis on threat and risk which has understandably dominated much of the narrative about those who travelled to Syria and Iraq since the start of the civil war. Narrative has long allowed us to make sense of and communicate our experiences as humans and story-telling of any kind is considered potentially transformative⁵. In this case, the humanitarian narrative served to re-establish the sense of Kazakh "foreign fighters" as Kazakh citizens first and foremost and invited the public to support the effort to bring them home.

Kazakhstan managed to build an efficient media strategy by selecting a pool of professional media companies who were invited to follow the progress of Operation Zhusan and the rehabilitation programme. Journalists from these outlets attended press conferences where they received updates and had the opportunity to interview repatriates undergoing rehabilitation. Media outlets were chosen on the basis of being reputable and journalists attended from a range of countries. A New York Times reporter was also invited to live for a week in the rehabilitation centre alongside the repatriates to gain a first-hand account of the programme⁶. Importantly, the participation of repatriates in interviews by these journalists was based on their full and informed consent. In this sense, the repatriates were able to exercise agency and decide for themselves whether sharing their stories with the media was right for them or not.

Fulfilling Legal Obligations

UN Security Council Resolutions 2178 and 2396 urged member states to ensure compliance with international law during the course of any action pertaining to counter terrorism⁷⁸. Since the fall of ISIS, the UN has been increasingly specific about states obligations towards citizens detained in Syria and Iraq, particularly focusing on women and children and

⁴ United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force. *Guidance to States on Human Rights-Compliant Responses to the Threat Posed by Foreign Fighters*. New York: United Nations 2018.. Accessed April 29th, 2020: <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Human-Rights-Responses-to-Foreign-Fighters-web-final.pdf>

United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, *Children Affected by the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: Ensuring a Child Rights-Based Approach*. New York: United Nations, 2019. Accessed May 3rd, 2020: https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/ftf_handbook_web_reduced.pdf

⁵ Davidson, Brett, "The role of narrative change in influencing policy". *On Think Tanks: Think Tanks and Communications*. July 20th, 2016. Accessed May 3rd, 2020: <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/the-role-of-narrative-change-in-influencing-policy/>

⁶ Kramer, Andrew. E., "Kazakhstan Welcomes Women Back From the Islamic State, Warily", *The New York Times*, December 10th, 2019. Accessed May 5th, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/world/europe/kazakhstan-women-islamic-state-deradicalization.html>

⁷ United Nations Security Council, *S/RES/2396(2017)*. New York: United Nations, December 21st, 2017. Accessed May 3rd, 2020: [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2396\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2396(2017))

⁸ United Nations Security Council, *S/RES/2178(2014)*. New York: United Nations, September 24th, 2014. Accessed May 4th, 2020: https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/SCR-2178_2014_EN.pdf

survivors of rights violations, calling for repatriation, prosecution at home where justified, and rehabilitation as appropriate⁹. The UN has made explicit several key principles member states should adhere to in relation to women and children. These include avoiding both assumptions of affiliation with terrorist groups without due process and actions leading to statelessness, prioritising the rehabilitation and reintegration of children in accordance with their best interests, and tailored strategies to address the needs of women entitled to rehabilitation and reintegration¹⁰. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the European Union and other organizations also have been urging states to follow the UN's recommendations, but many states have taken legislative action to enable stripping of citizenship and prosecution overseas, effectively turning their backs to those remaining in detention¹¹. Arguably Kazakhstan is one of the few countries to demonstrate compliance with the UN resolutions and guidance. Through Operation Zhusan, Kazakhstan has demonstrated that it is possible for states to fulfil their obligations towards "foreign fighter" citizens in accordance with international, humanitarian and human rights law whilst remaining sensitive to domestic concerns.

Kazakhstan's experience has not only demonstrated that compliance is possible, it has validated the UN's insistence that the "foreign fighter" population is heterogenous and that many are themselves victims of and survivors of terrorism. Kazakhstan's repatriates were mostly children, demonstrating clearly how many of those in detention are young, at risk of being denied their right to life and traumatised further by virtue of being exposed to hazardous conditions in the camps. Kazakhstan's child and women repatriates presented as significantly traumatised, malnourished and in many cases injured or suffering developmental difficulties as a result of life under the caliphate, exposure to conflict and camp conditions. Whilst assessment of risk remains important, this picture strongly challenges the narrative implying the vast majority of foreign fighters detained in Syria and Iraq are simply seasoned terrorists. Indeed, whereas the adult male repatriates and some of the women were prosecuted and found guilty of terrorist offences, the majority of the remaining returnees were not charged, presumably due to little or no evidence of wrongdoing, and instead were able to participate in rehabilitation.

⁹ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *Joint Statement on Human Rights and Humanitarian Concerns Related to Conflict Affected Women and Children in Syria and Iraq*. New York: United Nations, November 11th, 2019. Accessed May 3rd, 2020:

<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2019/11/joint-statement-on-human-rights-and-humanitarian-concerns-related-to-conflict-affected-women-and-children-in-syria-and-iraq/>

UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, *Guidance to States*.

UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, *Children Affected*.

¹⁰ United Nations, *Key Principles for the Protection, Repatriation, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children with Links to United Nations Listed Terrorist Groups*. New York: United Nations, April, 2019. Accessed May 3rd, 2020:

https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/key_principles-april_2019.pdf

¹¹ Dworkin, Anthony, "Beyond good and evil: Why Europe should bring ISIS foreign fighters home". *European Council on Foreign Relations*. October 25th, 2019. Accessed May 3rd, 2020:

https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/beyond_good_and_evil_why_europe_should_bring_isis_foreign_fighters_home

Multi-Disciplinary, Trauma-Informed & Systemic Intervention

The picture of returnees as more than former “foreign fighters”, rather human beings with their own identities and needs, is reflected in the holistic and multidisciplinary nature of Kazakhstan’s rehabilitation and reintegration programme. The Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations followed the programme closely and has conducted interviews with returnees, social workers and theologians involved in their care, and other non-governmental organisations who provided support.

The various features of the rehabilitation programme appear cognisant with well-established theories of human needs and encompassed physiological care, providing a sense of safety and security, social connection, and opportunities for achievement¹². The rehabilitation centre in Aktau was refitted to meet the anticipated needs of the returnees, with particular attention paid to making the environment welcoming for children. Immediate physical health needs were attended to as a priority due to the poor condition in which the majority of the repatriates arrived and a quarantine period of one month was also enforced for their wellbeing and to facilitate adjustment. Emergency surgery, wound care, nourishment, vaccinations and attention to mobility issues were among the actions necessary in the first few days.

The psychosocial aspects of the rehabilitation did not begin until three days after the arrival of each cohort to allow time for medical care and rest. Therapeutic work was undertaken individually and in groups through a range of activities designed to encourage communication and reflection, in a manner that is reminiscent of a therapeutic community¹³. Religious counselling was an important aspect of the programme. A range of new experiences and learning opportunities facilitated the development of new skills, freedoms and a sense of mastery. Many activities had an emphasis on Kazakh culture to support a developing sense of citizenship, identity and reintegration, such as music and dance, food preparation and local religious practice. A holistic strengths-based approach such as this is well-placed to nurture a well-rounded sense of identity, personal resilience and the ability to participate in and make a contribution to the community¹⁴.

The range of professional disciplines involved in the rehabilitation programme included medics, lawyers, social workers, teachers, theologians and psychologists. Where professionals are able to collaborate, care is considered to be better integrated and

¹² Maslow, Abraham Harold, “A theory of human motivation”, *Psychological Review* 50, (1943): 370–396.
Maslow, Abraham Harold. *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper, 1954.

¹³ Haigh, Rex, “The quintessence of a therapeutic environment”, *Therapeutic Communities: The International Journal of Therapeutic Communities* 34, No. 1 (2013): 6-15, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09641861311330464>
Pearce, Steve and Haigh, Rex. *The Theory and Practice of Democratic Therapeutic Community Treatment*. London: Jessica King Publishers, 2017.

¹⁴ Department of Health and Social Care, “Strengths-based approach: Practice Framework and Practice Handbook”. February, 2019. Accessed May 4th, 2020:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778134/strengths-based-approach-practice-framework-and-handbook.pdf

consequently more likely to be of benefit to the recipient¹⁵. The government's expressed support for the programme provided the multidisciplinary team with legitimacy and a clear purpose. Resources and consideration of the evidence base are important aspects of multidisciplinary care and the need for specialist consultation and training from non-governmental organisations and foreign experts was openly acknowledged.

Verbal accounts given by the rehabilitation staff suggest the psychosocial care of returnees was trauma-informed. Recognition of the experience of trauma is an important first step towards making sense of distress and associated behavioural issues in a non-pathologising manner, thus demonstrating sensitivity to rights infringements and violations that both cause and maintain distress at the individual and collective level¹⁶. Such approaches are an enactment of Kazakhstan's and the United Nations' challenge to view "foreign fighter" repatriates as fellow citizens and survivors.

Progress made through behavioural and psychosocial interventions within closed therapeutic settings can be maintained where attention is paid to the relational dynamics in the recipient's wider social environment, to which they will presumably return¹⁷. Testimonies have indicated that the women had typically either been deceived by recruiters who made false promises about the utopian idea of a caliphate or, as in the majority of cases, they were left with little choice but to follow their husbands to Syria. These accounts point to the importance of disrupting and educating against recruiters and providing resources for women's support services in the community as preventative measures. In either case, relational difficulties within the women's social networks were among the factors which contributed to their decision to leave in the first place¹⁸. The fact that relatives of repatriates received input from members of the rehabilitation team prior to resettlement, and reintegration support for repatriates continues after they have returned to their original neighbourhoods, is testament to the consideration given to the need for intervention at a systemic level to affect change long-term.

The impact of each strand of the rehabilitation and reintegration programme will ideally be rigorously evaluated. As yet, the specific details of the interventions provided and evidence of outcomes measurement and evaluation have not been made available to the public.

¹⁵ Social Care Institute for Excellence, "Delivering integrated care: the role of the multidisciplinary team". July, 2018. Accessed May 3rd, 2020: <https://www.scie.org.uk/integrated-care/workforce/role-multidisciplinary-team>

¹⁶ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA, July, 2014. Accessed May 3rd, 2020: https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Trauma-Informed Care: A Sociocultural Perspective", in *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA, 2014. Accessed May 3rd, 2020: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207195/>

¹⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Prevention". January 28th, 2020. Accessed May 4th, 2020: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/publichealthissue/social-ecologicalmodel.html>

¹⁸ Based on interviews undertaken with returnees by Cholpon Orozobekova.

Risk Management

Kazakhstan's rehabilitation programme indicates that it is possible to draw upon existing knowledge of psychosocial interventions to begin to address the needs of a complex population such as the returnees from Syria and Iraq. Collaborative multi-disciplinary working is likely to have enabled the rehabilitation workers to jointly bear the burden of assessing and managing any risk of harm to others posed by returnees. It is a significant challenge to attend to the various needs of an individual through an authentic, responsive and respectful therapeutic relationship whilst being mindful of risks they may pose¹⁹. Kazakhstan's rehabilitation team appears to have succeeded in tolerating the uncertainty of what they might encounter from the returnees, the novelty of the task at hand and the limits of their knowledge and experience²⁰. In doing so, they offer hope about what can be achieved in this area when there is a shared positive intention to rehabilitate and the resources available to do so.

At the beginning of the rehabilitation program, twenty adult female returnees were assessed by theologians as deeply radicalised and presenting a danger to society. These individuals received a separate intensive rehabilitation over a four-month period. Details of how this intervention differed from the shorter rehabilitation programme undertaken by most returnees are unavailable. However, what can be deduced is that it was possible for individuals requiring more intensive support to be identified and that some flexibility in the rehabilitation pathway was necessary to accommodate their needs. In the absence of detailed outcome data and evaluation, it can be assumed that rehabilitation has still been possible in such cases.

Future Considerations

According to accounts, some early positive outcomes are evident since the programme began one year ago, giving an indication of the minimum amount of time required for such interventions. The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Erzhan Ashikbaev, confirmed in an interview with the Bulan Institute that thirty-two women have been deemed completely deradicalized and returned to "normal" life. A minority of these repatriates are now volunteer contributors to the rehabilitation programme. The involvement of such "experts by experience" may be empowering for the volunteers and, when supported at all levels, may enhance the programme's effectiveness²¹. Many of the returnees in the programme expressed curiosity and enthusiasm regarding their growing national identity and the religious teachings which have encouraged them to revise their misunderstandings of Islam.

¹⁹ Hamilton, Laura, "The Boundary Seesaw Model: Good Fences Make for Good Neighbours", in *Using Time, Not Doing Time: Practitioner Perspectives on Personality Disorder and Risk*, edited by Allison Tennant & Kevin Howells, 181-194. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2010.

²⁰ West, A. F. and West, R. R., "Clinical decision-making: coping with uncertainty", *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 78, (2002): 319-321. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/pmj.78.920.319>

²¹ E.g. Together UK and NSUN Network for Mental Health, *Service User Involvement in the Delivery of Mental Health Services*. London: Together/NSUN, May, 2014. Accessed May 4th, 2020: <https://www.together-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2014/06/Service-User-Involvement-briefing.pdf>

Some became increasingly able to express and process their distress under the guidance of the rehabilitation team over the course of their stay at the rehabilitation centre. The majority succeeded in returning to their area of origin with ongoing support to reconnect with family members where possible and, in the case of the children, to enrol and participate in education alongside their peers. Approximately ten per cent of the adults have been able to find employment.

Kazakhstan's experience points to what can be achieved when states enact their obligations towards their citizens in spite of seemingly insurmountable fears. It also indicates what the long-term needs of repatriates from Syria and Iraq might include and some of the obstacles to supporting them to claim their rights whilst working to safeguard the wider population. Efforts to repair and strengthen the bonds between family members, in particular to address attachment difficulties between conflict-affected children and parents, are ongoing. Half-siblings united with blood relatives have experienced separation from one another, bringing the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging with their birth families but also further loss. The children attend school but are typically far behind their same-aged peers. It is unclear how supportive the wider communities around the returnees will be and whether the survivor narrative has reduced stigma and discrimination. It is unclear how well returnees will adjust to the restrictions on their movement forming part of the repatriation agreement. Women returnees need a great deal of support to improve employment rates, such as continued community engagement and skills development.

A high-quality evaluation of the outcomes of Kazakhstan's rehabilitation and reintegration programme to date would be welcome, in addition to long-term follow-up at intervals over the coming years. The most pressing concern of the international community, of course, is the impact on engagement in extremism and public safety long-term. In the meantime, however, whilst citizens of UN member states languish in camps and detention centres in Syria and Iraq, and in the absence of a means to look into the future, Kazakhstan offers hope and a template for a responsible rights-based approach.

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