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BULAN INSTITUTE
for PEACE INNOVATIONS



The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children from Syria and Iraq

The Experiences of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

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About Us

The Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations is a research institute and non-governmental organization that aims to promote peacebuilding and human rights-based dialogue on security in Eurasia, Central Asia, and South Asia. Its headquarters are located in Geneva, Switzerland, with an additional regional office in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The Institute works to promote peace and human rights through field-centered research, building dialogue and advocacy. Since 2018, the Bulan Institute has been observing state policies regarding returning foreign fighters, with a special focus on women and children.

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Introduction

Following the establishment of the so-called caliphate by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in June 2014, thousands of people traveled to the Middle East to join their ranks and those of other allied terrorist groups. According to Vladimir I. Voronkov, Under-Secretary for the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Office, more than 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters from 110 countries might have traveled to join the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.¹ Recruits flocked from all over the world, predominantly the Middle East, North Africa, Western Europe, and Central Asia to the conflict zone.²

The subsequent territorial defeat of ISIS on March 23rd, 2019, prompted the current dilemma about what should be done with the tens of thousands of ISIS fighters and their family members who remained in northeast Syria. Men, women, and children linked to ISIS who were unable to escape Syria were placed in Al-Hawl and Al-Roj camps. As research from the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations and other notable organizations such as Human Rights Watch have found, the majority of those who were captured continues to be held in appalling conditions without adequate nutrition, clean water, healthcare, or shelter, in these hastily built camps in Northeast Syria.³ Those who were captured across the border in Iraq were largely detained, charged, and have been sentenced by the Iraqi judicial system, allegedly without minimum standards of justice or fair trial.⁴ These conditions, as well as the legal obligations and moral imperative of states to care for their citizens, have been referred to repeatedly by the United Nations, which has called for the repatriation of foreign citizens from Northeast Syria and Iraq wherever possible.⁵

The United States has been playing an important role by advocating for repatriation of foreign nationals held in northeast Syria and also assisting states with logistics to organize repatriation operations. Washington made huge efforts to negotiate repatriation at least of women and

¹ UN Press, 'Greater Cooperation Needed to Tackle Danger Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters, Head of Counter-Terrorism Office Tells Security Council | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases', accessed 27 April 2021.

² Thomas Francis Lynch and others, *The Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia: Implications for US Counterterrorism Policy* (National Defense University Press 2016). Page 16.

³ Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, 'State Obligations and International Norms towards Children with Links to ISIS Being Held in North-Eastern Syria' (2021).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism and the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, 'Extra-Territorial Jurisdiction of States over Children and Their Guardians in Camps, Prisons, or Elsewhere in the Northern Syrian Arab Republic' (OHCHR 2020). Page 1.

children by warning that the Syrian Democratic Forces may not be able to guard its jails. “The United States calls upon other nations to repatriate and prosecute their citizens detained by the SDF and commends the continued efforts of the SDF to return these foreign terrorist fighters to their countries of origin,” State Department spokesman Robert Palladino said in a statement.⁶ The United States has emphasized the security threat for international peace that comes from the current situation with ISIS fighters and their associates. Christopher Harnisch, deputy coordinator for countering violent extremism at the Bureau of Counterterrorism with the US Department of State, highlights that there is a big risk that ISIS fighters can be free at some point whether they escape whether they are freed by ISIS fighters. “ISIS has called for the liberation of the prisons and the camps for some time now and if those people are able to escape from the prisons and the camps they will return back to the battlefield either in Syria or to another battlefield in Afghanistan, Libya, or they will return undetected through the back door to their home country. So, in order to secure that enduring defeat of ISIS, we think it’s imperative that countries repatriate now when they have an opportunity to repatriate,” said Christopher Harnisch.⁷

States should not ignore their international obligations towards their citizens. Security Council Resolution 2178 urges all member states to prevent and suppress the recruitment, organization, transport, and equipping of foreign terrorist fighters.⁸ Security Council Resolution 2397 urges those same countries to assist women and children associated with foreign terrorist fighters who may be victims of terrorism and to do so taking into account the impact of age and gender on their vulnerability and individual needs.⁹ Following repatriation, according to Article 4 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2002), children should be considered as having been recruited by violent extremist groups in violation of international law. In fulfilling their international obligations, some states are actively supporting their citizens to claim their rights, as outlined under various international instruments. The current report focuses on the efforts of Central Asian countries in particular who have taken a proactive approach in repatriation and rehabilitation of ISIS associates.

⁶ US asks countries to repatriate jihadists held in Syria, France 24, 04 February 2019, accessed on 01 June 2021

⁷ Christopher Harnisch, Public Discussion Organized by the Atlantic Council, 08 January 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/kazakh-repatriation-of-foreign-fighters/>

⁸ United Nations Security Council, ‘Resolution 2178 (2014): Adopted by the Security Council at Its 7272nd Meeting’; Schmid, ‘Foreign (Terrorist) Fighter Estimates: Conceptual and Data Issues,’ Page 9.

⁹ United Nations Security Council. Security Council resolution 2398 (2017). S/RES/2396 (2017).

When considering the broader picture of state responses to the issue at hand, it is remarkable how Central Asian states have taken a lead in repatriating their citizens from Syria and Iraq. According to the Institute for National Strategic Studies, citizens from Central Asia represented the third largest group of people who traveled to Syria during the conflict, after citizens of the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁰ Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have conducted the largest repatriation efforts to date bringing both children and women back home. Collectively they have facilitated the return of over 1300 people to the region. These repatriations have been followed up by comprehensive though evolving reintegration and rehabilitation policies focused on those women and children intending to restore them to their families and their communities. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country to have also brought back male citizens who were embroiled in the conflict, 43 male former foreign terrorist fighters in total. The noteworthy array of policies created by these Central Asian states offer potential models for repatriation, reintegration, and rehabilitation efforts of so-called foreign fighters and their family members in other countries of the world. Considering the high level of sensitivity, fear, and risk adversity that arises over the issue of preventing terrorism, positive examples of proactive approaches to citizens detained in camps and prisons in Syria and Iraq may go a long way towards resolving this pressing issue.

This report aims to outline and assess the repatriation operations, rehabilitation interventions, and reintegration processes undertaken in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The report is divided into six sections. Throughout, interviews by the Bulan Institute with state officials and activists from civil society in the region offer testimonies and insights into the experiences of stakeholders.

Section I provides the essential socio-economic, political, and cultural context of the region during the height of ISIS recruitment to Syria and Iraq, with an emphasis on economic instability, lack of religious freedom, political pressure, high levels of migration to Russia, and the emergence of domestic terrorist groups in Central Asia. Many of these issues persist today, the relevance of which will be reflected upon in later sections examining the strengths and limitations of Central Asian state policies towards returnees. Section II analyses demographic statistics and motivations of those who left Central Asia to join ISIS in Syria and briefly outlines the push and pull factors that influenced the decision to travel to the conflict zone. The

¹⁰ Joana Cook and Gina Vale, 'From Daesh to 'Diaspora'II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate' (2019) 12 CTC Sentinel 30.

nature of the involvement of men, women, children, boys, and girls as different groups within this population is further developed. In part, this section draws upon the testimonies of survivors, as well as activists from civil society.

Section III examines the framing and conduct of repatriation operations undertaken in each country. Although the motivations for action differed somewhat between Central Asian states, a clear consensus emerged, recognizing the long-term pragmatic advantages of repatriation whilst embracing the moral imperative to do so. The complexities of laying the groundwork for and implementing the repatriation plans are outlined, offering possible models to those countries in the international community who have yet to begin repatriations of their citizens.

Section IV describes the rehabilitation and reintegration programs being delivered in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, drawing strongly upon the accounts provided by representatives from civil organizations and state officials. The scope of each program and the range of expertise involved in delivery are also outlined and explored. Specific examples of interventions and support are provided where possible.

Section V focuses on emerging evidence of good practice and the early successes Central Asian states have reported as a result of their repatriation, reintegration, and rehabilitation efforts. Despite these notable indicators, there are distinct obstacles in terms of conducting safe and efficient repatriations and providing effective rehabilitation programs. Hence, Section VI discusses the pressing challenges affecting the scope and quality of repatriation and rehabilitation, such as a lack of economic resources, the short-term nature of the programs, social stigma, and demonization, persisting social grievances, a lack of a gender-sensitive approach, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section I: The Central Asian Context in Brief

The region of Central Asia consists of the countries Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the region has been characterized by the influence of authoritarian governments who have arguably failed to solve key problems such as border conflicts, water disputes, corruption, poverty, and stagnant economic growth. Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian state which regularly holds presidential elections and democratic transitions of power, while challenges to building a truly parliamentary republic free from corruption continue to persist.¹¹ Due to the economic pressures on most Central Asian countries, over the last twenty years, around 23% of the region's population has migrated to Russia for employment opportunities, where they face discrimination and tough immigration laws.¹² The remittances sent by this working diaspora is an improvement in the situation of relatives remaining in their home countries, to the extent that it is a key determinant of stability in the region.¹³ According to the World Bank, in 2019 Kyrgyzstan was one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world (with 28.5% of GDP coming from remittances), followed closely by Tajikistan (28.6% of GDP from remittances).¹⁴

Another important factor to consider in understanding the socio-economic and political context of the Central Asian states is the reality of political repression and anti-terrorism policies which limit religious expression, particularly Islam. The severity of political and religious repression has led entire families and communities to discourage younger members from engaging in overt religious practices for fear of attracting hostile governmental attention.¹⁵ Due to the social marginalization and disharmony, the region faces a high risk of internal instability and pathways into violent extremism.¹⁶ Several terrorist groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Movement of Central Asia (IMCA), have been active in the

¹¹ Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, 'Central Asia Security Report' (2018).

¹² Teng Kwek Kian, 'Eurasian Economics of Migration, Remittances and Human Development' [2020] Eurasian Economics of Migration, Remittances and Human Development (April 24, 2020). Page 53.; Noah Tucker, 'Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses' Arlington, VA (Management Systems International 2015). Retrieved January 2017. Page iii.

¹³ Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations. Ibid.

¹⁴ World Bank, 'Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP) | Data' <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS>> accessed 27 April 2021.

¹⁵ Tucker, ibid.

¹⁶ Zeyno Baran, Frederick S Starr and Svante E Cornell, *Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU* (Uppsala University 2006). Page 26.

region and have organized terrorist attacks. From the beginning of its formation, IMU expressed its radical ideology through carefully orchestrated attacks against Uzbekistan from neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, including the 1999 Tashkent bombings.¹⁷ From the IMU, various groups such as the Islamic Movement in Central Asia¹⁸ and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)¹⁹ evolved and by 2014 a significant number of members of IMU and IJU militants had left to join ISIS in Syria, with the IMU declaring its loyalty to ISIS in September 2014.²⁰ One such splinter group, Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari (KIB), has been closely affiliated with Al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusrah since 2015. Based south of Idlib by March 2018, the group commanded up to 500 Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Russian foreign fighters.²¹

Back home, domestic extremist groups carried out various attacks in the region, such as the attacks on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) in August 2016, on the internal troop base in Aktobe (Kazakhstan) in June 2016, and in Almaty (Kazakhstan) in July 2016.²² In response, the Central Asian countries reinforced their domestic policies against terrorism. The Tajik government improved the capacity of law enforcement agencies to combat terrorism, enhance border security, and detect terrorist financing.²³ The Uzbek government reinforced awareness-raising efforts around what it frames as the dangers of “religious extremism,” improving its implementation of existing laws, and including the development of a comprehensive national counterterrorism strategy and action plan.²⁴ Under Kazakh law, it became illegal for citizens to fight in foreign wars, one of the few policies likely to affect the recruitment of fighters to terrorist causes abroad.²⁵

¹⁷ Zeyno Baran, *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Guido W Steinberg, ‘The Islamic Jihad Union’, DOI:10.7312/columbia/9780231159920.003.0004, (2008) Page 2.

²⁰ Józef Lang, ‘Exporting Jihad—Islamic Terrorism from Central Asia’. Page 2, Anna Dwyer, Arkadiusz Legieć and Kacper Rękawek, *Ready to Go?: ISIS and Its Presumed Expansion into Central Asia* (Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych 2015). Pages 2 and 9.

²¹ United Nations Security Council Listing, ‘Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari (KIB)’, Accessed May 23rd, 2021. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/khatiba-imam-al-bukhari-%28kib%29>

²² Bertelsmann Stiftung, ‘BTI 2018 Country Report — Kazakhstan’ (2018). Page 2.; ‘Chinese Embassy Blast: Car Bomb Attack in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan’, BBC News, 30 August 2016, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37217712>>

²³ Bureau of Counterterrorism, US Department of State, ‘Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 – Tajikistan’ (19 September 2018)<<https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcf1f7da.html>>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, ‘Country Reports on Terrorism 2019’ Page 158.

Section II: Central Asian Citizens Who Joined ISIS

The Central Asia region accounts for the third-highest number of citizens to leave a home country for the purpose of joining ISIS, after the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe.²⁶ There is no data deriving from government sources regarding official numbers due to a lack of special services mechanisms to track and trace the outflow of foreign fighters and their family members from the region. However, various research institutes and academics have since taken on the task of compiling and reporting data on citizens from Central Asian countries who joined ISIS, within the limitations of their resources. In 2015, the number of departing citizens per capita from Central Asian countries was estimated to be relatively low: 1 in 40,000 Tajik citizens, 1 in 56,000 Kyrgyz citizens, 1 in 58,000 Uzbek citizens, and 1 in 72,000 Kazakhs were thought to have become foreign fighters in Syria.²⁷ By 2017, other academics estimated that the total number of people traveling from Central Asia to ISIS had reached 4,000.²⁸ This estimate has been updated since to a total of between 5,000 and 7,000 individuals from the region arriving in Syria or Iraq between 2012 and 2019, with approximately 1,200 minors and 600 women among them.²⁹

The vast majority of radicalized Central Asian citizens traveled from Russia rather than from their home countries. Being away from their communities of origin, without their family, community elders or local imams who spoke their native language to turn to for appropriate guidance at a time of need, many Central Asian citizens living in Russia are thought to have turned to sources of support online, such as groups purportedly devoted to religious practice. Once they began to interact regularly on such forums and expand their online social networks to include their active members, extremist recruiters treated them as their primary audience.³⁰

Many Central Asians reportedly believed that traveling to the Middle East and living under the so-called caliphate would resolve their social and economic problems. The factors motivating Kazakh citizens to join the Syrian war mainly included political marginalization, difficult living

²⁶ Elena Zhirukhina, 'Foreign Fighters from Central Asia: Between Renunciation and Repatriation' (*ISPI*, 2 October 2019) <<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/foreign-fighters-central-asia-between-renunciation-and-repatriation-24072>> accessed 27 April 2021.

²⁷ Dyer, Legieć and Rękawek, *ibid.* Page 3.

²⁸ Anne Speckhard and Chinara Esengul, 'Analysis of the Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan, Including the Roles of Kyrgyz Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening in, and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan' (ICSVE Research Reports 2017). Page 4.

²⁹ Cook and Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate". Annex 1. *Ibid*

³⁰ Tucker. Page 12.

situations, social and gender inequalities, and the search for alternatives to the post-Soviet realities of life opportunities in Kazakhstan, especially among the youth.³¹ In Uzbekistan, some people reportedly perceived the idea of an Islamic State as an opportunity for a novel political order since the failure of substantive political reform carried out by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev.³² Others, such as Central Asian foreign fighters who joined terrorist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda in Aleppo, looked to what was happening in Syria and bought into the narrative that the conflict was a just war against the Assad regime, contrasting somewhat with ISIS's narrative focused upon activating foreign fighters who had experienced marginalization at home.³³ As scholars analyzed, profiles of Central Asian fighters show interlinkage with their frustrations with their economic situations. Before traveling to Syria, many of them faced "extended periods of unemployment and constant migration within the country in search of better prospects. In the end, they have given up hope finding themselves as productive members of the society".³⁴

Interviews conducted by the Bulan Institute with female returnees in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan indicated that many of the women who had gone to Syria had felt hopeless about the socio-economic problems in their home countries and that, in contrast, the promised Islamic State would provide them with prosperity³⁵. Moreover, interviews by other organizations with women survivors of origin from various regions, including Central Asia, reported that a common aim shared by those who traveled to join ISIS in Syria was the solidification of their Islamic identity through their contribution to the establishment of the so-called caliphate. Some women referred to a motivation to travel to escape abusive lives at home. Importantly, it is known that many women were taken to the conflict zone and forced to join ISIS through deception or coercion, with citizens of Central Asia being no exception.³⁶

³¹ Dyer, Legieć and Rękawek. Pages 2 – 4.

³² Syria Calling, 'Radicalisation in Central Asia. International Crisis Group (ICG) Europe and Central Asia Briefing № 72' (Brussels: ICG 3, 2015).

³³ Tucker. Page iv.

³⁴ Azamat Sakiev, 'Guest Warriors: The Phenomenon of Post-Soviet Fighters in the Syrian Conflict' (2020) 11 Journal of Eurasian Studies, Page. 196.

³⁵ Interviews conducted by Cholpon Orozobekova in 2020 and 2021.

³⁶ Anne Speckhard and Molly D Ellenberg, 'ISIS in Their Own Words' (Journal of Strategic Security 13 2020) Page82.

Section III: An Overview of Repatriation Operations in the Region

This section presents an overview of the repatriation operations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, focusing on their framing and conduct.

International organizations which closely observed the efforts of these Central Asian countries to repatriate and rehabilitate their citizens have highlighted several positive features of their policies and programs. Keneshbek Sainazarov, Director for Central Asia at Search for Common Ground, emphasized the role of three important factors in the success of those efforts, particularly concerning influencing public opinion. First, the high level of leadership demonstrated by state leaders who expressed political will and readiness to take responsibility for their citizens in the face of the challenges presented by returning foreign fighters and their families. Second, civil society played an important role in addressing systemic factors contributing to stigma and the stereotyping of individuals who traveled to Syria at the family and community level.³⁷ Third, Mr. Sainazarov highlighted how research institutes and media outlets supported the repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration efforts in a manner that took a conflict-sensitive approach.

Local governments within the Central Asian countries led campaigns for repatriation by curating a narrative based upon humanitarianism and national mentality. Both Kazakh and Uzbek officials engaged the media successfully to garner support for repatriation and promote the planned missions as necessary humanitarian operations. These narratives tapped into shared cultural and religious values which could be recognized and appreciated by local people. Kazakhstan's repeated statement, "We never abandon our women and children"³⁸, served to reinforce both the common humanity and shared identity of local people and their compatriots detained abroad. The aim of the protection of citizens, especially children, has been repeatedly emphasized and this new humanitarian-centered discourse was supported in societies.

Referring to the third stage of Kazakhstan's repatriation effort in May 2019, President Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev stated, "The humanitarian operation Zhusan is a large-scale action that was initiated by the First President Nursultan Nazarbayev and was carried out since last year (...)

³⁷ Interview with Keneshbek Sainazarov, 'Panel Discussion on the Experience of Central Asian Countries Organized by the Bulan Institute ' (3 March 2021).

³⁸ Tanya Mehra LL.M and Dr Christophe Paulussen, 'The Repatriation of Foreign Fighters and Their Families: Options, Obligations, Morality and Long-Term Thinking' <<https://icct.nl/publication/the-repatriation-of-foreign-fighters-and-their-families-options-obligations-morality-and-long-term-thinking/>> accessed 7 June 2021.

Ensuring the safety of children became the main goal of the operation (...).³⁹ Kazakhstan’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Yerzhan Ashikbayev, stated, “Given the number of women and children, this is a humanitarian operation...They were without access to their basic needs of food, shelter, clean water, health, and education”.⁴⁰ Uzbekistan described its Operation Mehr as humanitarian and considered those individuals in need of rescue as *adashganlar* or the misguided.⁴¹

Collectively, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan carried out repatriation operations bringing back hundreds of citizens from camps in Syria and prisons in Iraq. Table 1 presents the number of people repatriated by each country.

Table 1. *Number of repatriates by country*

Country	Kazakhstan: Operations Zhusan and Rusafa	Uzbekistan: Operation Mehr	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan: Operation Meerim
Men	37	0	0	0
Women	188	141	0	0
Children	497	334	84	79
Total	722	435	84	79
Number of phases	5	4	1	1
Repatriation sites	Iraq and Syria	Iraq and Syria	Iraq only	Iraq only

Having repatriated women and children from Syria and Iraq, each Central Asian state published several videos and photos featuring the returnees and their arrival in their homeland. This strategy provided a kind of transparency that conveyed the message to the local population that these repatriates were not terrorist sympathizers or rebels but fellow citizens. As a Kazakh official stated during an interview, the government wanted to emphasize the humanity and Kazakh identity of the returnees. “When people saw photos and videos of women and children

³⁹ Tamara Abubakarova, ‘Tokayev’s Statement: 171 Children Evacuated from Syria’ (31 May 2019) <<https://informburo.kz/novosti/zayavlenie-tokaeva-iz-sirii-evakuirovali-171-rebyonka.html>> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁴⁰ Asim Kashgarian, ‘Could Kazakhstan Efforts to Repatriate Foreign Fighters Be a Model? | Voice of America - English’ <<https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/could-kazakhstan-efforts-repatriate-foreign-fighters-be-model>> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁴¹ Nodirbek Soliev, ‘Syria: Uzbekistan’s Approach to IS Detainees’, *ibid.*

arriving, their opinions changed. They saw simple Kazakh boys and started looking at them with compassion. Thus, we managed to decrease the level of stigmatization in society”.⁴²

Kazakhstan’s Repatriates: Operations Zhusan and Rusafa

Operations Zhusan and Rusafa were carried out in 2019 by the Kazakh government to repatriate citizens from Syria and Iraq who had formerly lived under ISIS. The first three phases of Zhusan focused on repatriating Kazakh citizens from camps and prisons in northeast Syria, while the final phase repatriated children mostly from Iraqi prisons. Approximately 600 Kazakhs were repatriated, the majority of whom were women and children. The male fighters among them were immediately arrested and later faced charges of terrorism, receiving sentences ranging from eight to 12 years’ duration. Since the beginning of 2021, the fifth and sixth phases of Zhusan brought back a small number of people with claims to citizenship in Kazakhstan.⁴³

The first part of Operation Zhusan took place on January 5th and 6th 2019 after five months of preparation. For this stage to succeed, the Kazakh diplomatic forces had negotiated the setting up of a secret secure zone within Syria from where the Kazakh military and Special Forces could retrieve their citizens.⁴⁴ The second stage of Operation Zhusan, commonly referred to as Zhusan-2, brought back 231 people. The success of the operation was announced on May 10th, 2019, by President Kasim-Jomart Tokayev, with his statement noting that the operation was carried out upon his direct order.⁴⁵ The third phase of Operation Zhusan took place between May 28th and 31st 2019.⁴⁶ In November 2019, a subsequent operation, Operation Rusafa, was conducted to repatriate orphaned Kazakh children whose fathers had lost their lives in conflict or being imprisoned by the Kurdish forces and whose mothers were serving life sentences in prison in Iraq. This operation, coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, required the

⁴² Interview conducted by The Bulan Institute with a Kazakh official who preferred to remain anonymous.

⁴³ Abira Kuandyk, ‘Kazakhstan Evacuates Kazakh Citizens from Syria as Continuation of Jusan Humanitarian Operation’ (The Astana Times 4 February 2021) <<https://astanatimes.com/2021/02/kazakhstan-evacuates-kazakh-citizens-from-syria-as-continuation-of-jusan-humanitarian-operation/>>

⁴⁴ Yavor Raychev, ‘Operations for Repatriation of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan Citizens That Have Joined the Islamic State’ ((МИНИСТЕРСТВО НА ВЪНШНИТЕ РАБОТИ РЕПУБЛИКА БЪЛГАРИЯ July 2020).

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

highest level of secrecy and more than six months of preparation since the Iraqi authorities demanded proof of parental citizenship before each of the children could be released.⁴⁷

The Kazakh government explained the motivation for the operations as being a listening country. “We were approached by a number of groups of relatives, of mothers, and those women, as well as the foreign terrorist fighters themselves, were pleading, sending messages to their relatives, or approaching or sending messages to government agencies with a plea to repatriate them. Most of them were disillusioned with the ISIS radical ideology. We believe, as President Tokayev introduced, in the concept of a listening state which is to be responsive to calls from the public, not only during election campaigns (...) but continuously.”⁴⁸ Indeed, Yerzhan Ashikbaev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that “Kazakhstan is among the very few countries of the world which facilitates repatriation programs for its compatriots and over the past 25 years we have repatriated over a million ethnic Kazakhs from different countries like China, Russia, Mongolia, Central Asian nations, Iran and so on. Given that number, when we talk about some 500 or 600 women and children, we felt it was our moral obligation to bring them back to the country so they could have a chance of a brighter future”⁴⁹.

The complex efforts for repatriation involved cooperation and coordination with governmental bodies and NGOs across the country to help with both repatriation and rehabilitation. On November 28th, 2019, the Kazakh Foreign Ministry stated, “The humanitarian action was carried out by the Foreign Ministry at the request of mothers and relatives of the children in close co-operation with many government agencies, domestic non-governmental organizations, and international organizations.”⁵⁰ An example of this cooperation was the relationship between the Kazakh government and the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC). Leila Baimanova, the chairwomen of the NGO Altyn Karpygash, said of the cooperation between the Kazakh government and the ICRC, “the Red Cross provides assistance to victims of armed conflicts around the world (...) They can help both at the stage of repatriation and in the subsequent rehabilitation of Kazakhs, especially of children.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Yerzhan Ashikbaev’s presentation at the panel discussion organized by the Atlantic council, 08 June 2021

⁴⁹ Yerzhan Ashikbaev, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Aydar Ashimov, ‘Red Cross Gives High Praise for Kazakhstan’s Repatriation Efforts’ (*Caravanserai*) <https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/12/13/feature-01> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁵¹ Farangis Najibullah, ‘The Women Who Came Home: Kazakhstan Tries To Rehabilitate Islamic State Returnees’ (*RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 23 June 2019) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/the-women-who-came-home-kazakhstan-tries-to-rehabilitate-islamic-state-returnees/30015082.html>> accessed 7 June 2021.

Kazakhstan managed to build an effective media strategy and narratives. The government closely worked with the groups of selected leading media outlets and to convey these narratives to the population. Following the narratives conveyed by the authorities about “saving the lives of our citizens” and “we never abandon women and children”, the Kazakh Muslims’ Spiritual Administration released an appeal to the Kazakh public to treat the returned wives of foreign fighters with mercy.⁵² There was a notable amount of positive feedback from the public regarding Operation Zhusan as a humanitarian mission. Following the first part of the operation in January 2019, both citizens and Kazakh officials praised the government for repatriating its people from Syria. Aleksandra Utepova, the spokeswoman for the Kazakhstan Air Assault Troops, wrote, “Kazakhstan does not forget its citizens, it lends a helping hand and takes them under its peaceful sky (...) All you need to do is look into the eyes of these children, and you understand that they have not seen a peaceful life. They've lived their whole childhood in fear”.⁵³ In another move of support, a 32-year-old civilian said in an interview, “These are our Kazakhs (...) Our country looks after its citizens, but the guilty must suffer punishment and those who need help must be helped.”⁵⁴

Many citizens in Kazakhstan, however, voiced concerns regarding the security aspects of repatriating former ISIS members and their families. Yerzhan Ashikbaev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs admits that they did not have full public support. “We reiterated that 500 of the repatriated people were children. We were talking entirely about children, so the message was well-received by society. Still, of course, there are issues that not everyone was happy that the government pays particular attention to these groups, but the overall support for repatriation was quite remarkable”.⁵⁵ In response to the concerns, Presidential Advisor Erlan Karin pointed out that the security threats would have been worse if Kazakhstan had left its citizens in camps in Syria or prisons in Iraq. He stated, “(...) there is a risk of these women and children being exploited by radical extremist groups for various [purposes] (...) Now that they’re safely back in Kazakhstan, there is an opportunity to constantly work with the children, to influence them.”⁵⁶

⁵² Raychev. “Operations for Repatriation of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan Citizens That Have Joined the Islamic State”. Ibid.

⁵³ Aydar Ashimov, ‘Kazakhstan Praised for Rescuing Dozens of Citizens from IS in Syria’ (*Caravanserai*) <https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/01/17/feature-01> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Yerzhan Ashikbaev, Atlantic Council. Ibid.

⁵⁶ Farangis Najibullah, *ibid.*

The main issue for Kazakhstan was mobilizing necessary human resources such as psychologists, social workers, theologians to work with returnees. As Yerzhan Ashikbaev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, shared during an interview with the Bulan Institute, Kazakhstan had no experience working with returnees from conflict zones, “We had been peaceful and never had conflicts. It is the first time we are facing returnees from the conflict zone; we are doing, and we are learning at the same time”.⁵⁷ Kazakhstan mobilized psychologists, theologians, and social workers before the arrival of the first group of returnees and they started working immediately.

Uzbekistan’s Repatriates: Operation Mehr

Between 2019 and 2021, Uzbekistan facilitated the return of 435 women and children from Syria and Iraq through four phases of the repatriation operation “Mehr”. The first stage of the operation brought back 165 people from northeast Syria to Uzbekistan, namely 106 children and 48 women.⁵⁸ A second phase of the operation was conducted in October 2019 and facilitated the repatriation of 64 children from Iraqi prisons whose mothers had been convicted of terrorist crimes. These children were handed over to the Uzbek government for repatriation after gaining the consent of their mothers.⁵⁹ “These children had been living in dire conditions in Iraq. Among the 39 boys and 25 girls who were repatriated, 14 were under 3 years of age and 2 had lost their parents. The Government of Uzbekistan brought those children to their homeland with the consent of their mothers, who are serving various sentences in Iraqi prisons. Some of the women’s husbands are still members of international terrorist organizations, while others were killed during hostilities or are serving prison sentences in Iraq and Syria,” stated Ambassador Ulugbek Lapasov, Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations in Geneva.⁶⁰

Uzbekistan has announced further plans for the repatriation of citizens from Al-Hol and Al-Roj camps in Syria, mostly women and young children.⁶¹ The third and fourth phases have been implemented in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. On December 8th, 2020, 73

⁵⁷ Interview with Yerzhan Ashikbaev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, conducted by the Bulan Institute in Vienna’ (February 2020).

⁵⁸ Raychev, Operations for Repatriation of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan Citizens That Have Joined the Islamic State. Ibid

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Interview with Ambassador Ulugbek Lapasov was conducted by the Bulan Institute on 8th June 2021.

⁶¹ Reuters Staff, ‘Uzbekistan to Repatriate More Citizens from Crowded Syrian Camps, Source Says’ *Reuters* (27 November 2020) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uzbekistan-syria-repatriation-idUSKBN2872E9>> accessed 7 June 2021.

children and 25 women were brought back to Tashkent from Syria. On April 30th, 2021, Uzbekistan repatriated 24 women and 69 children from Northeast Syria.⁶² Munir Mammadzade, Representative of UNICEF to Uzbekistan, praised the Uzbek government's efforts and reiterated UNICEF's commitment to supporting the Government of Uzbekistan in addressing the plight of children and their mothers, who are allegedly associated with or have lived under the control of armed groups.⁶³

Uzbekistan repatriated women and children not only from Syria and Iraq but from Afghanistan too. According to Ambassador Ulugbek Lapasov, Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations in Geneva, 435 citizens, mostly women, and children, were repatriated from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Ambassador Lapasov explains the position of Uzbekistan as its responsibility to protect its citizens. "Convinced that each State Member of the United Nations is responsible for the well-being of its citizens, wherever they may be, Uzbekistan is making systematic efforts to repatriate its citizens from armed conflict zones. Children are victims as they are not responsible for the decisions of their parents. Many women also were misled and deceived. Uzbekistan takes seriously its responsibility to protect its citizens, and especially when it comes to children, we need to take actions in the best interests of children" said Ambassador Ulugbek Lapasov.⁶⁴

One of the unique features of Uzbekistan's approach is that the government has chosen not to imprison any of the women and children who have been repatriated. Instead, the government has treated the female returnees and children as victims of the conflict, in acknowledgment that many were forced to travel to Syria and Iraq by their husbands or parents.⁶⁵ While Kazakhstan arrested and sentenced 13 female returnees, Uzbekistan charged none of the women. A second characteristic is that Uzbekistan decided not to repatriate male fighters from Syria at all. All Uzbek male fighters who survived under ISIS are being held by the Kurdish forces in Northeast Syria. Uzbekistan's repatriation process has centered on the idea of preemptive security,

⁶² Reuters Staff, 'Uzbekistan Repatriates 98 People from Syrian Camps', Reuters, (8 December 2020) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/uzbekistan-syria-repatriation-int-idUSKBN2811LX>>

Reuters Staff, 'Uzbekistan Repatriates 93 Women, Children from Syrian Camp', Reuters, (30 April 2021) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uzbekistan-repatriates-93-women-children-syrian-camp-2021-04-30/>>

⁶³ 'Statement by UNICEF Representative Munir Mammadzade on the Third Round of Repatriation of Uzbekistani Children and Women' <<https://www.unicef.org/uzbekistan/en/third-round-of-repatriation>> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁶⁴ Interview with Ambassador Ulugbek Lapasov was conducted by the Bulan Institute on 8th June 2021.

⁶⁵ Nodirbek Soliev. Syria: Uzbekistan's Approach to IS Detainees. Ibid

distinguishing clearly between the assumed risks posed by male fighters compared to women and children. The notion of preemptive security, or preemptive self-defense, refers to the actions that a state may take unilaterally to reduce or remove a threat that is deemed to be non-imminent.

The government of Uzbekistan has worked with UN agencies and international NGOs, such as UNICEF, to support the effectiveness of their repatriation and rehabilitation programs. UNICEF has aided these efforts by assisting the government with national and local services involved in the reintegration of returnees and with monitoring their progress.⁶⁶ Currently, all returnees face freedom of movement restrictions mandated by the court system, some for up to five years. These returnees also face consistent monitoring by local law enforcement.⁶⁷ Whilst the public has been generally welcoming of child returnees, some skepticism has been shown towards females who have returned from the conflict zones.⁶⁸

Those repatriated to Uzbekistan have been rehabilitated through a model based upon the principle of family and community life, contrasting with Kazakhstan's state coordinated and institutionalized model. Oliya Ilmuradova, director of NGO Barqaror Hayot described, "Our model relies on family members and community, meaning that all the adaptation programs and rehabilitation processes that are carried out with women and children are carried out within the family itself. No additional shelters are created, which allows avoiding expensive costs for their maintenance. All processes are carried out within the family and directly by the family members themselves".⁶⁹ Subsequently, a majority of female returnees and children have been living with their relatives or have been supported by their close family members.

Tajikistan's Repatriates: Children Rescued from Iraq

The Tajik government committed to repatriating hundreds of women and children from Syria and Iraq. However, the country has only partially managed to fulfill its commitment by repatriating dozens of children from Iraq whose mothers were sentenced for terrorist crimes.

⁶⁶ United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism, 'Press Release: Central Asian Experience with Individuals Returned from Syria and Iraq: Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned' (UNCCT, 25 September 2020) <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/200925_unoct_unrcca_press_release_spr_event.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Nodirbek Soliev. Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Oliya Ilmuradova, 'Interview Conducted by the Bulan Institute' (18 April 2018).

On April 30th, 2019, 84 children were repatriated to Tajikistan from the conflict zone.⁷⁰ Tajikistan has expressed the view that women who were coerced into traveling to the conflict zone are victims, not criminals. The Vice-Chair of the Committee on Women's Affairs Marhabo Olimi stated, "Tajik women are obedient; they left at the urge of their husbands. Unfortunately, most of them have received life sentences. In case it is not possible to return them, the commission is going to try to at least mitigate their punishment".⁷¹ However, Tajikistan has not yet managed to repatriate women from Syria and Iraq as promised and it remains unclear whether Tajik women would be charged upon their return home. The Tajik government has unsuccessfully attempted to reach a deal with the Iraqi government regarding the transfer of Tajik female detainees to prisons in Tajikistan.⁷² Currently, 575 women and children who are citizens of Tajikistan remain in Al-Hawl and Roj camps.⁷³

The motivation of the Tajik government to prioritize the repatriation of their citizens from Iraq and Syria comes from previous experiences during the civil war in the 1990s. The Tajik Ambassador to Kuwait, Zubaidullo Zubaidzoda, noted, "such a stance stems from Tajikistan's experience in its civil war of the 1990s when some Tajik families and children were left behind in Afghanistan... We don't want this history to repeat itself with IS families... We don't want to leave anyone behind".⁷⁴ Tajikistan, therefore, applied a compassionate approach to returning fighters by granting them amnesty. In 2015, Tajikistan announced that if Tajik citizens were to voluntarily return and confess to their involvement with ISIS, the government would provide amnesty to all those who had not been armed combatants. The Tajik Ministry of Internal Affairs released a statement clarifying, "Young people who took part in military conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and other countries but have realized their mistake, regret their action, and voluntarily leave the conflict zone (...) will be allowed to return home."⁷⁵ The offer of amnesty was subsequently granted to 120 Tajik citizens who returned voluntarily and were deemed as not posing a threat

⁷⁰ Raychev. Operations for Repatriation of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan Citizens That Have Joined the Islamic State. Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Farangis Najibullah and Mumin Ahmadi, 'Tajikistan Prepares To Repatriate Families Of Islamic State Fighters From Camps In Syria' (*RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty* 10 December 2020) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-prepares-to-repatriate-is-families-from-camps-in-syria/30994273.html>> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁷³ Interview with Rustam Azizi, 'Panel Discussion Organized by the Bulan Institute.' (3 March 2021).

⁷⁴ Farangis Najibullah and Mumin Ahmadi. Ibid.

⁷⁵ 'Tajik IS Militants Told "Return And Repent, And You'll Be Forgiven"' (*Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty*) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-islamic-state-militants-amnesty/27054985.html>> accessed 7 June 2021.

to Tajik society after an extensive vetting process.⁷⁶ Only a few of those who could be identified as former combatants or recruiters faced prison sentences.⁷⁷

Like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Tajikistan worked with the ICRC and UNICEF on its repatriation efforts. In early 2020, the Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhridin noted, “We are...cooperating with UNICEF and the ICRC (...) They [both] expressed readiness to assist with the repatriation and rehabilitation of Tajik citizens”.⁷⁸ Tajikistan created an inter-ministerial working group to coordinate the repatriation and rehabilitation of children from Iraq, which included 12 ministries. Tajikistan placed returned children in 17 different orphanages and special boarding schools throughout the country. The rationale for this decision was the belief that it would be easier for children to recover from the horrors of the conflict if they did not have contact with other children who shared their experiences.⁷⁹

Kyrgyzstan’s Repatriates: Operation Meerim

On March 16th, 2021, Kyrgyzstan repatriated 79 children from Iraq during Operation Meerim, translated as Grace, thus becoming the fourth country in Central Asia that has brought back its citizens from Syria and Iraq.⁸⁰ Approximately 300 women and children with Kyrgyz citizenship remain in Al-Hawl and Roj camps.⁸¹ Operation Meerim was orchestrated in response to public pressure following several organized protests held by family members and their supporters near the White House and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bishkek. “It is worth highlighting that it was a fully humanitarian operation to save the children who were living in conditions that were dangerous for their life and health. And it is the first ever repatriation made on such a scale,” stated the press release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁸² Ruslan Kazakbaev, Minister of Foreign Affairs, who met the children at the Manas airport near

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Farangis Najibullah and Mumin Ahmadi. ‘Tajikistan Prepares To Repatriate Families Of Islamic State Fighters From Camps In Syria’. *Ibid*

⁷⁸ Caravanserai, ‘Tajikistan to Repatriate 500 Citizens Held in Syrian Refugee Camps’ (*Caravanserai*) <https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/02/21/feature-02> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁷⁹ Interview with Rustam Azizi.

⁸⁰ ‘Kyrgyzstan Repatriates Dozens Of Children Born To Militants In Iraq’ (*RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty* 16 March 2021) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-repatriates-children-iraq/31154206.html>> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁸¹ Interview with Woman living in Al - Hawl, ‘This Number Was Mentioned during an Interview Conducted by the Bulan Institute’ (November 2020).

⁸² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyz Republic, ‘79 children repatriated in the framework of the humanitarian operation “Meerim”, Press release,’ (16 March 2021) <<http://mfa.gov.kg/kg/osnovnoe-menyu/press-sluzhba/novosti/v-ramkah-gumanitarnoy-missii-meerim-vozvrashcheny-na-rodinu-79-detey-grazhdan-kyrgyzskoy-respubliki->> accessed 7 June 2021.

Bishkek upon their arrival, told journalists that Operation Meerim followed long negotiations. “The Kyrgyz government started the negotiations with the Iraqi government, UNICEF, and The Red Cross in 2018, but the operation was delayed due to several reasons. However, this time it was successful, thanks to the political will of the new authorities in Kyrgyzstan,” he said.⁸³

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan said Operation Meerim was carried out on two conditions. Firstly, the imprisoned mothers of Kyrgyz children in Iraq were required to give their consent for their children to be repatriated. The Kyrgyz working group spent twenty days in Iraq meeting with officials, paying a fine for every child for their illegal residence in Iraq, participating in court hearings defending the rights of children, and arranging temporary legal guardianship. According to the members of the working group, the most heartbreaking moment during the repatriation operation was when children had to be separated from their mothers. “Not only the mothers, but the children also realized that it was a tragic moment and that they might have been seeing their mothers for the last time. On the plane, the children kept very close to one another, understanding that their mothers were no longer with them. The older ones started taking care of their sisters and brothers. You could see in their eyes that they were afraid to be separated from their siblings too,” stated Aliza Soltonbekova, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection⁸⁴.

The second condition of repatriation was that the relatives of the returnee children, back home in Kyrgyzstan, were required to accept them into their homes and take responsibility for their upbringing.⁸⁵ A significant element of the domestic preparations before Operation Meerim was the work undertaken with relatives and communities to prepare them to accept returnee children. The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection spent almost one year identifying appropriate relatives, assessing their socio-economic conditions, and preparing them to adopt the children. “We have been working with the local authorities and local schools where these children will be living. We gave them a formula for how to treat these children, how to build communication, and how to behave in critical moments to protect the rights of these children. We spent a huge amount of time working with relatives to prepare them to accept these children and to explain

⁸³ ‘The Children Returned from Iraq without Their Parent’ (*Азаттык Уналгысы*, 16 March 2021) <<https://www.azattyk.org/a/31153426.html>> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁸⁴ Interview with Aliza Soltonbekova, ‘Interview Conducted by the Bulan Institute’ (19 May 2021).

⁸⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyz Republic, ‘79 children repatriated in the framework of the humanitarian operation “Meerim”, Press release,’. Ibid.

what kind of trauma and religious indoctrination these children might bring,” reported Aliza Soltonbekova.

The children’s repatriation was conducted with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Kyrgyzstan Red Crescent. Christine Jaulmes, the UNICEF Representative, made a statement commending the commitment of Kyrgyzstan to fulfill its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Children by treating these children primarily as victims in need of protection.⁸⁶ She stated, “UNICEF, under its mandate to uphold children’s rights and building on its long experience of assisting children affected by armed conflict, has supported the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic in this humanitarian operation and will continue supporting the full reintegration of these children into their families and communities,”. UNICEF also called on the media to protect these children by respecting their privacy to avoid any discrimination or stigma.

A key concern for the Kyrgyz government was the need to reduce the stigmatization of ISIS-associated returnees at the community level and they recognized the need to take measures to mitigate it. The authorities organized meetings, trainings, and workshops for journalists in different regions. “It is important to respect the privacy of these children and the families who are adopting them. Journalists are important actors who shape public opinion, so we worked intensively with the media to avoid demonization and stigmatization. But at the same time, journalists also helped us to build our media strategy by guiding and giving invaluable advice,” said Aliza Soltonbekova, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection. Several media workshops were held in Osh and Jalalabad in particular since returnee children are expected to live primarily in those southern regions⁸⁷. The plight of the children is indeed visible in the Kyrgyz media and consistent messages are relayed. The children’s identities have been protected, for example through the use of blurring techniques to hide faces in photos or videos, contrasting with Kazakhstan’s approach which sought to connect the public with the children emotionally by allowing them to see their faces.

⁸⁶ ‘Statement of UNICEF Representative, Christine Jaulmes, on the Repatriation of Kyrgyzstani Children from Iraq’ (16 March 2021) <<https://www.unicef.org/kyrgyzstan/press-releases/statement-unicef-representative-christine-jaulmes-repatriation-kyrgyzstani-children>> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁸⁷ ‘The Ministry of Labor Hosts a Seminar on the Correct Coverage of the Issue of Repatriation of Children from Iraq’ (*Новости Кыргызстана*, 6 September 2019) <<https://kg.akipress.org/news:1565177>> accessed 7 June 2021.

Section IV: Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returnees in Central Asia

The following section describes the steps taken by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to rehabilitate and reintegrate returnees, mainly women and children.

Kazakhstan's Rehabilitation and Reintegration Program

One Month of Quarantine

Following their arrival, all Kazakh returnees were placed in a dedicated rehabilitation center located near the Caspian Sea and subjected to a period of one month in quarantine, during which they received essential medical assistance and were questioned by security services. During this period, at least 12 women were charged with terrorism-related offenses.⁸⁸ The deprivation of citizenship provision of the Constitution was not applied to returnees, allowing them all to retain their Kazakh nationality.⁸⁹

The physical state of the returnees was critical and attributed to the stress, violence, hunger, and injuries endured by them over their time embroiled in armed conflict.⁹⁰ Returnees spoke of being threatened with death if they attempted to flee ISIS, and seeing Kazakh recruits meet horrific ends in botched attempts to desert. Many children as young as eight years old and their mothers presented with gunshot wounds, according to pediatrician Dr. Albina Aitpagambetova.⁹¹ Olga Ryl, Director of NGO Pravo in Kazakhstan, who worked directly with returnees in rehabilitation, informed the Bulan Institute that the quarantine included medical examination and testing for 38 separate infections. "If necessary, a mother or a child was placed in a hospital for primary medical care, this was especially relevant for women and children who returned under Operation Zhusan-2, as there were many injured women and children among them, some of whom had amputated limbs and needed specialized treatment in medical institutions".⁹² All of the women were physically and emotionally exhausted, prompting

⁸⁸ Cook and Vale. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora'II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate". Ibid.

⁸⁹ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova, 'Interview Conducted by the Bulan Institute' (18 April 2021).

⁹⁰ 'Digital Counterterrorism during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kazakhstan – Institute of Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasus Studies' (8 September 2020) <<https://mecacs.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2020/digital-counterterrorism-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-kazakhstan/>> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁹¹ 'Life After IS: What Awaits Kazakhstanis upon Return Home?' (CABAR.asia, 28 May 2019) <<https://cabar.asia/en/life-after-is-what-awaits-kazakhstanis-upon-return-home>> accessed 7 June 2021.

Aydar Ashimov, 'Kazakhs Say Rescued IS Children from Syria "Not to Blame"' (Caravanserai) <https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/06/03/feature-01> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁹² Interview with Olga Ryl, 'Interview Conducted by the Bulan Institute' (18 April 2021).

staffers to provide them with enhanced support.⁹³ The gravity of the wounds required various treatments, from daily dressing changes to neurological care.⁹⁴ Many children suffered from chronic illness as a result of poor or non-existent antenatal care and early life adversity, including malnutrition. According to a Kazakh Foreign Ministry official, all of the children suffered from scabies.⁹⁵ Among the returnees, several pregnant women and newborn children required good quality pediatric and obstetric care.⁹⁶

Gulnaz Razdykova, psychologist and Director of the Pavlodar Province Centre for Analysis and Development of Interfaith Relations in Kazakhstan, informed the Bulan Institute that all returnees suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and shock trauma.⁹⁷ The women seemed aggressive, anxious, depressed, or avoidant, and they often expressed guilt about surviving when loved ones had died, including their children.⁹⁸ A striking way in which post-traumatic stress became evident among the children was their tendency to run and hide when they heard passenger planes flying overhead.⁹⁹ Many children appeared to be suffering from depression. Learning disabilities and delays in speech development was visible in some of the children, while others struggled to read, write, count, and name basic things such as colors.¹⁰⁰

Psychological rehabilitation included providing enabling environments for learning and safe forums in which to explore and process traumatic memories. Activities designed to help women build their confidence and sense of belonging included group sessions involving creative and cultural traditions.¹⁰¹ The foundation of the rehabilitative approach taken with the children included a focus on offering structure through a daily routine, which involved shared meals, exercising, education and sports, and creative activities.¹⁰² They received psychological and theological support for two months.¹⁰³ Initial indications of positive shift described by the

⁹³ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova conducted by the Bulan Institute, *ibid.*

⁹⁴ 'Life After IS: What Awaits Kazakhstanis upon Return Home?'. *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Aidana Yergaliyeva, 'Kazakh Social Workers to Start Adaptation Course for Children Returned from Iraq' (*The Astana Times*, 28 November 2019) <<https://astanatimes.com/2019/11/kazakh-social-workers-to-start-adaptation-course-for-children-returned-from-iraq/>> accessed 7 June 2021.

⁹⁶ Interview with Panel discussion organized by Atlantic Council. *Ibid.*

'Life After IS: What Awaits Kazakhstanis upon Return Home?'. *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova. *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ 'Life After IS: What Awaits Kazakhstanis upon Return Home?'. *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Ashimov, 'Kazakhs Rescued from IS in Syria Tell of Lies, Delusions'.

¹⁰² 'Kazakhstan's "Holistic" Reintegration of Radicals' <<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kazakstans-holistic-reintegration-radicals>> accessed 7 June 2021.

¹⁰³ Andrew E Kramer, 'Kazakhstan Welcomes Women Back from the Islamic State, Warily' *The New York Times* (10 August 2019) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/world/europe/kazakhstan-women-islamic-state-deradicalization.html>> accessed 7 June 2021.

practitioners involved included more spontaneous expressions of joy coming from children who had presented as emotionally disconnected.¹⁰⁴

Ongoing Care in the Community

After one month, those women and children whose relatives managed to obtain clearance were reunited with them, marking the beginning of a long reintegration process spearheaded by local authorities and security services.¹⁰⁵ The reintegration aspects of the program take place in the communities in which the returnees now reside, through support delivered via satellite centers funded through a \$1million budget.¹⁰⁶ Sixteen rehabilitation and reintegration centers have been established throughout Kazakhstan, in the regions of Karaganda, Zhambyl, Aktobe, Atyrau, Akmola, and Almaty, providing ongoing psychological, medical and administrative support, as well as training.¹⁰⁷ The rehabilitation centers of the Pravo Public Fund, located across the country, have been important in the rehabilitation of returnees. Since 2010, they have been especially active in the realm of deradicalization and reintegration of children. Some children are accommodated at these centers with their mothers, while others receive services at day hospitals.¹⁰⁸

Women and children can stay in these regional rehabilitation centers for between six months and one year depending upon their needs.¹⁰⁹ In addition to education and training, an emphasis is placed on the impact of family dynamics on recovery and reintegration, on the basis that familial responses can either help or hinder the process.¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, the quality of service varies significantly from one region to another in terms of coverage, availability, and responsiveness.¹¹¹ Due to the coronavirus pandemic, reintegration processes have been reorganized and brought online, presenting unexpected challenges to the delivery of comprehensive services.

¹⁰⁴ Ashimov, 'Kazakhs Say Rescued IS Children from Syria "Not to Blame"'.
¹⁰⁵ Farangis Najibullah. 'Tajikistan Prepares To Repatriate Families Of Islamic State Fighters From Camps In Syria'. Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ 'Kazakhstan is doing more than Europe', Karavan kz, "[Казakhstan делает больше, чем вся Европа": что пишут иноСМИ о процессе репатриации граждан из Сирии - Новости | Караван \(caravan.kz\)](#)

¹⁰⁷ 'Rimma and Her Children. The Story of a Family Returning from Syria' (*Радио Азаттык*, 30 July 2019) <<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-vozvrashchennyya-iz-sirii-semya/30076294.html>> accessed 7 June 2021.

¹⁰⁸ State Official Interview.

¹⁰⁹ Ksenia Bondal, 'Kazakhstan Rehabilitating Children Recently Returned from Syria, Iraq' (*Caravanserai*) <https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/01/08/feature-01> accessed 7 June 2021.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Nurlan Abdylidaev, a specialist of NGO Asia Group, 'Panel of the Bulan Institute' (2020).

¹¹¹ Jamilya Nurkanova, 'Kazakhstan's State Programme: Prevention of Extremism in Females through Rehabilitation Centres', *Terrorist Deradicalisation in Global Contexts* (Routledge 2019).

Religious Counselling

As Gavin Helf, Senior Advisor at the United States Institute of Peace has highlighted, Kazakhstan took an ideological approach to support returnees to detach from the radical religious ideology promoted under ISIS¹¹². Dozens of theologians were mobilized and trained to work with returnees, a significant and novel challenge for them. They hold group and individual sessions to educate and divert returnees from Salafi and Wahhabi religious tenets, which the government terms “destructive religious movements”.¹¹³ In this way, theologians and psychologists seek to limit the expression of extremism, such as opinions on the causes of war in the Middle East, or discussions of Islamist concepts such as *jihad*, *darul-kufr*, *takfir*, *kafir*, or *tagut*, all associated with violent jihadism. The theologians are available to answer religious questions and help returnees navigate complex religious ideas and views.¹¹⁴ The Pavlodar Foundation has found having a team of deradicalization practitioners and theologians mainly composed of female staff to be effective, in part by helping returnees to open up about subjects such as sexual abuse.

According to Yerzhan Ashykbayev, Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, the data has so far shown that most women returnees have renounced radical ideology, with some purportedly showing evidence of healthier behavior patterns and more mainstream views, such as relaxing their dress code, following local Hanafi practices, and expressing remorse for their engagement with ISIS.¹¹⁵ Some of those returnees now volunteer to assist in deradicalization efforts, thus emerging not only as survivors but as fighters of terrorism, and indicating their successful reintegration into Kazakh society. They assist deradicalization specialists and represent Kazakhstan in international forums on the topic.¹¹⁶ Gulnaz Razdykova, psychologist and Director of the Pavlodar Province Centre for Analysis and Development of Interfaith Relations, acknowledges the continued risk of secondary radicalization, particularly among women married to husbands who themselves express radical views, survivors with vulnerabilities arising from severe injuries or chronic emotional distress, women who return to families who are themselves radicalized, and women who maintain ties

¹¹² Gavin Helf, Panel Discussion organized by the Bulan Institute, Ibid.

¹¹³ Svante E Cornell, S Frederick Starr and Julian Tucker, ‘Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan’ [2018] Electronic Resources) <<http://isdpeu/publication/religion-secular-state-kazakhstan/>> accessed: 22 april 2020).

¹¹⁴ Zhanagul Zhursin, “‘We Walked Right over the Corpses.’ The Story of a Family Exported from Syria” (*Радио Азаттық*, 3 July 2019) <<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-evakuirovannya-iz-syrii--semya/30029865.html>> accessed 7 June 2021.

¹¹⁵ Yerzhan Ashykbayev, Atlantic Council. Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova. Ibid.

with relatives and friends in Syria. When asked about returnees unwilling to partake in rehabilitation, Ms. Razdykova explained that engagement with the Pavlodar Foundation is voluntary, and whilst initially, several women did not want to participate, efforts to engage them paid off, and they subsequently joined the program and started receiving psychological aid and religious counseling.

Psychological Support

Psychological support underlines the deradicalization process, as practitioners observe post-traumatic stress in all adult returnees, especially women who lost children or husbands. They focus on helping beneficiaries process their trauma whilst accepting self-responsibility and reflecting on what can be learned from their experiences. As part of this aim, some female returnees are encouraged to write about their experiences, to become outreach workers, or to participate in television programs talking about their experience, while others started actively writing on social media about their experience under ISIS. The core purpose of rehabilitation programs in Kazakhstan is to assist women and children in returning them to normal life, strengthening their professional skillset, developing their economic capacities, and integrating them back into societies without psychological and mental traumas. Having undergone the rehabilitation programs, some women position themselves not as victims of terrorism, but as active fighters against terrorism by becoming volunteers in rehabilitation programs.¹¹⁷

Trauma treatment has reportedly addressed experiences such as witnessing murders and surviving sexual violence.¹¹⁸ The returnees are encouraged to express their feelings and reflect on their experiences, with the help of art and drama therapy. A sense of a safe therapeutic environment is nurtured and in part serves to minimize judicial pressure and political interference in the rehabilitation process. Such a compassionate approach purportedly helps to foster trust among returnees, who in turn encourage peers to make the most of the opportunity and to develop relationships with those in authority who are offering support. Despite this, some practitioners report the persistence of some radical ideas among program participants.¹¹⁹

Women's Education and Training

¹¹⁷ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova. Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Nurlan Abdyldaev, a specialist of NGO Asia Group. Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Kramer, "Kazakhstan Welcomes Women Back from the Islamic State, Warily". Ibid.

The women returnees who made it back to Kazakhstan arrived with few professional skills, prompting local authorities to offer vocational courses, which have successfully trained hairdressers and beauticians, as well as seamstresses, massage therapists, and manicurists.¹²⁰ Returnees have also been able to study at university.¹²¹ As a result, out of 40 returnees with children, 13 are now employed, 13 are unemployed due to child-caring responsibilities, and of the remaining 14, six have completed vocational courses.¹²² Several female entrepreneurs have emerged from rehabilitation programs, including one woman who opened a confectionery shop, another who opened a hair salon, and a third woman who started a specialized sewing and manufacturing business. Such opportunities support newly reintegrated Kazakh women to become relatively independent from the state and financially self-reliant.¹²³

Children's Education and Development

The extent of the children's indoctrination under ISIS requires a thorough rehabilitation process, but success has so far hinged more on their emotional recovery and healing from trauma, rather than the deconstruction of theological perspectives.¹²⁴ The psychological well-being of children is considered the foundation of their development in the education and social spheres. Olga Ryl, Director of NGO Pravo, stresses that child psychotherapy is a prerequisite for further input from social workers and lawyers under their program.¹²⁵

Significant effort is put into addressing the learning deficits of child returnees, which had developed at least in part due to non-existent or inadequate education under ISIS, such as skills in reading and writing. Psychologists and teachers are jointly involved in preparing children for reintegration into the school system alongside other children. All of the children who were evacuated as part of Operation Zhusan have reportedly gone on to attend a school or a pre-school institution. Olga Ryl has highlighted the importance of providing the children with a thorough grounding in the culture and history of their country to support engagement in learning and leisure and to nurture a sense of security. Such events have included teaching the national anthem of Kazakhstan, visiting national museums, and learning about national

¹²⁰ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova.

¹²¹ Farangis Najibullah, 'Tajikistan Prepares To Repatriate Families Of Islamic State Fighters From Camps In Syria'. Ibid.

¹²² Bondal, 'Kazakhstan Rehabilitating Children Recently Returned from Syria, Iraq'. Ibid.

¹²³ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova, Ibid.

¹²⁴ "'We Walked Right over the Corpses.'" The Story of a Family Exported from Syria'.

¹²⁵ Interview with Olga Ryl conducted by the Bulan Institute, *ibid.*

symbols. Education is provided in both Russian and Kazakh. Awareness-raising initiatives are delivered at the community and school level as part of the prevention of bullying by peers.

The Kazakh policy has been to avoid separating children from their mothers and financial support has been provided in cases where the death of the father is reported. Children that cannot be taken care of by their parents, either because they are deceased or incapable of doing so, are taken in by grandparents.¹²⁶ Attending to the development of child-parent relationships has been found to be an effective aspect of rehabilitation, where dedicated training and activities address parenting skills. For example, a training course regarding the basics of Family Law has helped women under the Pravo program to understand the standards and liabilities associated with the proper performance of parental functions and duties.¹²⁷

Many children did not have identity documents when they arrived in Kazakhstan. Duplicate documents were provided for 113 children returning from Syria immediately,¹²⁸ and diplomatic efforts were carried out with Iraq to compare the DNA of returned children and their imprisoned mothers.¹²⁹ More definitive papers took more time, with at least 3 months needed to establish a birth certificate to assert blood rights to Kazakh citizenship, in a process including genomic tests and court hearings.¹³⁰ On average, the overall process took four months.¹³¹

Adaptations in the Face of COVID-19

Deradicalization efforts were affected by the COVID-19 crisis, which has limited social movement and has led practitioners, such as Gulnaz Maksutovna from the Center for Analysis and Development of Interconfessional Relations (CADIR), to adapt. For example, therapy sessions continue over Zoom and are complemented with a reinforced social media presence and monitoring, such as Instagram streams, as well as best practice learning from international practitioners and seminars for local actors.¹³² The Pavlodar Province Centre also runs a project

¹²⁶ 'Not In Our Name' (RFE/RL) <<https://pressroom.rferl.org/not-in-our-name>> accessed 7 June 2021.

¹²⁷ Interview with Olga Ryl.

¹²⁸ Aidana Yergaliyeva, *ibid*

¹²⁹ 'Kazakhstan's "Holistic" Reintegration of Radicals'.

¹³⁰ Bondal, 'Kazakhstan Rehabilitating Children Recently Returned from Syria, Iraq'. *Ibid*.

Reuters Staff. Uzbekistan Repatriates 93 Women, Children from Syrian Camp. *Ibid*.

¹³¹ Reuters Staff. *Ibid*.

¹³² Cosmin Artimof, 'Digital counterterrorism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kazakhstan' (University of St Andrews 2020) <<https://mecacs.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2020/digital-counterterrorism-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-kazakhstan/>> accessed 13 June 2021

called Zoom Jusan, which allows psychologists and theologians to meet biweekly and share their experiences working with returnees.¹³³

Summary

Kazakhstan is arguably the Central Asian country with the most political will for repatriation while being the most focused on rehabilitation thereafter.¹³⁴ Despite concerns about the persistent radicalization of returnees, the repatriated, mostly children and women, are usually considered survivors of terror who are Kazakh citizens, and thus the responsibility of the Kazakh state. Confidence has been expressed among rehabilitation providers that once returnees are ready to be reintegrated into their families, they do not pose a threat to society. Returnees have also been described as motivated to reintegrate.¹³⁵ However, returnees are robustly tracked and followed up by local authorities once released from quarantine.¹³⁶ The reintegration efforts of Kazakhstan include prison outreach, youth work, and targeted support in areas housing marginalized communities. Satellite centers provide legal and administrative advice and serve to normalize the status of returnee women and their children. However, an understanding that returnees left to join ISIS because they were “too Muslim” pervades Kazakh society and underlines the policy of stringent control on outwards signs of religion.¹³⁷ Recently, the onus has been put on supporting returnees to withstand the socio-economic difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 crisis.¹³⁸

¹³³ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova, *ibid*

¹³⁴ ‘Time to Bring Women and Children Home from Iraq and Syria’ (*Just Security*, 4 June 2019) <<https://www.justsecurity.org/64402/time-to-bring-women-and-children-home-from-iraq-and-syria/>> accessed 7 June 2021.

¹³⁵ Zhanagul Zhursin, “‘We Walked Right over the Corpses.’ The Story of a Family Exported from Syria’. *Ibid*.

¹³⁶ Gavin Helf, ‘Central Asia Leads the Way on Islamic State Returnees’ (2019) <<https://www.usip.org/blog/2019/09/central-asia-leads-way-islamic-state-returnees>>

¹³⁷ ‘Not in Our Name’. *Ibid*.

¹³⁸ UNGA75 Side Event – Central Asian Experience with Individuals Returned from Syria and Iraq | Office of Counter-Terrorism’ <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/events/central_asian_experience> accessed 9 February 2021.

Uzbekistan's Rehabilitation and Reintegration Program

Immediate Medical Treatment

Uzbekistan's authorities seek to support returnee women and children by providing medical, psychological, financial, and moral assistance, including access to educational and social programs, housing, and employment.¹³⁹ The decision to not imprison repatriated women were guided by the perception that they were misled into leaving for Iraq and Syria.¹⁴⁰ Instead, repatriated women and children were initially placed in the Buston Sanatorium, a health resort near the capital Tashkent. The first group of returnees received medical aid due to several injuries and ailments that were apparent, including two women with serious wounds, one boy who had lost his lower limbs, one child suffering from an acute intestinal infection, 25 cases of unspecified somatic illnesses, three children with pneumonia and ear infections, and one child with a severe inflammatory infection of the lower jaw which required hospitalization. Two women returnees had newborn babies just eight and ten days old, and a 14-year-old girl also returned with a young baby aged four months.¹⁴¹ Another woman had lost the use of her left hand.¹⁴² In terms of their emotional wellbeing, most returnees had experienced major trauma, having faced death and multiple losses under ISIS, as well as imprisonment in a foreign country under dire circumstances.¹⁴³

Although delayed due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the third phase of Operation Mehr took place on December 8th, 2020, repatriating a further 73 children and 25 women. Quarantine measures and health checks were all the more stringent as a response to the risk of infection.¹⁴⁴ Specific information about the physical and emotional condition of those returnees

¹³⁹ Radio Azattyk, 'Operation "Good". Uzbekistan removed 156 of its citizens from Syria and Iraq'. (May 31, 2019) <<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/uzbekistan-156-grazhdan-vyvezeny-s-blizhnego-vostoka/29973684.html>>; Elena Zhirukhina, 'Foreign Fighters from Central Asia: Between Renunciation and Repatriation' (2019) <<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/foreign-fighters-central-asia-between-renunciation-and-repatriation-24072>>; Edward Lemon, 'Central Asia brings foreign fighters' families home, but what next?' (2019) <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/returnees-central-asia/>>

¹⁴⁰ Nodirbek Soliev, 'Syria: Uzbekistan's Approach to IS Detainees'. (2019). <<https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/10220/50231/1/Syria%20%20Uzbekistan%E2%80%99s%20Approach%20to%20IS%20Detainees.pdf>>. Page 3.;

Farangis Najibullah, 'The Women Who Came Home: Kazakhstan Tries To Rehabilitate Islamic State Returnees' (2019) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/the-women-who-came-home-kazakhstan-tries-to-rehabilitate-islamic-state-returnees/30015082.html>>

¹⁴¹ Victor Mikhailov, 'What do ordinary citizens think about the "Mehr" humanitarian action?' (2019) <<https://nuz.uz/antiterror/42200-что-думают-простые-граждане-про-гуманитарную-акцию-добро.html>>

¹⁴² Konstantin Agafonov, 'Return from the War' <<http://uzrtend-vsv.tilda.ws/>>

¹⁴³ Rumble Mirzo, *ibid*.

¹⁴⁴ 'Despite the pandemic Uzbekistan is bringing back its citizens from Syria following Russia' (2020) <<https://prevention.kg/?p=9214>>

is not publicly available, but it could be assumed that they required similar levels of treatment as their fellow returnees from the initial phase.

At the sanatorium, as well as medical attention the returnees received psychological support, meals, and new clothing.¹⁴⁵ This process was supported by psychologists specially trained in Women's Committees, which are group-based psychological interventions where returnees are encouraged to participate alongside their mothers and mothers-in-law.¹⁴⁶ Such practices have been found effective with regards to gaining the understanding of family members of their relative's trauma experiences and improving levels of adjustment.¹⁴⁷

Local Family-Based and Community-Led Support

Relocation to the home community typically took place following two to three weeks of assessment and support at the health resort. Government officials promised to support returnees with educational and social programs, as well as housing and employment upon their return.¹⁴⁸ According to Ambassador Ulugbek Lapasov, Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations in Geneva, the Uzbek government is providing the returnees, who had erred in leaving the country and suffered considerable hardships, with comprehensive medical, psychological, material, and moral support in partnership with the United Nations and other international organizations. "The returnees were provided with access to educational and other social programs, including housing and employment programs, enabling them to return to a peaceful life and reintegrate into society. A majority of children have successfully integrated and enjoying school education. Many women have found jobs and are working" said Ambassador Lapasov.¹⁴⁹

This support has been arranged through the collaboration of state institutions, local authorities, banks, and civil society institutions and is provided at a regional level once returnees have

¹⁴⁵ Victor Sidorenko, 'Uzbekistan Returned 64 Children from Iraq' (*CABAR.asia*, T13:51:39+06:00?) <<https://cabar.asia/ru/uzbekistan-vernul-64-rebenka-iz-iraka>> accessed 7 June 2021.

Rumble Mirzo, "'MEXR-3': Return to a Peaceful and Happy Life' [2020] <https://yuz.uz> <<https://yuz.uz/ru/news/mexr-3-vozvraenie-k-mirnoy-i-schastlivoy-jizni>> accessed 7 June 2021.

Radio Ozodlik, 'Women and Children Returned from Syria: Social Networks Divided into Two Camps (Video)' (*Радио Озодлик*, 11 December 2020) <<https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/30994578.html>> accessed 7 June 2021.

¹⁴⁶ Victor Sidorenko, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Oliya Ilmuradova, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Ekaterina Panteleeva, 'In Uzbekistan, a Woman Returned from Syria Was Presented with an Apartment' (19 June 2019) <<http://www.news-asia.ru/view/12479>> accessed 7 June 2021.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Ulugbek Lapasov, *ibid.*

relocated home to their native communities. Regional educational and social centers act as core pillars of the rehabilitation support network, with the International Social and Educational Centre, Barqaror Hayot, meaning Sustainable Life, rehabilitating 22 families, including 64 children.¹⁵⁰ Women’s centers around the country also offer professional training, guidance on healthy living, and assistance with reintegrating into community life.¹⁵¹

According to Oliya Ilmuratova, director of the NGO Barqaror Hayot, the rehabilitation model is based on the active involvement of family members in scaffolding the returnee women and children during their reintegration.¹⁵² Following the first stage consisting of emergency medical care and needs assessment, including replacement of identity papers,¹⁵³ returnees were housed, and the second “active rehabilitation” stage began. With separate pathways for women and children, family members play a crucial part in helping returnees to participate in family, education or employment, and community life with confidence and a sense of being supported. Family members also play an active part in structuring the rehabilitation process with the returnees and their support workers.¹⁵⁴ In the final stage of rehabilitation and reintegration, Barqaror Hayot remains actively involved in supporting returnee women to pursue employment, with several women launching family businesses.¹⁵⁵

Children’s Rehabilitation Pathway

UNICEF has played a major role in supporting the children’s rehabilitation pathway through the provision of essential immunizations and intensive educational programs.¹⁵⁶ Comprehensive medical, psychological, and social assistance has featured in the rehabilitation pathway in reflection of the perception of children as victims of terrorism.¹⁵⁷ The challenges involved in mitigating the impact of exposure to terrorism and detention on the future health and prospects of the children are apparent, but local organizations such as Barqaror Hayot

¹⁵⁰ Interview of Oliya Ilmuratova. Ibid.

Konstantin Agafonov, ‘Return from the War’. Ibid.

¹⁵¹Rumble Mirzo, “‘MEXR-3’: Return to a Peaceful and Happy Life’. Ibid.

¹⁵² Interview of Oliya Ilmuratova. Ibid

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Maksim Yeniseyev, Uzbekistan begins rehabilitation of repatriated 'victims of deception' from Syria”, 2019, from: https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/06/11/feature-01

¹⁵⁷Victor Sidorenko, “Uzbekistan returned 64 children from Iraq” 2019, from: <https://cabar.asia/ru/uzbekistan-vernul-64-rebenka-iz-iraka>; <https://nuz.uz/sobytiya/43804-specoperaciya-dobro-prodolzhaetsya.html>.

continue to express determination to support them. In their experience, children under five appear easier to rehabilitate, whilst older children can occasionally revert to references to extremist views when practitioners engage them regarding their past experiences.¹⁵⁸ Depending upon their unique experiences and backgrounds, rehabilitation plans can reportedly be fine-tuned according to the needs of each child.

Some of the children, primarily those who were born in Syria or Iraq, were initially unfamiliar with their family members, making early interactions and settling into education more difficult. An important intervention here is support from NGOs and other local organizations to assist with conflict resolution and the development of secure attachments. Those children without close relatives available to support their rehabilitation are placed in residential care with other children to support resocialization.¹⁵⁹ Eighteen families have been vetted and permitted to accommodate separated or unaccompanied minors, with positive results at least in the short to medium term.¹⁶⁰ Support to manage conflict is extended to the school environment where difficulties with peers are monitored and attended to with the support of NGO workers. The provision of additional classes in school and at home is prioritized so that children with the potential can catch up with their same-aged peers within a few years.¹⁶¹

Religious Counselling

Uzbek Muslim institutions such as the Imam al-Bukhari International Research Center in Samarkand, the Center for Islamic Civilization, and the Islamic Academy in Tashkent, make significant contributions concerning the religious counseling and the deradicalization of returnees. They promote an “Enlightenment against ignorance” approach in Uzbekistan, aimed at explaining Islam to young people to support them to move away from extremism.¹⁶² This provision is unique in that NGOs, such as Barqaror Hayot, who are involved in the rehabilitation of returnees, focus on socialization and the restoration of family and community roles before touching on the issue of religious beliefs. In some cases, when the subject of religious beliefs is broached early on, returnees have reportedly responded defensively and

¹⁵⁸ Interview of Oliya Ilmuratova, *ibid*

¹⁵⁹ *ibid*.

¹⁶⁰ ‘UNGA75 Side Event – Central Asian Experience with Individuals Returned from Syria and Iraq | Office of Counter-Terrorism’.

¹⁶¹ Interview of Oliya Ilmuratova, *ibid*

¹⁶² ‘UNGA75 Side Event – Central Asian Experience with Individuals Returned from Syria and Iraq | Office of Counter-Terrorism’.

have appeared to distance themselves from practitioners.¹⁶³ Support workers from the NGOs take the approach of offering returnees acceptance and collaboration to create the conditions under which returnees can re-evaluate their life decisions and make new ones with the support of their family, wherever possible.¹⁶⁴

Outcomes to Date

The limited rehabilitation experience of the Uzbek authorities compared to other countries accounts for the modest nature of the rehabilitation and reintegration program.¹⁶⁵ There is little data on the specific outcomes experienced by returnees following their relocation to their respective communities.¹⁶⁶ According to the accounts of NGO workers, the duration of rehabilitation is contingent on the specific needs of each returnee, demanding flexibility concerning the duration of support, the scale of resources required, and the willingness of each returnee to engage in the program. Where returnees are reluctant, engagement through consultation to the family can be one means of ensuring some form of rehabilitation support is provided.¹⁶⁷ The government is reportedly developing specialized psychosocial support, with the possibility of providing it for months, or even years, if necessary.¹⁶⁸

The Uzbek reintegration effort aims to create a favorable environment for women and children to return to their communities. This includes educational support for children and women married forcibly as children, economic support for women, and social benefits to entitled returnees. Practitioners report that returnees have reintegrated well on average, gradually increasing their presence in the community.¹⁶⁹ One example of success shared with the Bulan Institute was a returnee who went on to become a successful farmer thanks to state aid and housing assistance, who now employs 60 women to produce vegetables and dairy products for the local markets.¹⁷⁰ Twelve returnees have been provided with housing, five returnees have been assisted with home renovations, two have been assisted in arranging their wedding

¹⁶³ Interview of Oliya Ilmuratova, Ibid

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ ‘Returned from Hell ...’ (*Новости Узбекистана сегодня: nuz.uz*, T10:30:08+00:00?) <<https://nuz.uz/obschestvo/1176626-vozvrashennyye-iz-ada.html>> accessed 8 June 2021.

¹⁶⁶ Victor Sidorenko, “Uzbekistan returned 64 children from Iraq”. *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Interview of Oliya Ilmuratova. *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ ‘UNGA75 Side Event – Central Asian Experience with Individuals Returned from Syria and Iraq | Office of Counter-Terrorism’.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Interview of Oliya Ilmuratova. *Ibid.*

celebrations, one returnee has been supported to obtain commercial premises, and equipment has been provided to those in need of household appliances or pursuing vocational qualifications. Financial benefits have been granted by community authorities to 27 returnees with newborn babies. Out of 48 adult returnees, 14 have entered employment, six are being supported to pursue entrepreneurship, and 27 have been helped to start farming. Beyond the pardoned returnees, some are serving sentences including probation and are being monitored by law enforcement agencies, according to the Uzbek Code of Procedure. According to testimony obtained by the Bulan Institute through interviews with NGOs, there has not been a single case of recidivism.¹⁷¹

Tajikistan's Rehabilitation and Reintegration Program

The Tajik repatriation process has been heavily influenced by the experience of the reintegration of former fighters in the aftermath of the Tajik civil war, whose number far surpassed that of the current returnees from Iraq. In the aftermath of the war, a solid infrastructure of disarmament, repatriation, rehabilitation, and reconciliation of fighters from both sides established a longstanding policy of pardon for returnees.¹⁷²

Tajikistan's approach to the rehabilitation of returnees focuses more on the aim of consolidating their commitment to their national identity and reintegrating into the community, as opposed to deradicalization. Some returnees who received amnesty are now involved in outreach projects and initiatives to raise awareness, while others have been convicted of their involvement in terrorist recruitment or armed combat as a result of investigations by authorities.¹⁷³ The requirements of regret and voluntary return are noteworthy, as they suggest a search for newfound loyalty in the potential returnees rather than humanitarian needs, for example.

The 84 children who were repatriated from Iraqi prisons with their mother's consent were placed in a sanatorium upon their return where they were supported by psychologists on an individual basis. Once it was established that they were not a threat to the community, they were relocated to residential care and special boarding schools.¹⁷⁴ Unless they were siblings, all of the children were separated at this point. Only fifteen families applied to accommodate

¹⁷¹ Interview of Oliya Ilmuratova. Ibid.

¹⁷² Gavin Helf, 'Central Asia Leads the Way on Islamic State Returnees'. Ibid.

¹⁷³ Elena Zhirukhina, 'Foreign Fighters from Central Asia: Between Renunciation and Repatriation'. Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Rustam Azizi, Panel Discussion. Ibid.

some of the children, due to stigma or fear of the involvement of security forces or social services. “They have the fear that these children may have negative effects on their own children and also they don’t want to attract the constant attention of law enforcement agencies and social services. There was a problem in schooling as some parents don’t want their children to go to the same school with children who have returned from Iraq,” stated Rustam Azizi, Deputy Director of the Center for Islamic Studies and Advisor to the President of Tajikistan¹⁷⁵.

There is understandable concern from the government that families are not ready to reunite with their children. There is the additional issue of legal guardianship which would require parental rights to be revoked by the courts, a process which is complicated by the ongoing detention of their mothers in Iraqi prisons.¹⁷⁶ Social workers and psychologists involved in the care of the children, however, feel that early family unification could be counter-productive due to the extent of the children’s trauma and the skills required to support them. “These children saw horrors of war and they should be under constant mentoring of psychologists and teachers because their relatives are not prepared to deal with their trauma and stress”.¹⁷⁷

In contrast to other Central Asian countries, Tajikistan has not involved civil society in the development of its rehabilitation and reintegration processes. Consequently, a serious challenge to the process has been a shortage of well-trained specialists to work with the returnees, including psychologists, social workers, and media workers. According to Rustam Azizi, to ensure a successful rehabilitation process, Tajikistan needs to cooperate and increase the level of involvement with NGOs and civil society. “While there is a need for organized state control, the increase of involvement of civil society will enable us to make the process more successful and more integrated”. The lack of participation of civil society also makes it difficult to learn from the experience of Tajikistan as detailed information about the repatriated children and their progress is hard to come by.

Kyrgyzstan’s Rehabilitation and Repatriation Program

Children who returned to Kyrgyzstan were accommodated in a children’s residential home in the Chuy region which was originally equipped for disabled children. The children were reportedly amazed at the sight of snow as well as the extent of their newfound freedom, “What

¹⁷⁵ Rustam Azizi, Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Rustam Azizi. Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

was remarkable was how the children were running around the territory of the residence and playing with snow. Some of them had spent four years in the Iraqi prison and had never had the opportunity to move freely and run,” said one of the social workers¹⁷⁸.

The very first stage of rehabilitation was medical quarantine. Medical personnel was ready to work with the children and all of them passed the medical examination. Dozens of analyses were made to check for infections, but nothing serious was found. The children, aged between 2 and 18 years of age, were generally in good health, but initially appeared small or young for their age as a result of malnutrition. Social workers taking care of the children have described how much they have changed in appearance during their first two months in their home country. They have reportedly grown and continue to get stronger and are eating and sleeping well.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and the Ministry of Health have jointly coordinated the rehabilitation and reintegration program in Kyrgyzstan. “We have created a special menu for the children so they can recover and gain some strength. Most of the children have never eaten milk products, as they never had them in Iraq. They also did not see many different dishes and foodstuffs, so we had to explain the foods and give them some to try. Within four to five days, the children started eating well. We also spent some time teaching them to use the bathroom and to wash themselves, to clean their teeth,” said Aliza Soltonbekova, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection¹⁷⁹.

More than ten psychologists reside with the children at the residential home where theologians also provide support. Each child is receiving psychological assistance involving a comprehensive assessment of their psychological, social, and pedagogical needs. The Bulan Institute was unable to interview the psychologists and theologians who are directly working with the children as they said it is too early to report on progress. As part of their assessments, the psychologists and theologians flag any concerns and make recommendations about what needs to be done for each child and what kind of support they may need in the future.

The children are reportedly encouraged to draw, play, and have started learning the Kyrgyz alphabet. Whilst the returnee children speak several languages between them, they cannot read or write. “Our children speak in Turkish, Arab, Uzbek, and Kyrgyz. Some of them know some

¹⁷⁸ ‘Interview with Social Workers Who Preferred to Remain Anonymous Conducted by Bulan Institute through WhatsApp.’

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Aliza Soltonbekova was conducted by the Bulan Institute

English and French. They never went to school, so now we are starting an assessment of every child's preparedness for education. We need to identify which grade they should go into, as their learning level does not currently match their chronological age. Additional tutoring will be organized for many of them," stated Deputy Minister Soltonbekova.

The children will be allocated places in schools and kindergartens in September 2021. During the summer, regional local authorities continue to work to prepare the children for this transition. According to the observations of local specialists, the children are quick to learn new things. "These children will be absorbing new material with enthusiasm. Many of them are dreaming already about going to school and making new friends. They speak several languages. It is impressive how they read by heart the long verses of the Quran which means they can learn. Many children have strong characters and know how to overcome difficulties. So, we are sure that they will catch up with the school program and will adapt very fast," shared a social worker from the residential unit.¹⁸⁰

The Kyrgyz authorities are planning to hand over the children to their grandparents or other close relatives in one month. Court hearings are underway and necessary documents are being prepared to support this process. Every child reportedly has a relative ready and willing to adopt them and no child is going to be placed into residential care long term. "In June of this year, we are hoping that all children will go to their families. We worked with relatives before repatriation, so they are ready to take them. Even some grandparents are coming to the residence and hoping to see the children, but we cannot allow them to meet yet due to COVID-19. Instead, we organize video calls so they can see each other and talk. The children have mobile phones, so they speak every day," stated Deputy Minister Soltonbekova.

¹⁸⁰ 'Interview with Social Workers Who Preferred to Remain Anonymous Conducted by Bulan Institute through WhatsApp.'

Section V: Emerging Good Practice and Early Indicators of Success

Drawing upon the information contained in this report, acknowledging the limitations of those sources, this section tentatively identifies factors that have contributed to the implementation of repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of predominantly women and child survivors of ISIS. The willingness of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan to welcome returnees from Syria and Iraq, recognize the victimization they endured, and to encourage a collective responsibility towards their welfare is certainly one major factor that cannot be emphasized enough. Whilst hopeful of success, the authorities in Central Asian countries adopted a realistic approach to the social challenges of welcoming returnees. The significant efforts that have gone into preparations for safe repatriation, comprehensive rehabilitation, and effective reintegration are noteworthy and the involvement of civil organizations, in particular, seem essential. The experience in rebuilding communities following conflict and reintegrating fellow-citizens held by actors in the region has no doubt been invaluable. The necessary step of quarantining returnees demonstrates the authorities' careful consideration to the vulnerability of returnees and the desperate nature of the environment from which they were rescued. The holistic nature and systemic approach characteristic of the rehabilitation programs described draws upon the current understanding of the importance of social connection and cooperation for human development and social progress.

a. Previous experience and collaboration with civil society

The Central Asian countries developed their rehabilitation and reintegration programs based on previous experiences but have been open to learning through the process of implementation. For example, the Tajik Civil War led to the Protocol on Refugee Issues in response to the need to safeguard and return 6600 refugees from Northern Afghanistan in October 1997, which served as a basis for the current Tajik policies and infrastructure.¹⁸¹ Stemming from the Civil War experience, the longstanding policy of amnesty and reconciliation conditioned on repentance for traveling to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS is a cornerstone of the current Tajik

¹⁸¹ UNDHA, 'Updated Donor Alert on Urgent Humanitarian Needs in Tajikistan - Tajikistan.' (ReliefWeb November 1 1997) <<https://reliefweb.int/report/tajikistan/updated-donor-alert-urgent-humanitarian-needs-tajikistan>>

repatriation operation .¹⁸² This resulted in the pardoning of half of the Tajik returnees as of 2018, and the conviction of the other half for violent actions. This approach recognizes the complexities of involvement with ISIS in Syria and Iraq and goes some way towards intervening to protect and help survivors to recover, whilst bringing justice where crimes were committed.

Uzbekistan also built upon prior experience, using the concept of preemptive security as a guiding principle for its operations. Preemptive security had already been experimented with during the 2000s as it repatriated members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami. Moreover, civil society organizations such as Barqaror Hayot have been working since 2017 with self-returnees, thus developing their skill set and the necessary infrastructure to deliver effective services.¹⁸³ The Kazakh government also drew upon its experience for the benefit of repatriation operations since it had already repatriated 27 families between 2016 and 2018 before Operation Zhusan.¹⁸⁴ It also benchmarked deradicalization and reintegration processes in other countries.¹⁸⁵

One of the best practices evident in the efforts of Central Asia is the collaborative partnerships developed between government and civil society, albeit to different degrees. The involvement of civil society organizations filled many gaps in terms of building trust, preparing, and mobilizing essential practitioners across disciplines, and gaining from a wealth of experience in working with returnees and other vulnerable groups. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan especially welcomed the active involvement of civil society organizations, delegating the coordination and delivery of many phases of rehabilitation and reintegration, in recognition of their skill and capacity in developing local solutions. Keneshbek Sainazarov, Central Asia Director at Search for Common Ground, has highlighted the important role played by civil society, “Many of the individuals came back with a lot of fear and distrust and there were a lot of stereotypes and stigma in the society. But the civil society organizations have played a critical role in ironing out these issues at the community level, even working at the family level so that these individuals don't face discrimination when they come back to their communities”¹⁸⁶.

¹⁸² Gavin Helf, ‘Central Asia Leads the Way on Islamic State Returnees’. Ibid.

¹⁸³ Interview of Oliya Ilmuratova. Ibid

¹⁸⁴ Raychev. Operations for Repatriation of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan Citizens That Have Joined the Islamic State. Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova. Ibid

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Keneshbek Sainazarov. Ibid

b. Minimizing stigmatization at the national and local level

Central Asian governments have skillfully created a discursive environment conducive to the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees. The principal discursive tool for this has been to replace the narrative of terrorist sympathizing surrounding ISIS-affiliated nationals with one of victimhood, vulnerability, and shared identity. In Tajikistan, returnees were commonly considered traitors and terrorists, until the government shifted the narrative by framing the repatriation operation as a humanitarian response.¹⁸⁷ The Tajik Ministry of Internal Affairs played an important role in framing the returnees as non-threatening, stating “Young people who [...] have realized their mistake, regret their action, and voluntarily leave the conflict zone...will be allowed to return home.”¹⁸⁸ The framing of mistaken and regretful returnees was also echoed in the public space, with Vice-Chair of the Committee on Women’s Affairs Marhabo Olimi stating that Tajik women were misled by their husbands to leave for Syria and Iraq.¹⁸⁹ The Tajik Ambassador to Kuwait, Zubaidullo Zubaidzoda, reinforced the returnees’ belonging to the Tajik population by stating, “We don’t want to leave anyone behind.”¹⁹⁰ Amnestied returnees were declared not to be a threat to the wider society.¹⁹¹

This was echoed in Kazakhstan by the president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who declared “None of our people will be left behind,”¹⁹² a symptom of the growing humanization of returnees in Kazak public discourse.¹⁹³ Earlier, the response of Kazakhstan had been to deny

¹⁸⁷ Anushervon Aripov, “‘There were deaths every day’: people from ISIS territories in Syria and Iraq are returning to Tajikistan” (2018) <<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/29029380.html>>

¹⁸⁸ Farangis Najibullah, ‘Tajik IS Militants Told ‘Return and Repent, and You’ll Be Forgiven,’’ *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, 5 June 2015.

¹⁸⁹ Yavor Raychev, ‘Operations for repatriation of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan citizens that have joined the Islamic State,’ *Ibid.* Page 169.

¹⁹⁰ Farangis Najibullah and Mumin Ahmadi, ‘Tajikistan Prepares to Repatriate Families of Islamic State Fighters from Camps in Syria,’ *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, 10 December 2020.

¹⁹¹ Farangis Najibullah, ‘Tajik IS Militants Told ‘Return and Repent, and You’ll Be Forgiven,’’ *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, 5 June 2015. <<https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-islamic-state-militants-amnesty/27054985.html>>

¹⁹² Zhirukhina, ‘Foreign Fighters from Central Asia: Between Renunciation and Repatriation’ (2019)

¹⁹³ Nodirbek Soliev, ‘Syria: Uzbekistan’s Approach to IS Detainees’. (Nanyang Technical University 2019) <<https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/10220/50231/1/Syria%20%20Uzbekistan%E2%80%99s%20Approach%20to%20IS%20Detainees.pdf>>

Stevan Weine. ‘I’ve Met the Children of ISIS Fighters. Their Home Countries Can’t Abandon Them Forever.’ *USA Today*. (Gannett Satellite Information Network December 18, 2019) <<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2019/12/18/islamic-state-isis-families-children-repatriation-extremism-column/2667418001/>>

Farangis Najibullah, ‘The Women Who Came Home: Kazakhstan Tries To Rehabilitate Islamic State Returnees.’ *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. June 23, 2019. <<https://www.rferl.org/a/the-women-who-came-home-kazakhstan-tries-to-rehabilitate-islamic-state-returnees/30015082.html>>

the presence of its citizens in Syria and Iraq,¹⁹⁴ but, faced with undeniable evidence, it shifted to the discourse that they had been misled by foreign ideologies.¹⁹⁵ The specific focus on children in this discourse is notable and reflected in their majority among groups of returnees. President Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev stated that “Ensuring the safety of children became the main goal of the operation Zhusan.”,¹⁹⁶ echoed by Kazakhstan’s Deputy Foreign Minister Yerzhan Ashikbayev who said, “Given the number of women and children, this is a humanitarian operation...They were without access to their basic needs of food, shelter, clean water, health and education,”¹⁹⁷ and Aleksandra Utepova, spokesperson for the Kazakhstan Air Assault Troops, stating, “All you need to do is look into the eyes of these children, and you understand that they have not seen a peaceful life. They've lived their whole childhood in fear.”¹⁹⁸ As in Tajikistan, Kazakh victimization discourse focused on women, with the Kazakh Muslims’ Spiritual Administration appealing for returned wives of foreign fighters to be treated with mercy.¹⁹⁹ As such, children and women were discursively disconnected from Kazakh male returnees who were more readily cast as terrorists.²⁰⁰ Returnees themselves were directly associated with this shift in discourse in giving interviews to local and foreign media and participating in the publication of hundreds of materials about Operation Zhusan.²⁰¹

c. Operational qualities

The careful approach to repatriation operations was conducive to making them a success, with the key components being the high level of discretion, necessarily lengthy preparations, and cooperation with multiple stakeholders involved. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in each of the four countries cooperated directly with Iraqi officials and the relevant actors in Syria to ensure the safe repatriation of their citizens²⁰². They also cooperated with multilateral

¹⁹⁴ Yavor Raychev, ‘Operations for repatriation of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan citizens that have joined the Islamic State,’ Ibid. Page 167.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 167.

¹⁹⁶ Tamara Abubakarova, ‘Tokayev’s statement: 171 children evacuated from Syria,’ (*informburo* 31 May 2019). <<https://informburo.kz/novosti/zayavlenie-tokaeva-iz-sirii-evakuirovali-171-rebyonka.html>>

¹⁹⁷ Asim Kashgarian, ‘Could Kazakhstan Efforts to Repatriate Foreign Fighters Be a Model?’ VOA, (15 January 2021) <<https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/could-kazakhstan-efforts-repatriate-foreign-fighters-be-model>>

¹⁹⁸ Aydar Ashimov, ‘Kazakhstan praised for rescuing dozens of citizens from IS in Syria,’ (*Caravanserai*, 17 January 2019).

¹⁹⁹ Yavor Raychev, ‘Operations for repatriation of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan citizens that have joined the Islamic State,’ Ibid. Page 168.

²⁰⁰ Stevan Weine, ‘Rehabilitating The Islamic State’s Women And Children Returnees In Kazakhstan’, (*Just Security* 2019) <<https://www.justsecurity.org/67694/rehabilitating-the-islamic-states-women-and-children-returnees-in-kazakhstan/>>

²⁰¹ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova. Ibid

²⁰² Interview with Rustam Azizi. Ibid.

organizations. The Kazakh government, for example, worked in tandem with the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC) in negotiations with Iraqi and Syrian officials.²⁰³ Starting in 2017, it also held multilevel negotiations on Syria.²⁰⁴ Similarly, the Uzbek government partnered with UNICEF.²⁰⁵ The Uzbek NGO Barqaror Hayot worked with the International Organization for Migration, which provided equipment for self-employed women.²⁰⁶ Tajikistan also worked with UNICEF and the ICRC.²⁰⁷ Such collaboration helped foster financial and advisory support, ensuring operations were run with a high standard.

Once the initial decision-making process with Syrian and Iraqi interlocutors was underway, governments painstakingly prepared repatriation operations whilst maintaining a high level of secrecy, with Kazakh operatives negotiating a secret secure zone in Syria to stage the first phase of Operation Zhusan.²⁰⁸ Similarly, Operation Rusafa, which sought to repatriate Kazakh children from Iraq, was undertaken in complete secrecy with six months of preparation which involved the tricky task of proving the citizenship of the returnees.²⁰⁹ Such operations were underpinned by legislative changes, such as the expansion of criminal liability for terrorist actions.

d. Holistic approaches

The holistic nature of both the rehabilitation and reintegration processes described can be considered an important factor in their success. The infrastructure required for the delivery of effective rehabilitation support was reinforced where possible before repatriations took place, with the training and recruitment of psychologists, theologians, and social workers.²¹⁰

The multidisciplinary support provided by Kazakh psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, theologians, lawyers, nurses, and teachers to returnees and their families as part of

²⁰³ Farangis Najibullah, 'The Women Who Came Home.' (2019). Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova. Ibid

²⁰⁵ U.S. Department of State, "Uzbekistan - United States Department of State." December 1, 2020. <<https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/uzbekistan/>>

²⁰⁶ Interview of Oliya Ilmuratova.

²⁰⁷ Caravanserai, 'Tajikistan to Repatriate 500 Citizens Held in Syrian Refugee Camps.' Caravanserai. (Caravanserai, February 21, 2020) <https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/02/21/feature-02.>

²⁰⁸ Raychev, 'Operations for repatriation of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan citizens that have joined the Islamic State.' Ibid. Page 167.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 168.

²¹⁰ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova. Ibid

rehabilitation and reintegration is an example of comprehensive care.²¹¹ Trauma treatment has reportedly been adjusted to respond sensitively to Muslim and Kazakh cultural specificities,²¹² is provided in a way that shields returnees from excessive surveillance and interference from the security apparatus, and includes body-based interventions such as art and drama therapy.²¹³ Regional reintegration centers support women and children by providing administrative assistance to restore their legal existence and obtain birth and marriage certificates, placing children into schools, and accompanying them by helping to resolve legal, social, and economic problems. Differing from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Kazakhstan integrated deradicalization into its interventions on the basis that the risk of harm to society would be reduced.²¹⁴ Comprehensive care was also provided in Uzbekistan, where services ranged from medical, psychological, financial, and moral assistance, including educational and social programs, housing, and employment.²¹⁵ Interventions have been provided at multiple levels, individual, family, and community, thus displaying sensitivity towards the systemic nature of wellbeing and further supporting the chances of recovery and belonging.

e. Initial quarantine and ongoing surveillance

One crucial aspect of practice has been the immediate quarantine of returnees upon their arrival, as this provided opportunity for necessary medical care, immunizations, and the establishment of an early sense of safety. It also acted as a buffer against any possible communication with contacts who might have otherwise sought to re-involve returnees in extremist activities. The quarantine process was especially prominent in Kazakhstan at the Aktau quarantine camp.²¹⁶ In the center, whilst returnees were being screened and treated, the media, the general public, and even family members were forbidden. A similar process occurred in Uzbekistan with

²¹¹ Stevan Weine, 'Rehabilitating The Islamic State's Women And Children Returnees In Kazakhstan' (Just Security 2019) <<https://www.justsecurity.org/67694/rehabilitating-the-islamic-states-women-and-children-returnees-in-kazakhstan/>>

²¹² Nurlan Abdyldaev, a specialist of NGO Asia Group. Ibid.

²¹³ Andrew Kramer, "Kazakhstan Welcomes Women Back From the Islamic State, Warily", 2019, from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/world/europe/kazakhstan-women-islamic-state-deradicalization.html>

²¹⁴ Cornell, S. Starr and Tucker, 'Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan' (2017),

<<https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2018-04-Kazakhstan-Secularism.pdf>>

²¹⁵ Radio Azattyk, 'Operation "Good". Uzbekistan removed 156 of its citizens from Syria and Iraq'. (May 31, 2019) <<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/uzbekistan-156-grazhdan-vyvezeny-s-blizhnego-vostoka/29973684.html>>;

Elena Zhirukhina, 'Foreign Fighters from Central Asia: Between Renunciation and Repatriation' (2019)

<<https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/foreign-fighters-central-asia-between-renunciation-and-repatriation-24072>>; Edward Lemon, ibid.

²¹⁶ Gavin Helf, 'Central Asia Leads the Way on Islamic State Returnees'. Ibid.

returnees being placed in a sanatorium, especially to receive medical attention,²¹⁷ with reinforced measures after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.²¹⁸

Related to this are measures of confinement and surveillance during and after rehabilitation, which seek to "quarantine" any potential threat that the returnees may pose. In Kazakhstan for example, returnees released from the quarantine camp were still robustly tracked by both security and social services, including strong restrictions on outward signs of religion.²¹⁹ Moreover, as they were reintegrated into their local communities, they attended regional rehabilitation centers which allowed their tracking.²²⁰ Relatedly, even before the repatriation operations, extremist content was blocked on the Kazakh internet nationwide, and Kazakh courts banned the Islamic State, the Al-Nusra Front, and the Takfir wal-Hijra Front, while extremist preachers were deported or imprisoned.²²¹ Similarly, many of the pardoned prisoners remain on the government watchlist, yet are allowed to enroll in universities, seek employment, and travel abroad.²²² In some instances, proactive measures were used to support the development of links with positive influences within the local community, for example in Kazakhstan where women were encouraged to socialize with women who were not fellow returnees.²²³

f. Cross-governmental approach and multi-stakeholder processes

In all four countries, the provision of quarantining and holistic rehabilitative care has been predicated upon the collaboration of diverse national stakeholders, which could be described as a cross-governmental approach complemented by the participation of civil society, academic, and media actors.²²⁴

In Tajikistan, a foreign affairs division coordinated the activities of the Ministry of Foreign

²¹⁷ Victor Mikhailov, 'What do ordinary citizens think about the "Mehr" humanitarian action?' (2019)

<<https://nuz.uz/antiterror/42200-chto-dumayut-prostye-grazhdane-pro-gumanitarnuyu-akciyu-dobro.html>>

²¹⁸ Prevention media, 'Несмотря на пандемию, вслед за Россией Узбекистан возвращает своих граждан из Сирии' (2020) <<https://prevention.kg/?p=9214>>

²¹⁹ Gavin Helf, *ibid*; RFE/RL, 'Not in our Name Project' (2019) <<https://pressroom.rferl.org/not-in-our-name>>

²²⁰ Farangis Najibullah, 'The Women Who Came Home.' (2019). *Ibid*.

²²¹ Interview with Gulnaz Razdykova. *Ibid*

²²² Farangis Najibullah, 'Life After Islamic State: Pardoned Tajik Militants Navigate Road to Reintegration' (2017) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-islamic-state-pardoned-militants-reintegration/28661770.html>>; Gavin Helf, 'Central Asia Leads the Way on Islamic State Returnees'. *Ibid*.

²²³ Jamilya Nurkanova, 'Kazakhstan's State Programme: Prevention of Extremism in Females through Rehabilitation Centres.' In *Terrorist Deradicalisation in Global Contexts*, 1:54–65. 1st ed. (Routledge 2020).

²²⁴ Interview with Keneshbek Sainazarov, 'Panel Discussion on the Experience of Central Asian Countries Organized by the Bulan Institute' (3 March 2021).

Affairs, the state committee for national security, the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the General Prosecutor's Office, the Committee for Religion, and others, such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection in covering all aspects of the repatriation and rehabilitation processes. However, the government action has also been supplemented by the considerable participation of civil society organizations in rehabilitating and repatriating returnees, building on the experience gained in the aftermath of the civil war.²²⁵

Similarly, in Uzbekistan, state institutions, local authorities, banks, and civil society institutions have collaborated to provide care through regional educational and social centers, and women's centers.²²⁶ Oliya Ilmuratova stated that the success of rehabilitation in Uzbekistan is rooted in an intersectoral and inter-departmental approach that allows partnership between government departments and civil society actors alike. As such, her organization Barqaror Hayot sat in the working group with the Cabinet of Ministers and supported the development of strategies and policies.²²⁷ Such partnership has allowed the organization to contribute to the reform of the Uzbek security sector, promoting a more humane approach to target groups and the reduction of discrimination against minorities.²²⁸ It has also enabled the collaboration of different actors such as the educational, healthcare, and social security sectors towards streamlining reintegration processes, such as the registration of orphaned children. Thanks to this collaboration, holistic care is possible, with returnees passing through every stage seamlessly.²²⁹ The Islamic communal organizations of the Mahala have also been included in efforts to support the reintegration of returnees.

In summary, the most successful repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration operations to date have been made possible by the collaboration of four interconnected groups of actors: state institutions, civil society, academia, and the media.²³⁰ State institutions have been empowered to act through the direct intervention of the presidents of their respective countries. Given the autocratic model of governance endemic to Central Asia, individual leaders have been the driving force that has compelled state institutions to act, as well as being provided with the necessary resources. The shift in policy was consistent through the state apparatus, leading to

²²⁵ Slim, 'The Sustained Dialogue Process in Tajikistan: 1993- 2005' Pages 21–23.

²²⁶Rumble Mirzo, "'MEXR-3": Return to a Peaceful and Happy Life'. Ibid.

²²⁷ Interview with Oliya Ilmuratova conducted by the Bulan Institute. Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid

²²⁹ Ibid

²³⁰ Interview with Keneshbek Sainazarov. Ibid

a change in messaging from state officials towards ISIS affiliates.

Section VI: Limitations and Drawbacks

Despite the commitment and effort of the Central Asian governments and their partners, a distinct lack of resources remains, threatening the breadth and scope of the repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration policies. The effects of such shortcomings can be seen in four ways – the short-term nature of the programs, persistent social stigma, continued social grievances and both economic and political marginalization, the lack of a gender-sensitive approach, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

a. Short-term nature of the repatriation programs

The first fundamental threat to the repatriation programs described is their short-term nature, in contrast with the long-term, potentially life-long impacts suffered by returnees. These returnees, who experienced the brutal ISIS regime, have been left with deep psychological wounds, as well as a range of physical injuries in many cases. The problem of complex trauma is widespread, particularly among children whose difficulties associated with such devastating disruption to their development and sense of safety may have yet to fully emerge. According to Gavin Helf, Senior Advisor at the United States Institute for Peace, healthcare, and social support networks in Central Asia are not yet prepared to deal with the magnitude of this issue.²³¹

Child returnees have suffered the impact of missing years of schooling and subsequently falling behind their peers. The ability of educational institutions to gauge their literacy level and make sure they are assigned to an appropriate learning level, as well as providing them with physical materials and emotional support, is reportedly lacking.²³² Analyzing Kazakhstan's efforts to repatriate foreign fighters, Gavin Helf argued that the ongoing programs in Kazakhstan are weaker on the longer-term issues of psychiatric distress, educational accommodations for children with cognitive and emotional and behavioral issues, and long-term social work and tracking.²³³ As suggested in the previous section of this report, the psychological and physical health interventions provided at Aktau center in Kazakhstan and later on demonstrated that

²³¹ Gavin Helf, Panel Discussion, Ibid.

²³² Gavin Helf. Ibid

²³³ Asim Kashgarian, 'Could Kazakhstan Efforts to Repatriate Foreign Fighters Be a Model?' Voice of America. January 15, 2021. <<https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/could-kazakhstan-efforts-repatriate-foreign-fighters-be-model>>

returnees need a holistic approach to the deradicalization process as part of longer-term policies.

b. Stigmatization within society

Despite the efforts of the Central Asian governments to desensitize the population at large, there is still stigma attached to returnees. There is a consistent fear that returnees bring extremist ideologies and associated instability with them to their homelands.²³⁴ This stigma may have stemmed from previous portrayals of returnees as mere terrorists to the Central Asian public. The prior tactic of demonization by the state and independent media, in a desperate effort to stem the flow of foreign fighters to the conflict zones, molded public opinion in such a way that wariness overcame welcoming and generous attitudes. Notably, in Tajikistan, some parents have expressed deep discomfort or in some cases have even refused to have their children educated in schools that also accept the children of returnees.²³⁵

Heightened levels of fear, anger, and mistrust from communities can be significant challenges to reintegration and rehabilitation processes. The fear and anger generated in local communities who still consider returnees as a security threat should be addressed. At the same time, local populations struggling with poverty and unemployment may resent the governments' intentions to support returnees socially and economically. The task of supporting social cohesion and stability whilst attending to the particular needs of returnees remains an arduous endeavor, but one where both intentions can indeed be complementary.

c. Remaining social grievances

The repatriation and reintegration programs ultimately do not address the push factors and social grievances which compelled foreign fighters to leave and join ISIS in the first place. Economic and social issues persist, and there has been a failure from Central Asian governments to acknowledge and address these problems. If the initial drivers, conditions, and motivations suggested as push and pull factors at the beginning of this report remain, the rehabilitation and reintegration policies may not be as effective in the long term as Central Asian governments expect. People affected by these issues may seek other ways to express the

²³⁴ Farangis Najibullah and Mumin Ahmadi, 'Why Tajikistan Is Fighting To Bring Its Islamic State Widows Back Home', (*Radiofreeeurope/Radioliberty* 2019) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/why-tajikistan-is-fighting-to-bring-its-islamic-state-widows-back-home/29782787.html>>

²³⁵ Interview with Rustam Azizi. Ibid

frustration caused by injustice, marginalization, and repression.²³⁶

The Central Asian states have received especially harsh criticism by human rights organizations for restricting basic freedoms, human rights, and religious freedom. Their governments react harshly to dissent, notably from independent media and opposition parties.²³⁷ There are few legitimate civic or political outlets through which to focus grievances and frustrations, conditions that can contribute towards nurturing extremism. As is seen in other societies where religion is repressed, more extreme doctrines advocating violence are sometimes adopted, leading to deeper instability.

d. Lack of a gender-sensitive approach

Central Asian governments demonstrate their dedication for rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign terrorist fighters by promoting national programs, however, a gender-sensitive approach remains largely absent from policy. Lack of attention to women and girls and the differing roles they served whilst living under ISIS undermines their recovery and reintegration by denying important aspects of their experience and unique needs. The empowerment of women and girls returning from detention in Syria and Iraq is essential to offer them a true alternative to the repressive experiences they have endured abroad and to support them in fulfilling their potential as valued contributors to their communities.

ISIS recruiters employed specific strategies to distance women and girls from their communities by promising them forms of power and privilege which were not available in their own lives. Combined with socioeconomic factors of poverty, inequality, and unemployment, sexual discrimination, and inequalities may be conditions conducive to violent extremism for some women and girls. According to a recent analysis on the gendered dimensions of return, rehabilitation, and reintegration published by ICAN and UNDP, it is important to recognize that some women and girls were seduced by power, status, and comfort.²³⁸

To best rehabilitate female returnees and reintegrate them into society effectively and sustainably, efforts to bridge gender gaps through economic empowerment, trauma-sensitive interventions, and politically and socially engaging activities are essential to countering the

²³⁶ Farangis Najibullah, 'Why Tajikistan Is Fighting' (2019). Ibid.

²³⁷ Farangis Najibullah, 'The Women Who Came Home' (2019)

²³⁸ ICAN and UNDP, 'Invisible Women: *Gendered Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism*, ' Page 56.

pull of violent extremism and, of course, supporting women and girls to claim their rights. Education or training of women and girls in life and job skills can contribute to comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration processes. Counterterrorism actors in government and civil society must be aware that rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children demand ongoing commitment and long-term willingness to maintain high levels of support .

e. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Finally, the situation on the ground has been deeply exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The crisis has paralyzed further repatriations, shredded the regional economy, and severely limited governmental and non-governmental budgets. The effects of COVID-19 may indeed be long-lasting, as it draws political attention and resources away from the repatriation and reintegration of returnees. Tajikistan, for instance, has already reallocated budgets and halted repatriation plans to deliver timely public health measures.²³⁹

The problems of repression and economic difficulty may only become more acute with the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, Kazakhstan's GDP is forecasted to have contracted by 2.2% in 2020. This is on top of an already stalling economy due to low commodity prices, which has seen standards of living fall and inequality rise sharply since 2013.²⁴⁰ Tajikistan, which has by far the lowest standards of living in the region, is continuously plagued by issues of violent extremism and instability in neighboring Afghanistan. COVID-19 has worsened its condition by halting global trade outflows and slowing down economic growth. Uzbekistan has seen its commodity and tourism sectors suffer heavily due to COVID-19 and it remains politically fragile following a political transition away from its former leader, Islam Karimov. The tenuous economic situation has allowed ethnic tensions to re-emerge, threatening the stability of the entire region.²⁴¹

The context of the ongoing pandemic helps to explain why many of the efforts of Central Asian states to repatriate and reintegrate former ISIS affiliates stalled in 2020²⁴². Repatriations stopped, experts and advisors were blocked from assisting returnees, and communities have

²³⁹ RSIS, 'Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses,' 4 January 2021 <<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CTTA-January-2021.pdf>>

²⁴⁰ The Economist, 'Kazakhstan,' accessed March 1, 2021 <<https://www.country.eiu.com/kazakhstan>>

²⁴¹ Interview with Gavin Helf. Ibid.

²⁴² SC/14282, 24 August 2020, Security Council, "Repatriating Detained Foreign Fighters, Their Families Key to Combating Threat Posed by Islamic State, Counter-Terrorism Officials Warn Security Council", 24 August, 2020 <<https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14282.doc.htm>>

been forced to close in on themselves. This has exacerbated the isolation experienced by returnees.

Conclusion

Central Asian states have been on the front lines of global efforts to repatriate foreign citizens from the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria. These states saw the third-highest number of foreign fighters travel to join ISIS, with estimates ranging from 5000-7000 people. For those traveling to fight, push factors included religious marginalization and social inequality, socio-economic difficulties, and a lack of opportunities. For the women traveling abroad, deception and coercion were often involved, whilst some sought to escape abusive family lives and others felt unable to defy their husbands who wanted to travel. The minors were often coerced or deceived, with many victims of human trafficking. Children who traveled with their families were also sent to military training from a young age.

The emphasis of the Central Asian states' repatriation efforts has primarily been on women and children of foreign fighters, who were often coerced or duped into traveling abroad with foreign fighters or traffickers. In doing so, they are working towards fulfilling their obligations under international law, specifically the UN Security Council Resolution 2397, which calls on nation-states to assist women and children associated with foreign fighters. These states have responded to the reports of the desperate conditions evident in the camps in Syria and the plight of those who have been imprisoned in Iraq, often also denied the right to a free and fair trial. Therefore, not only have the Central Asian states taken action to fulfill their obligations under international law, but they have also recognized and responded to their moral obligations.

Over the past two to three years, the Central Asian states included in this report have mustered the required political will and taken the necessary steps to organize and undertake sensitive repatriation operations to rescue their nationals. While this report has identified and noted the differences in their approaches, the repatriation missions have all been driven by a shared sense of nationality and humanity. Most states in the region have worked closely with international organizations, civil society, and the UN system to reintegrate returning family members of foreign fighters. They have also attempted to alleviate some of the stigma associated with returning foreign fighters and family members by working closely with local media organizations and journalists. The repatriation efforts have framed returnee women and children as survivors deserving of a chance, though rehabilitation and reintegration efforts have differed somewhat by design.

The medical quarantine period put into place by all four states has shown the extent to the

physical and psychological suffering of women, children, and men in the camps in Syria and prisons in Iraq. The provision of such immediate care would presumably be relatively straightforward for any repatriating state to organize and deliver. The psychological and relational aspects of recovery are of course much more complex and different countries will have varying perspectives on what good care in this area should include. The Central Asian states do well to promote attention to individual needs as well as the impact of systems of care on recovery, by attending to relationships between children and their caregivers, women returnees, and their close relatives, between children and peers at school, between all returnees and their communities. It is not clear what therapeutic approaches are being applied in day-to-day practice with regards to psychological models and theories, and such information might go some way towards supporting the development of repatriation and rehabilitation plans in other countries.

It would be an unfair expectation for the burden of care to be left with any one individual, family, or organization, given the complexity of some of the needs of returnees from Syria and Iraq. Where resources have been shared and collaboration has been prioritized, the Central Asian states mentioned in this report appear more confident in their efforts. This points to the need for not only political will but strong integration of services and a commitment to providing long-term support, including financial means.

The Central Asian states have managed to move beyond a fear of increasing the risk of domestic terror incidents by allowing people linked with ISIS in Syria to return. Efforts have been made to provide good quality healthcare and supportive social and educational provision to offer returnees a good life, though the extent of the support received by each individual is perhaps not consistent. What remains unclear is whether the support in place has been sufficient to counter the push factors associated with vulnerability to terrorist recruitment, whether by coercion or otherwise. Notably, no cases of recidivism were shared in the course of the interviews undertaken prior to this report. However, it is known that socioeconomic and political issues in the Central Asian states persist, and the long-term trajectories of returnee women and children are yet to be discovered.

Whilst this report has attempted to trace the emergence of best practices from the Central Asian experience, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The report relies on the testimonies and self-report of individuals involved in delivering services to returnees, primarily members of

civil organizations or state officials. During the writing of this report, it was not possible to access beneficiaries of repatriation and rehabilitation programs for a variety of reasons and, as such, their important perspectives are lacking. Further, there is currently no quantitative data available regarding outcomes pertinent to the recovery and reintegration of returnees. Whilst this report is an important starting point in collating and disseminating information about the possibilities of repatriation and rehabilitation from the Central Asian perspective, for countries yet to act to protect their citizens, future works addressing these aforementioned shortcomings would be most welcome.

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