



REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN RETURNED FROM SYRIA AND IRAQ

**WORKING PAPER from Workshop for PRR Practitioners and
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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an overview of general approaches toward repatriation and rehabilitation of children in Central Asian countries, with concrete examples of practices and multi-agency interventions, and national coordination for the repatriation of child returnees. Four Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, repatriated hundreds of ISIS-linked children from Syria and Iraq. The paper draws on the workshop organized on 05 August 2022 by the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations promoting an active exchange of good practices and knowledge between national and international experts, diplomats and practitioners. The workshop was targeted at PRR practitioners from different fields and countries who currently prepare to work or are working in the rehabilitation and reintegration of children repatriated from conflict zones in the Middle East, and want to exchange on experiences, strategies, and best practices.

The paper analyses the aspects of children's R&R discussed during the workshop and concludes with the analysis of promising practices and existing challenges. Finally, it presents practical recommendations on institutional cooperation, local level measures and individual reintegration approaches to be implemented in future programs and actions.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

More than 60,000 women and children with links to ISIS have been held in the Al-hawl and Roj camps in northeast Syria. Since the first wave of returnees, UN Member states have been facing the issue of how to repatriate and manage women and children returning from Iraq and Syria. Each returnee's case must be handled carefully, with full consideration of individual needs, the trauma experienced, and the level of radicalization and security risks it may pose. The process of repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of FTFs-linked children indeed poses particular challenges to many UN Member states.

Highlights and key recommendations of the workshop included the following:

01.

Having comprehensive rehabilitation programmes in place to deal with child returnees is of the utmost importance.

02.

R&R actions should follow a trauma-informed approach by multi-dimension professionals, envisaging long-term mental-health support for both child returnees and their guardians.

03.

Successful R&R programs for child returnees require multi-agency cooperation between actors from various sectors, most importantly community-level organizations, and NGOs.

04.

Among these actors, appropriate information-sharing and collaboration mechanisms are needed to establish and share best practices.

05.

Different approaches have been implemented successfully demonstrating that the repatriation of FTFs and their families is possible and does not result in a security threat.

06.

Implementing the best R&R practices is an opportunity to make a big difference in preventing violent extremism and future radicalization.

07.

Children's schooling and integration into school environments is essential. To this end, education specialists should use individual approaches.

08.

Every country should build media and communications strategies to achieve its desired goals of rehabilitation, including community acceptance and de-stigmatization.

EXISTING GOOD AND PROMISING PRACTICES

Approaches to returning FTFs and their families in the Central Asian region vary. Such approaches are typically built on pre-existing initiatives, practitioners' networks and legal frameworks depending on the local context. Four broad topics can be identified in expert practitioners' discussions about promising practices in the early experiences of dealing with child returnees, as explained below.

Reception Phase

- Reception strategies differ across the region, however, all four countries discussed have been **considering child returnees primarily as victims** in need of a safe family environment, psychological support, and education. Existing good practices in the region involve an initial assessment of basic and urgent children's needs, as well as individualized evaluations of schooling and development deficiencies. Both practices are necessary to formulate **proper reintegration and rehabilitation programs tailored to helping child returnees** in processing and overcoming traumatic experiences lived in Syria and Iraq.
- Child returnees in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan are initially **accommodated in rehabilitation centres** and are followed by **social workers and psychologists** in their adaptation to an ordinary and peaceful life. In Kazakhstan, psychologists work together with theologians and religious experts, and children are thus provided with **counselling sessions and emergency psychological assistance** when necessary. In the rehabilitation centres, child returnees have access to various services, including clothing, medical check-ups, psychological assistance, and genetic DNA tests.
- After the identification of a child to be repatriated, local authorities and local civil society organizations **cooperate in identifying suitable guardians** for him/her. When children return accompanied by their mothers, both mother and child are reunited with close relatives. Otherwise, after national courts' decisions about legal guardianship, orphans and children returning from Iraqi prisons unaccompanied are **adopted by their grandparents or by other close relatives**. At this stage, children receive support from expert practitioners who follow them in their social rehabilitation and reintegration into the community. Likewise, in Kyrgyzstan, once the children join their guardians, they continue to be followed by social pedagogues and are regularly monitored in their studies and social behaviour. The **search for guardians can be challenging**, as has been the case in Tajikistan. In such cases, children for whom no guardian has been identified yet go live in boarding schools and are constantly monitored and supported by social workers and psychologists.

- Kyrgyzstan had the unique opportunity to learn from the Kazakh and Tajiki experiences and thereby implement an efficient and successful guardianship model, identifying relatives and preparing them to host. The country **established two conditions for guardianship**: firstly, mothers who are in Iraqi prisons have to give their consent to the repatriation of their children, and secondly, legal guardians should be identified among close relatives and should meet all requirements. Limits exist, but many lessons can be learned from Kyrgyzstan`s approach to finding guardians. Generally, according to on-the-ground observations, children in Central Asia who returned from Syria and Iraq have been adapting very well to their new family, school, and community environments.

Partnership with Civil Society

- The R&R experiences in Central Asia demonstrate the **importance of involving civil society** and NGOs to improve and implement effective whole-of-society rehabilitation programs. Within existing national legal frameworks, state institutions, international agencies, NGOs, and community actors have **partnered up to guarantee the enactment of child returnees` rights**.
- In Kazakhstan for instance, rehabilitation programs are **fully state-led and institutionalized**, with different governmental agencies being involved but at the same time civil society organizations are key actors in the process. Coordination among different agencies and actors can be done through everyday communication (e.g., WhatsApp chat groups), or through seminars and publications allowing knowledge and best practices to be shared.
- R&R programs rely heavily on the **establishment and strengthening of local and multidimensional networks of support**. Notably, Uzbekistan`s partnership with existing civil society organizations, and mainly with family members and community leaders has been by and large a remarkably successful strategy guaranteeing the longevity of essential support networks among practitioners, government personnel, guardians, and returnees. In Kazakhstan, we see a **very well-funded and comprehensive government effort** complemented in various communities by an informally organized local Islamic civil society that participates in providing clothing and homes and a variety of other basic material needs. Overall Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan have involved **numerous civil society organizations such as Barqaror Hayat, Pravo, Shans, Future of Kyrgyzstan, Ak Niet, and the Center for Analysis and Development of Interconfessional Relations**, these organisations filling gaps by providing legal, social and other services to returnees.
- **International cooperation** plays an essential role in guaranteeing the mobilization of human and economic resources required for R&R projects. International donors have followed the lead of Central Asian countries adapting to the existing national practices. For instance, in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, projects are carried out through non-governmental organizations with the support of international donors



Schooling of Children

- Throughout the discussion in our workshop, we found many common best practices in the schooling of child returnees. One important best practice in the area of schooling is to create an **individual approach** and look at the educational needs of each child separately. Some **children have bigger educational gaps** than others and require additional tutoring in addition to standard study plans. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, children who face more difficulty with schooling receive tutors' support for basic subjects such as mathematics and language. This **extra tutoring** is necessary to achieve the reintegration of child returnees into school classes with peers of their own age.
- Another best practice is to focus schooling **reintegration on empathy**. Practitioners have indeed found that children's reintegration is easier when teachers, tutors, and guardians approach them with empathy. Both social interactions and teaching styles in schooling environments should be empathetic. This approach is needed due to the hard and traumatic experiences of numerous child returnees.
- A third best practice is the **training of social pedagogues and teachers**. The latter must be trained as the needs of a child returnee differ from those of an ordinary child. For example, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, these teachers and pedagogues need to understand how to work with the individual educational plan set out for each child. In addition, teachers and pedagogues need to understand the needs of each child and how to treat them, as well as the correct strategy to face situations that may arise with child returnees coming back to school. The public foundation, Future of the Country, in Kyrgyzstan has already carried out training for teachers and pedagogues, which has shown to be a best practice to prepare teachers and pedagogues for the integration of child returnees into the schooling system.

Highlight n° 1: In Kyrgyzstan, the working groups, which consisted of dozens of pedagogues, teachers, and education experts, conducted individual evaluations, and developed individual study plans for each child returnee. The first stage of reintegration by the working group was to do an individual assessment, after which a study plan was developed with teachers for the children to be enrolled back into the schooling system.



Psychological and Social Aspects of Reintegration

- A key best practice in Central Asia is **preparing communities to accept these children** and create networks of support. In Uzbekistan, rehabilitation programs are based on family models which means that relatives and family members provide necessary support and assistance to returnees. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, community leaders and neighborhoods have been playing an important support role.
- In Tajikistan, there is **raising awareness, consulting and psychological support** provided to classmates of child returnees. This was found to be a good practice for the reintegration of returnee children because it prevents stigmatization and backlash from peers. By **reducing peers' stigmatization**, the child returnees are better able to socialize and adapt to their new environment along with children their own age. By facilitating the socialization between returnee children and hosting communities, **children's mental health is improved** as they better adapt to school programs and peaceful life. This is a big change and a big success taking into account the fragile mental state with which child returnees often arrive, with some affected with post-traumatic stress disorder and having trouble with socializing.

Highlight n° 2: In Kazakhstan, the state has registered child returnees born in Iraq/Syria as being born in Kazakhstan to avoid stigmatization and to avoid further psychological trauma to these children.

CHALLENGES TO REHABILITATION

Despite the many good practices that we have listed above, the workshop also **discussed multiple challenges of rehabilitation and reintegration**. The most recurrent challenge across Central Asian countries is the greater difficulty in **rehabilitating older children**. Older aged children have built barriers and already have set beliefs. This creates an obstacle for the rehabilitation as older children are set into believing that what they were taught in Syria/Iraq is the truth and any attempt to change their belief alienates the children further from the rehabilitation staff.

In all four countries in Central Asia, there is a **shortage of specialists and practitioners** to engage in different phases of the rehabilitation and reintegration process. There is an urgent need for trained practitioners who have knowledge and real experience. Repatriating countries, as a first step need to start training practitioners, equipping them with the necessary skills.

One challenge which all reintegration programs have faced is the backlash and **stigmatization from communities** where children are returning. Reintegration programs need to be balanced so that returnees are not seen to be receiving too much material, financial and physical support. We have found that when returnees are seen as receiving too much from the state or other entities, the communities are more averse to including and aiding in the rehabilitation of children returnees.

Highlight n° 3: Authorities and practitioners in Tajikistan have had difficulty finding guardians for the returned children. Those relatives are not psychologically ready to take responsibility for these children. The guardians continue to have fears that the children returnees bear some threat and are not adapted to socializing. This has meant that returnee children in Tajikistan are still living in boarding schools. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the relatives do visit and talk regularly with the children.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

The following recommendations were offered in the meeting by practitioners working in R&R programs:

- It is important to involve civil society in the rehabilitation process because civil society organizations have the trust of local people and are more representative at the community levels.
- Each child will require an individually tailored rehabilitation approach. The rehabilitation process should involve multi-disciplinary specialists and practitioners and should be age and gender sensitive.
- Involved actors need to have a long-term perspective on rehabilitation processes. It is an ongoing long-term process which is likely to shift and change as children grow.
- Repatriating countries must consider securing funding for long term mental health support and psychological assistance to returnees.
- Throughout rehabilitation programs, practitioners and international donors have found that there is a lack of closure for children with their mothers and in some cases their fathers too. A future step into the reintegration of Syria/Iraq returnees should be to finance programs which focus on repatriating or ensuring closure with the child's parents.

