Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans

Regional Needs Assessment [1]

Introduction

This concept note was commissioned by the *Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund* (*GCERF*) to contribute to a better understanding of current efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) in the Western Balkans, and more specifically to provide an overview of the most immediate needs in rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of ex-ISIL fighters and their family members in the region. Such a mapping exercise was assumed to produce useful recommendations for policy planning and budgeting of P/CVE and R&R activities in the Western Balkans. In order to fulfill this goal, the scope of this paper was widened to include supplemental data and analysis that should provide more factual background and context-specific insight. Though a slight diversion from the original extent and format of the paper, this change allows for the presentation of more nuanced complexities and, consequently, to more fine-tuned policy responses to P/CVE and R&R in the Western Balkans.

Note: At the time of writing, in mid-April 2020, the world is still battling the new corona virus (COVID-19). The unprecedented global spread of the decease and restrictions introduced to contain it (most notably by social distancing) have already made profound changes to our everyday lives. At this point it is still uncertain as to how long will it last, and to what extent the aftermath of this battle will affect rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from Syria to the Western Balkans. It is also unclear if group deportations of the remaining fighters and their family members will at all take place. In such circumstances, and to fulfill the purpose of this consultancy, this analysis is based on the assumption that R&R process will continue to occur in an unchanged socio-political and economic environment, and that return of the remaining Balkan contingent from Syria will eventually unfold.

Understanding the Context: Radicalization into Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans – a geopolitical term coined by EU institutions to describe the countries of Southeast Europe that are not yet members of the Union – encompasses Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Historically, the Balkans region has been seen as politically volatile and unstable, especially after the end of

[1] This report is based on the consultant's own research and expertise, as well as insight into open and classified sources and interviews with some 20 government, law enforcement and intelligence officials, prosecutors, academics, and civil sector activists, conducted in March and April 2020. The views expressed herein are solely those of the consultant, and may not in any circumstances be regarded as stating an official position of any government, organization, or institution.

Ottoman rule in the late 19th century, but also more recently, following the violent post-Cold War breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent wars of Yugoslav succession (1991-2001). The fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia into a number of smaller countries reflected another geopolitical term – Balkanization – often used to describe the division of a region or state into reduced territories that are viewed as hostile or uncooperative with one another.

In truth, violent episodes in the history of the Balkans have typically echoed important geopolitical developments, rather than resulting from the alleged "ancient ethnic hatred" of the region, though this argument was persistently used during the wars of Yugoslav succession to justify reluctance by the West to intervene. In the past eight years, localized reflections of the global foreign fighter phenomenon have been the single most obvious manifestation of violence in the Western Balkans, with fighters departing to Syria and Iraq, and to a lesser extent to Ukraine.

In the Western Balkans, radicalization has occurred over the last decade primarily in the context of militant (*takfirist*[2]) Salafism, which has been most rapidly adopted in regional countries marred by fragile internal structure, administrative dysfunctionality, frozen conflict, and unresolved identity and governance issues. Such states often produce underachieving, inward-looking societies that are more obsessed with the past than they are focused on the future, keeping citizens polarized and thus unable to protect and restore common-sense values. This makes these states continually and increasingly vulnerable to a broad embrace of reductionist thinking and belief systems. Some of these societies may be thought of as *post-conflict*; but a number of worrying recent developments in the region may qualify them more accurately as *pre-conflict*. This particularly applies to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo, but also to North Macedonia.

While in recent years the attention has been fixated primarily on militant Salafism and foreign fighting, new forms of extremism have (re-)emerged in the region. They include non-violent Salafism, ethnonational movements, and a neo-anti-Western right, mostly inspired by malignant foreign influences.[3] What all of these developments share is the potential, independently or in concert, to disrupt and even prevent the accession of the remaining Western Balkan countries to both NATO and the EU. In some of these countries, underlying conditions may foster "cumulative extremism," or "reciprocal radicalization," in which these radical movements feed off one another; making their potential destabilizing impact even greater. A failure to recognize emerging threats that emanate from the changing extremist landscape,

[2] *Takfir* refers to the act of excommunicating or declaring a Muslim an apostate; which is punishable, if deemed necessary, by death. Among Sunni Muslims, those who view the world in black-and-white terms that clearly discern between "true believers" and nonbelievers, with no shades in between, are referred to as *Takfiris*. Adherents of *takfirism* seek to re-establish a Caliphate that aligns with what they consider a literal interpretation of the Qur'an.

[3] While ethnonational and right wing movements in the Western Balkans have received more attention in recent years, particularly in connection with the rise in popularity of similar movements elsewhere in the world, this analysis will remain limited to the challenges posed by militant Islamism in the region, and the resulting foreign fighter phenomenon.

combined with a narrow focus on long-standing perils, could damn the region to a futile routine of applying old or partial solutions to current problems.

In short, one of the key findings that emerged from the extensive research into the root causes of violent and non-violent extremism in the Western Balkans suggests that in order to better understand, and hopefully prevent radicalization, we should stop obsessing with just militant Islamism, and look instead into a much broader pool of typically young individuals of all identity groups vulnerable to a variety of subversive influences that may lead to disproportionate risk-taking or violent behaviors.

The Psychosocial Context for Radicalization into Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans

In the Western Balkans, radicalization into violent extremism typically occurs in communities and amid circumstances that are significantly different from those associated with this process in the West. While extremist narratives in the West are often designed to appeal to immigrants who face the consequences of failed integration, socio-economic marginalization, and a sense of injustice and inequality, radicalization in the Western Balkans generally takes place within native communities. This is "closely tied to a recent past defined by interethnic strife, segregation, and victimization, and a current reality marked by popular perceptions of failed leadership efforts and unmet expectations against a backdrop of identities in flux in a nascent country struggling to define itself."[4]

It has been well documented that, in many cases of radicalization in the region, and especially in those of younger individuals, the choice to join radical groups has been motivated by the desire to meet immediate psychosocial needs, rather than by extremist or violent ideologies. The dynamics of such groups provide these individuals with a sense of belonging, inclusion, equality, dignity, and purpose, and often fill psychosocial gaps left open in their previous lives. Indeed, in an alarming number of cases, individuals who join these groups come from broken families where they were exposed at a young age to some combination of neglect, domestic violence, and various forms of addiction on the part of a parent, most frequently their father.

These conditions are known to impact long-term mental health. Children who have experienced early neglect are vulnerable to cognitive, language, and behavioral deficits. There is also evidence that exposure to trauma early in life markedly increases the risk for major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress disorder.[5] These types of experiences

[4] Adrian Shtuni, *Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo,* United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 397, December 2016.

[5] For more on this, see: F. Gould, et al., "The Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect on Cognitive Functioning in Adulthood," *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 46, no. 4 (2012): 500-506. Also, a Europol report from the beginning of 2016 found that 20% of the EU citizens who have left for foreign battlefields were diagnosed with a severe mental health disorder (or more than one) prior to their departure. According to some sources, this percentage is actually much higher.

and mental disorders can make individuals more susceptible to seduction by "a simplified structure and low complexity of thinking," such as that demonstrated in the discourse of extremism.[6]

In addition, since the early 1990s, the region has been plagued by corruption, incompetence, and a lack of accountability in politics, as well as by nepotism, high unemployment, economic hardship, and dysfunctional public administration. These factors have impacted all but the most insulated citizens. It is not surprising, then, that individuals radicalized into violent extremism over the last few years (including those who have become foreign fighters) have come mostly from the geographic, social, and economic margins. For the most part, they have been poorly educated, unemployed, from dysfunctional or broken families, and have demonstrated a propensity toward antisocial behavior and a history of mental health issues.

When comparing the dynamics of radicalization in the West with those in the Western Balkans, another notable difference emerges, related to the rate at which violence is brought to fruition. Relative to the number and *modus operandi* of recent terrorist attacks in Europe, it seems that groups and individuals radicalized in the Western Balkans have so far been less violent and less driven by revenge against their respective communities. It would be interesting and wise to examine whether drivers of radicalization and extremism in the Western Balkans indeed produce an individual and group mentality that is less likely to compel an actual engagement in violence.

The Other Looming Threat: Radicalization into *Non-Violent* Extremism

Much has been said and done in the last few years in connection with the foreign fighter phenomenon, radicalization into violent extremism, and recruitment into terrorist groups that operate in Syria and Iraq; yet, the issue of radicalization into non-violent extremism has, for the most part, gone underreported and unaddressed. It is this type of radicalization that is most inherently challenging, though, and more dangerous in the long-run, because it is aimed at undermining the secular character of regional societies and the universal norms, values, and rights they share. The so-called moderate Salafi narrative is intended to induce profound societal changes gradually, over time, and without open confrontation, through a conservative revolution that directly challenges not only the traditional practice of Islam in the region, but a centuries-old culture of tolerance and coexistence. As such, the ideology of Salafism instigates adherents to embrace gender-based segregation and inequality, for example.

Even after the more obvious signs of radicalization associated with violent extremism subside or are contained altogether, the non-violent Salafi narrative will continue to promote profound and long-term societal changes, which may pose eventual security risks and challenges. Salafism, whether moderate or violent, is irreconcilable with democracy, human rights, and the

[6] For more, see: Sara Savage, "Extremism and Complexity of Thinking: The Psychological Reason for Investing in Education," in How to Prevent Extremism and Policy Options, eds., Khalid Koser and Thomas Thorp (Tony Blair Faith Foundation, 2015).

core values and principles of modern societies. The idea that extremism can be inhibited by throwing support behind non-violent Salafism, and that this will gradually dissuade individuals from joining militant or *takfirist* groups, is as ill-conceived as it is shortsighted and potentially dangerous.

Trends common to Western Balkan societies, including endemic corruption, widespread nepotism and clientelism, a lack of political accountability and transparency, and well-established crime networks all play into the Salafi narrative. These state and societal failures are interpreted by ideologues as evidence that, without Divine order and absolute obedience to God, humans are incapable of creating and maintaining just and functioning societies. And in such circumstances, people are more susceptible to believing that their adherence to a strict code – in this case, that of the first three generations of Muslims after the Prophet Mohammad (the *salaf*) – can bring about order and justice for all.

The appeal of reductionist interpretations is a particular threat among traditionally Muslim Albanian and Bosniak populations in the region (particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia). However, the deeply rooted sense of overarching ethnic belonging of Albanians surpasses their religious identity and seems to make them more resilient against the pull of Salafism. Bosnian Muslims, on the other hand, remain embroiled in an ethnogenic process defined by their tragic suffering during the 1992-1995 war that has resulted in a mentality of victimhood which appears to have made them more susceptible to the draw of Salafism.

A fringe ideology in many Muslim countries, Salafism places the (perceived and actual) victimhood of Muslims throughout the world as a central locus. The ideology has been aggressively proselytized in Bosnia and Herzegovina with strong outside support and, as such, is poised to become a core identity values matrix for many Bosniaks. For more than two decades, the political context in BiH has been determined by the dynamics of an unfinished war and the failures of Bosniak, Bosnian Croat, and Bosnian Serb political elites to resolve underlying political disputes. The sense of being trapped in a hostile ethnic, religious, and political environment may lead young Bosniaks particularly to develop a "Gaza Strip mentality," as they increasingly feel as though they live under a sort of societal occupation and forced isolation. In these circumstances, a helping hand, be it from the Saudi Arabia, Iran, or Turkey, may be ever more tempting.

The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans: Figures & Trends

Overall, it is believed that over 1,110 individuals from the region traveled to Syria and Iraq from the end of 2012 until 2016, when the outflow was stopped. This number includes individuals who are thought to remain in those countries, those who are known to have returned home, and those who are believed to have died; and the data includes women, children, and the elderly – all of whom are likely noncombatants and account for one-third of the entire Western

Balkans contingent in Syria and Iraq. Citizens from Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and North Macedonia comprised the bulk of this contingent (for a detailed breakdown, see Tables 1-4).

It is important to note that the figures used in this study were provided to the consultant by official regional and international law enforcement, judiciary, and intelligence sources in the early spring of 2020. Some discrepancies in the data can be attributed largely to the fact that many individuals who traveled to Syria and Iraq from diasporas in the West hold citizenship in more than one country, and there is a lack of uniformity regarding how to identify their formal national belonging. There are also cases in which individuals are missing and their movements cannot be tracked. Many of these individuals are presumed dead, but their deaths cannot be confirmed. In other cases, no data was available, or only assessments could be produced; this particularly applies to the number of children in Syria and Iraq – both those who traveled there with their parents (many of whom have become adults since their departure) and those who were born there. For this reason, the following figures should be viewed as indicators, rather that absolute values.

Traffic to and from Syria reached its peak in 2013 and early 2014, when some 70% of the Western Balkans contingent travelled back and forth with some regularity. The pace of travel then slowed in 2015, and almost completely stopped by late 2016, when the last departures (of one woman from BiH and four men from southern Serbia) were registered. This decline in traffic can be attributed to: (1) the overall demise of ISIL; (2) intensified regional and international efforts to criminally prosecute aspiring fighters and returnees; (3) an escalation in fighting in the conflict zones, which in turn became more difficult to cross into and out of; and (4) the gradual exhaustion of the pool of individuals willing to fight in Syria and Iraq.

Table 1: Overall Departures from the Western Balkans to Syria and Iraq (2012-2016[7])

	Men	Women	Children	Total
Albania	79	27	38	**144**
BiH	192	67	104[8]	**363**
Montenegro	18	5	3	**26**
Kosovo	256	52	50[9]	**358**
N. Macedonia	146	10	-	**156**
Serbia	37	12	10	**59**
Total	**728**	**173**	**205**	**1106[10]**

[7] The last such departure was registered in November of 2016.
[8] BiH security agencies believe that another 110 children have been born to at least one or both Bosnian parents in conflict zones.
[9] Authorities in Pristina reported that at least additional 48 children have been born in Syria and Iraq to the families from Kosovo.
[10] This number was probably higher, as it now seems that nearly 160 new children have been born to the Western Balkans contingent in Syria and Iraq.

Table 2: Overall Returns 2012-2019

	Men	Women	Children	Total
Albania	30	7	8	**45**
BiH	56	11	27	**94**
Montenegro	8	1	1	**10**
Kosovo	124	38	80	**242**
N. Macedonia	73	1	2	**76**
Serbia	9	1	2	**12**
Total	**300**	**59**	**120**	**479**

Table 3: Deceased in Syria and Iraq (2012-2020)

	Men	Women	Children	Total
Albania	26	-	-	**26**
BiH	97	13	43	**153**
Montenegro	6	-	-	**6**
Kosovo	86	6	5	**97**
N. Macedonia	36	1	2	**39**
Serbia	12	1	4	**17**
Total	**263**	**21**	**54**	**338**

Table 4: Still in Syria (April 2020)

	Men	Women	Children	Total
Albania	23	20	30	**73**
BiH	39	43	133	**215**
Montenegro	3	4	2	**9**
Kosovo	46	8	43	**97**
N. Macedonia	13	4	23	**40**
Serbia	16	10	4	**30**
Total	**140**	**89**	**235**	**464**

Compared to contingents from other countries, the Western Balkans contingent in Syria and Iraq was on average older and included more women. This is due to the migration (*hijra*) of entire families – sometimes three generations.

One in three individuals from the region that has reached Syria or Iraq has been killed or deceased. The ratio of men of military age killed or deceased was 1 in 2,7.

By December 2019, close to 500 individuals (men, women and children) had returned from the conflict zones.

Initially, men of military age dominated the Western Balkans contingent in Syria and Iraq with some 66 % of the entire group. The remaining 34% were non-combatants – women (19%) and children (15%) – although it is reported that some children as young as 8 have attended military trainings. Over the years, however, with the escalation of fighting in Syria and Iraq, some 300 men have left the conflict zones and returned to the region, while more than 260 have been killed or died of natural causes, reducing the overall contribution of men to the Western Balkans contingent to just 31%. The remaining 69% are women (20%) and children (49%) still in Syria, awaiting deportations to their respective countries (see Tables 5-7).

Patterns of Radicalization and Recruitment

Extensive research on the socio-demographic profiles of the Western Balkans foreign fighters reveals that many came from low-income families, possessed little education or marketable skills, and suffered from underlying psychosocial and mental health conditions. More than one-third already had criminal records before departure. More than one-quarter have resided, worked, or spent time in the West as part of the Western Balkans diasporas, typically in German-speaking countries. [11]

Individuals who traveled, and in some cases fought in Syria and Iraq had various motives, usually a mix of personal drivers and overarching ideological objectives. Many were running away; from an unhappy marriage, the burden of debt, criminal prosecution, or substance abuse. Others were looking for something, such as adventure or a sense of belonging and purpose. At the same time, most felt they were following a divine order (to perform *jihad* or *hijra*).

A number of recent interviews with detainees and returnees suggest that these motives include: a strong posttraumatic and "fictive kin" identifications with a global community of Sunni Muslims being under attack; humanitarian concerns and altruistic motivations; call for jihad and End Times apocalyptic thinking; wish to build and live inside an Islamic "Caliphate" and under Shariah law; the desire for personal significance; unemployment; material benefits of joining, and the desire and need to keep familial ties intact when one member of the family is convinced to go to Syria.[12]

The most common vulnerabilities to ISIL recruitment for the entire sample of interviewees were poverty, unemployment and underemployment. Breaking it out by gender, the most common vulnerabilities were a criminal history for men and poverty, family conflict, and prior trauma for women. Poverty and unemployment tended to be much more influential for Iraqi and Syrian ISIL members, who joined the group after it took over their villages, whereas foreign participants had more complex vulnerabilities, such as the combination between a criminal

[11] For more on this, see Vlado Azinovic: *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, 2017.
[12] Anne Speckhard and Ardian Shajkovci, *Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo: Women's Roles in Supporting, Preventing & Fighting Violent Extremism,* International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 2017.

history and substance abuse, and viewing un-and under-employment as a consequence of discrimination over being Muslim and/or from an immigrant background.

For men, the most common influences to joining ISIL were friends, face-to-face recruiters, and passive viewing of videos on the Internet and social media. The majority of participants were influenced in some way online, and a significant minority reported that all of their recruitment occurred online. For women, the most common influences were spouses, Internet recruiters, and parents. This can be expected due to the greater tendency for women to make decisions based on the preservation of relationships, particularly with their parents and spouses. While many women followed their husbands to ISIL out of fear of emotional or financial abandonment, only a very few women credibly claimed that they did not know where they were going when they left their home countries for ISIL territory—although many men and women had no idea it would be as bad as it was.

Motivations for joining ISIL differed drastically by location. Foreign males tended to be motivated by a "helping" purpose to provide humanitarian and defensive militant aid to the Syrian people, whereas foreign women tended to be motivated by the desire to pursue an Islamic identity, which many felt was not possible in their home countries due to harassment and discrimination. European women were also motivated by family ties, meaning that they followed their parents or husbands. [13]

The mobilization of prospective foreign fighters in the Western Balkans appears to have been more successful in countries where Muslims are a (relative) minority, such as in Serbia and North Macedonia. This lends support to the notion that minority groups, and diasporas in general, are often more susceptible to radicalization into violent extremism. Members of minority communities living outside their original identity corpus sometimes grow to believe that the majority identity group surrounding them is the cause of injustice (real or perceived) and discrimination as well as political, social, and economic marginalization. The mobilizing narrative of militant groups thrives on this victimhood mentality, and groups that target Muslims specifically mechanize the historic (and current) oppression inflicted on Muslims by their non-Muslim neighbors. What's more, in both Serbia and Macedonia, researchers reported that, among Muslims, trust in state institutions is incredibly low; and in Serbia, this is offset by a higher-than-average rate of trust in religious institutions and NGOs.[14] This may be related to perceptions of exclusion and may make Muslims in these societies more susceptible to the influences of religiously-affiliated non-governmental organizations and extremist religious leaders, especially if they position themselves in opposition to the state, which should be considered in the context of P/CVE programming.

[13] For more on this, see Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg: "ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners." Journal of Strategic Security 13, no. 1 (2020): 82-127.

[14] For more on this, see the British Council's Extremism Research Forum Reports for Serbia and Macedonia respectively (2018).

As the scale of the foreign fighter phenomenon became clear to analysts several years ago, they began emphasizing the need to both view the phenomenon holistically and also treat radicalization in a locally-specific manner, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches. Meaning, solutions to the problem of radicalization must incorporate all of society and must recognize the role that systemic factors play as drivers, but de-radicalization and prevention programs must be designed to untangle the unique web of factors that drives any given individual toward extremes. Indeed, time and again, researchers add to a chorus of voices reporting that "there is no single profile of a foreign fighter..."

In the Western Balkans, the role of systemic factors – often called "push factors" – are a special concern, because "countries in the region are young and have brittle institutions."[15] Interviewees in each of the countries evaluated in this research cited the pressing need to address systemic factors such as economic deprivation, corruption, and political and institutional dysfunction. Along with these push factors, individual-level drivers called "pull factors" also contribute to the radicalization process. Across the Western Balkans, and from respondents of all types, personal and community-level crises of identity – especially among youth, who face very high levels of unemployment and social disenfranchisement – were highlighted as a key potential driver of extremism.

In the context of religious radicalization, one of the blurry lines that must be considered by those seeking to prevent or counter extremism lies between democratic religious rights and freedoms on one side and, on the other, an understanding that any person who is radicalized into violence was once non-violent. Throughout the region, the problem of drawing this line was raised by respondents, particularly those in law enforcement, some of whom have adopted Schmidt's term "not-now-violent" as a way of categorizing certain individuals.[16] This reflects a desire by many experts to distinguish between people who may be intellectually and socially radicalized but show no propensity for violence, and those who appear to be passing through a phase of non- violent radicalization on the path to a violent extreme. In this way, authorities and analysts appear increasingly sensitive to the context specificity of what is viewed as "extreme" and the need to remain open to changing relativities within extremisms.

The lack of prior religious knowledge among radicalized individuals was noted among foreign fighters and their family members throughout the region, suggesting that a shallow understanding of religion makes one vulnerable to radicalizing forces who present reductionism as piety. Some analysts have called the ideology promoted by Salafi extremists a "pseudo-theology" that "distils concepts to their least complex form," and have called for religious counter-messaging to educate citizens in the region about the complexities and nuances of Islamic practice.[17]

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[15] Peter Neumann, "Foreword" in *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, ed., Vlado Azinović, 2017, 7.
[16] A. P. Schmid, *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?* ICCT Research Paper, 2014, 14.
[17] More on this in Vlado Azinovic and Muhamed Jusic, *The New Lure of the Syrian War – the Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent* (2016).

The end of ISIL as the world has known it certainly does not mean the end of radicalization and recruitment into extremism and into violence. Indeed, for security and law enforcement officials in the Western Balkans, it simply means having to refocus or heighten their attention on other forms and threats of extremism, including many groups that have long instrumentalized ethnic and national identity tensions in the region. Given the socio-political dynamics of the Western Balkans and the prevalence of ethnicity-based identity cultures, it is important that the risk of these types of extremist influences is fully appreciated. Media and political personalities may not declare the region a "hotbed of ethno-nationalist violence" as readily and boldly as they proclaimed it was a hotbed of ISIL terrorism, but the truth is that less violence has been carried out in the region by Salafist militants than by individuals who express anti-Western or nationalist sentiments.

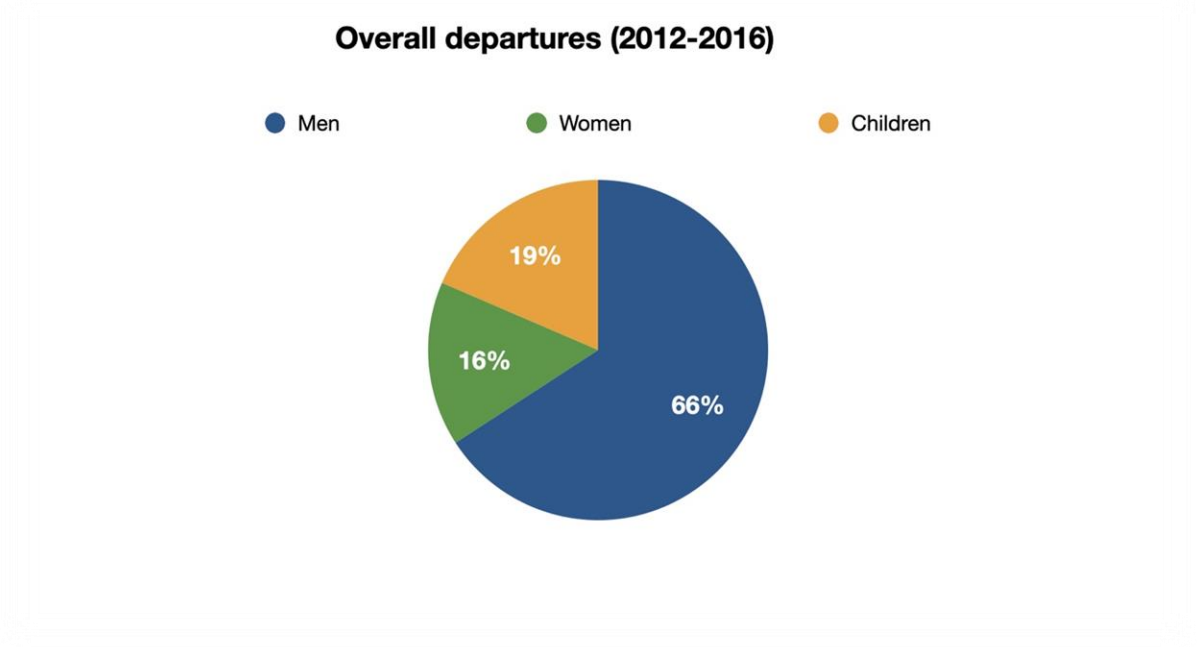

Table 5: Overall departures to Syria and Iraq, 20112-2016

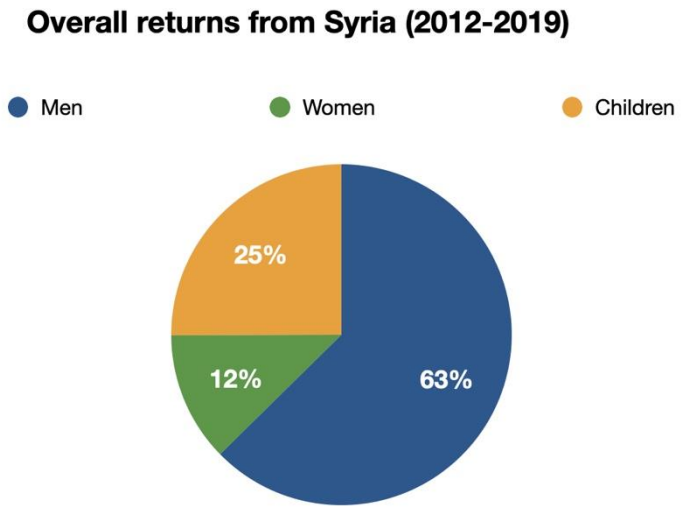

Table 6: Overall returns from Syria and Iraq, 2012-2019

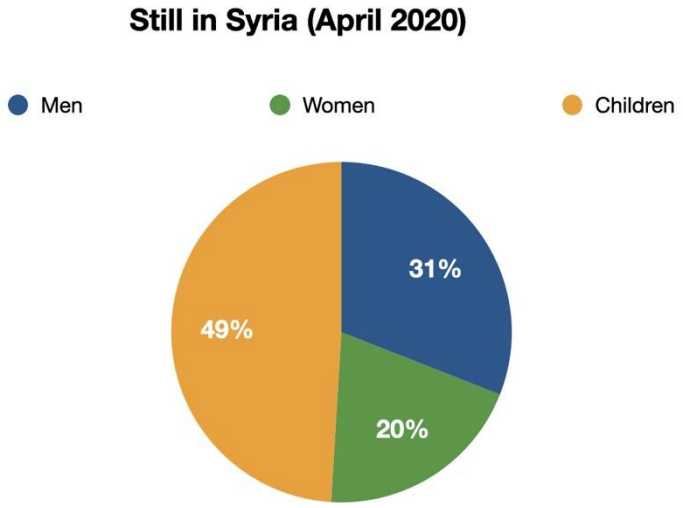

Table 7: The Western Balkans contingent still in Syria

Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTFs) and Their Families in the Western Balkans - Early Lessons Learned

When individuals, who have been foreign fighters, return to their respective places of origin, they may, in theory, assume any number of roles; not all of which are violent or threatening to their communities. But because returned foreign fighters are almost always seen as hardened

war veterans skilled in the use of military-grade weapons and explosives, the expectation is often that they will be likely to plot and/or carry out terrorist attacks at home.

Theoretical deliberations infer that returnees from Iraq and Syria could assume a number of roles, some of which may overlap. According to those analyses, former fighters and their family members may be engaged in: (1) returning to normal life; (2) attempting to radicalize and mobilize new volunteers; (3) providing logistic, financial, and other support to the process of radicalization into extremist ideologies; (4) travelling to the next war theatre; (5) planning and perpetration of terrorist attacks in their respective communities or elsewhere; and (6) utilizing their skills in handling weapons and explosives to join a criminal group.

A cursory look at the returnee population in the Western Balkans points to at least two distinct clusters of such individuals, with a prospect of an additional, third cluster arriving from Syria in the near future. Since most of the male returnees have already undergone, or will be committed to, custodial measures, the focus will remain on women and children returnees.

The first cluster

The first and largest cluster is comprised of individuals who had returned to the region from Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2018. These were all typically individual returns, that for male fighters were often followed by police arrests, prosecution and incarceration in their respective countries. In most cases, the women have not been indicted. Countries most affected by this early outflow from Syria were Kosovo - with 108 male returnees, 5 women and 3 children (116 in total), and BiH - with 45 men, 13 women and 4 children (62 in total). There were no reported returns in 2017, whereas in 2018 4 individuals returned to Kosovo (1 men and 3 children), and 6 (1 men, 2 women, and 3 children) returned to BiH.

We now know that military engagement in Syria and Iraq for many Western Balkans foreign fighters in this group resulted mostly in disillusionment. In short, it appears as if many returnees were disappointed to find realities on the ground in conflict zones to be in stark contrast with what they had been initially promised during the recruitment process, prior to their departures to Syria. Some also returned because they believed that they had done their share of fighting for a noble cause. [18]

[18] The returnees reported that rebel groups lacked a solid command and operational structure at that time. In fact, fighters had to obtain weapons, ammunition, power generators, and even bottled water on their own. And adaptation to the climate and food was difficult, with fighters often suffering from chronic abdominal infections due to food and water poisoning. The returnees complained about theft, smuggling, and fraud, and stories of positions being surrendered without struggle or soldiers switching sides for money. This is not altogether surprising, though, given that monthly combat pay is between 50 and 100 US dollars and additional income is commonly earned through the sale of weapons and ammunition appropriated in combat. The former Western Balkans fighters have also testified that, in most cases, the formations in which they fought have had no medical personnel or facilities and that soldiers with non-lethal wounds died on the battlefield due to untreated bleeding. For more on this, see Vlado Azinovic and Muhamed Jusic: *The Lure of The Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*, 2015.

Over the years, this cluster of returnees has been quietly absorbed and gradually reintegrated into local micro-communities (their respective families and neighborhoods) that provided for their basic needs (accommodation, food, sources of income, etc.). For the most part, both male and female returnees have resumed normal lives, and thus far have not created any major security-related or other problems. A number of male returnees have already served prison sentences for their involvement in foreign fighting in Syria and Iraq, while some still remain in prisons. The children returnees from this cluster have been attending schools, and they typically do not stand out in comparison with their peers.

However, whatever the reason for these early returns may be, there is little credible evidence to support the notion that these individuals (men, women and children) have disowned the ideology that had led them to foreign fighting in the first place. Therefore, a reasonable caution is still required, and that is the reason why they mostly remain under the watchful eyes of security services in the region.

Assessing needs for this cluster seems rather difficult, as most of these individuals have gradually blended into their immediate families, neighborhoods, and local communities. In many cases, the rehabilitation and reintegration process was almost self-driven, and spontaneous, and as such is typical for traditional, closely knitted micro-communities in the Western Balkans. However, for a variety of reasons a more thorough mapping of these individuals' exact whereabouts and actual needs, carried out in coordination with security and social services, could provide for a more accurate assessment. Short of such effort, one can only assume that these returnees my still require psychosocial support, medical attention, occupational therapy, additional education, vocational trainings and job opportunities.

Actors involved in such assistance, alongside local Centers for Mental Health and Social Welfare Services, could also include CSOs with a niche in aforementioned areas.

The second cluster

The second cluster of returnees includes individuals that, for the most part, have been repatriated to their respective countries in April and December 2019 respectively, with the assistance of U.S. military and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). These deportations included 110 individuals in Kosovo (4 men, 32 women and 74 children, of which 44 have been born in the conflict zone), and 25 individuals in BiH (7 men, 6 women, and 12 children of which 11 have been born in Syria, including one orphaned child). [19]

The mere number of repatriated individuals in the second cluster has by automaticity introduced a number of security and socio-economic challenges, particularly in Kosovo. These included issuing birth certificates to children born into conflict-affected areas, registering their residency and citizenship, providing accommodation for mothers and children, access to health care,

[19] In early 2020, one man, one woman and two children were also repatriated to North Macedonia.

kindergartens and schools, as well psychosocial counseling, work therapy, vocational trainings and job opportunities.

However, the most worrying of all was the fact that the second wave of returnees, with little exception, included individuals who seemed totally committed to the ideology of ISIL, and determined to stay in its self-proclaimed Caliphate in Syria to defend it until their very last breath. The vast majority of returnees (men, women and children) have been captured or detained following the fall of Baghouz in March 2019, the last ISIL's stronghold in the country. Based on the available evidence, one can assume that these individuals never would have opted for a voluntary return to their respective countries in the Western Balkans, if it wasn't for the military defeat of ISIL.

Therefore, any intervention aimed at rehabilitation and reintegration of this cluster of returnees to the Western Balkans, either in non-custodial or custodial environments, must be understood and carried out as a risk management operation, rather than a pursuit of the elusive concept of "de-radicalization."

Women in the second cluster [20]

Psychologists in the region engaged with the second cluster reported that the vast majority of female returnees have been complaining, or showing visible signs, of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, frequent panic attacks, depression and sleep deprivation.[21] These feelings of anxiety and panic interfere with daily activities. They are always out of proportion to the actual danger and difficult to control. Also worrying is the fact that these symptoms and behaviors can last a long time, even if treated properly and timely. The observed anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder (social phobia), specific phobias and separation anxiety disorder (typically in children). In addition to undergoing individual and group psychotherapy, both in Kosovo and BiH, a significant number of female returnees have been prescribed antidepressants and anxiolytics (anti-anxiety drugs) to help them deal with these mental health issues. Some female returnees expressed fear from stigmatization of both themselves (as many still wear a full *niqab*) and their children. The initial psychotherapy also established that some women have suffered multiple traumas, as they survived the ordeal of the wars of Yugoslav succession (1991-2001). Some were orphaned, or lost a parent (typically fathers). Further traumas ensued once they reached conflict zones in Syria and Iraq - frequent bombardments, airstrikes, loss of family members (husbands and children), detention and life in camps, but also the uncertainties linked to their deportations back to the region and prospects of indictment and incarceration).

[20] It is assumed that men in the second cluster will be all indicted and eventually incarcerated, therefore the emphasis in this document remains on women and children returnees. The treatment of men in custodial environments in the Western Balkans is currently being addressed by Council of Europe's (CoV) Radicalization in Prisons Project, and funded by EU.

[21] For the purpose of this document, psychological observations on returnees have been generalized and depersonalized by the consultant in order to avoid the breach of (what amounts to) doctor-patient confidentiality. However, despite this effort, these observations should not be shared with a third party.

Also worrying are reports that vast majority of these women still refuse, or remain unable, to even entertain the idea of their own responsibility for the decision to travel to Syria in the first place, and to bring along, or give birth to children there. The anecdotal stories from camps in Syria, where these women had been held prior to their deportation to BiH and Kosovo indicate that "there were hardcore ISIL ideologues among them." Major General Alexus Grynkewich, deputy commander of Operation Inherent Resolve who oversees joint and coalition operations, recently stated the potential for radicalization in these camps is "the biggest long-term strategic risk" outside of active military operations in efforts to counter the Islamic State, as in the absence of men, the women of ISIL are now seen as harbingers of its ideology. "The children are being brought up in that. So, you can almost see the next generation of ISIL …today. It's a tremendous problem," said Grynkewich [22]

It is still uncertain as to whether or not these observations apply to female returnees in the Western Balkans, as they all seem pleased to be back home. Their general behavior and disposition toward R&R efforts and actors involved seem cooperative and opportunistic. Therefore, first-liners on the ground typically refer to this early stage of the intervention as a "honeymoon period."

For women, in general, it is critical to assess the varying levels of individual agency based on their unique circumstances of joining, the plurality of their roles in the group, and possible continued support for, or disownment of, the group. Assessments should take into account the risk that some women may pose, both in security terms and the possibility of radicalizing others. Action should also be taken in accordance with legal norms and with respect of human rights, including access to fair trials and gender-conscious rehabilitation and reintegration programs.[23]

Minors in the second cluster

Children returnees of all ages in the Western Balkans have been showing signs of PTSD as well. Psychologists in the field reported of a widespread fear in children of overflying (commercial) aircraft. The sound of an airplane prompts some children to scream in panic and run for shelter. This is obviously related to the airstrikes they had endured and survived in the conflict zone. Some children were wounded in such airstrikes, while some lost their parents or/and siblings.

Disorders also observed in children returnees include selective mutism - a consistent failure of children to speak in certain situations, such as school, even when they can speak in other situations, such as at home with close family members (this can interfere with school, work and

[22] Richard Hall, "'Hardcore' Isis ideologues held in Syrian camps represent long-term risk, warns US-led coalition," Independent, July 3, 2019.

[23] Joana Cook and Gina Vale: "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," CTC Sentinel, July 2019, Volume 12, Issue 6

social functioning), as well as separation anxiety disorder - characterized by anxiety that's excessive for the child's developmental level and related to separation from parents or others who have parental roles.

The repatriation of minors, particularly infants, also raises the issue of separation from their Islamic State-affiliated parent(s). Although ISIL-affiliated parents have endangered their children through their travel to Islamic State territory, separation could also exacerbate trauma experienced by minors. Furthermore, blanket separation policies may prove harmful if custody is granted to other family members also holding extremist views. This reinforces the need to assess the parameters of repatriation and rehabilitative needs for minors on a case-by-case basis.

Minors should have their rights and development put first, and initiatives that address healthcare, education, and psychosocial support should be prioritized. A rehabilitation-first approach responds to individual needs, provides an effective counterpoint to the Islamic State's indoctrination, and offers a new 'non-Islamic State' identity on which to build a future.

For obvious reasons, and without exception, the first-liners in the region engaged in day-to-day interaction with the second cluster of returnees, strongly insist that access to it must remain limited to just (i) psychologists and social workers who have been involved from the outset in rehabilitation and reintegration effort, (ii) law enforcement, intelligence and judiciary (only if and when required), and that intervention should be (iii) carefully planned and carried out, closely and regularly coordinated, monitored and evaluated.

Early experiences with this particular group of women and children returnees, both in Kosovo and BiH, clearly demonstrate that progress in R&R depends primarily on trust and respect between the target group and actors engaged in intervention. Given the (psychosocial, and other) sensitivities observed (and treated) in this group, it seems safe to assume that confidence-building process will be long and probably turbulent, while progress in R&R will remain uncertain for an indefinite period of time. Therefore, it is of a paramount importance to maintain this process uninterrupted, and most importantly - tailored and guided by the input from the first-liners. Introducing other actors at this stage seem premature and may backfire as the newcomers (whoever they might be) could disrupt and undermine the confidence-building process, prompt suspicion and introduce a new dynamic into a group that is in a desperate need of tranquility, trust and continuity. The decision about whether, when and in what capacity other actors should be introduced into R&R activities must depend solely on a needs assessment and progress achieved.

This is particularly important having in mind the prospect of yet another wave/cluster of returnees that may arrive to the region in 2020. Current estimates put the overall number of Western Balkans fighters and family members who have remained in Syria to over 460, of which the most are citizens of BiH (215), Kosovo (97), and Albania (73). Around 70% of this contingent are women (20%) and children (49%), whereas only 31% are men (see Tables 4 and 7). While the precise timing of such group deportation remains unknown, sources familiar with

the process suggest "it will be only one flight (typically the McDonnell Douglas/Boeing C-17 Globemaster III) with multiple stops – most probably in Tirana, Skopje, Pristina and Sarajevo.

Assessing needs for this cluster is still an ongoing process. Initially, the single most obvious problem was the fact that children born in Syria and Iraq did not have birth certificates, or any other documents that could facilitate their registration for citizenship and residence permits. At the time of writing, the problem remains unresolved in BiH, where social workers are forced to virtually circumvent the existing laws in order to enroll such children in kindergartens and schools, or to provide them access to health care. If not resolved soon, the issue of "invisible children" could undermine the reintegration process, as the failure to address it could be interpreted by returnees as intentional and intended to intimidate them.

Other needs include, continuing psychosocial treatment (including individual and group psychotherapy), support from local Centers for Social Welfare (including financial and logistical), acquiring additional education or skills through vocational trainings, setting up small businesses or farming activities (as most returnees live in villages or suburban areas that typically encompass some land). A more detailed assessment will ensue during the R&R process, so that the subsequent activities could be tailored to meet individual needs of every returnee.

For R&R interventions to be successful, additional capacity building and awareness raising activities/workshops should be carried out with services involved in providing assistance to returnees, and especially minors (in Centers for Mental Health, Social Welfare Services, kindergartens, schools, medical institutions, community job centers, etc.).

Actors involved may include government institutions, but also CSOs with a proven track record in these areas of expertise, adequate capacity and willingness to engage.

Opportunities for Societal Responses to Violent Extremism and Rehabilitation and Reintegration Efforts in the Western Balkans

Western Balkan countries have already made a significant progress in improving existing P/CVE strategies by evolving considerably from a whole-of-government into a whole-of-society approach. This should further awareness rising of radicalization among community stakeholders and build greater local competencies to fight it. And, a civil society-based approach should enhance capacities in areas such as education, professional development and employment, social welfare, and mental healthcare. These efforts would benefit immensely from the establishment of research-based policy development centers, preferably as a mix of governmental and non-governmental experts and committed professionals in the field, possibly with regional participation and focus. Centers of this kind are already embedded in some local communities and are thus best positioned to understand each context and help devise the most effective locally-owned P/CVE and R&R interventions.

While it is evident that not all approaches to P/CVE produce the same effects on all designated target groups, there are some core methodological principles that can be drawn from interventions elsewhere. Interestingly, these principles are often applied in recruitment *to* extremism as well; and as one interviewee noted, "We should reclaim the recruiters' tools." These tools include: (a) undertaking initial research that provides a comprehensive understanding of a particular environment and its underlying, context-specific risks and challenges; (b) devising the best approaches to intervention, based on insights acquired from best practices elsewhere; (c) building trust, respect, and relationships with the target group; (d) involving and empowering credible facilitators (most often local or international non-governmental actors) and engaging governments and institutions as partners; (e) providing facilitators with a clear mandate; and (f) encouraging and securing voluntary participation.

Also, instead of developing sometimes elusive counter-narratives, radicalization into extremist ideologies may be better prevented, and reintegration of returnees more easily achieved by re-affirming traditional societal values. In the Western Balkans, these values stand in stark contrast to the practices promoted by extremists in the region, such as: gender segregation in education, healthcare, and employment; arranged and child marriages, and polygamy; female genital mutilation; and limitations on the freedoms and rights of women. Core societal values that vehemently oppose this worldview should be deployed against these specific practices, but also to address more general societal trends, including intolerance of others, religious and ethnic discrimination, the normalization of hate speech, and a lack of collective introspection, all of which make a society more conducive to radicalization into extreme ideologies.

Finally, assistance aimed at helping institutions and communities in the region with diminished capacities and/or funding should be embedded into already existing state structures and services (schools, social welfare, mental health centers, professional training, etc.), so that a transfer of expertise and resources becomes institutionalized, and thus more sustainable.