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BRING THEM BACK: MANAGE THE RISK

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INTRODUCTION

Local and international media continuously tell stories about people who, after having joined the Islamic State (IS) a few years ago, cannot return home from Syrian camps. These stories display the security dilemma that European governments have to deal with: how to manage the risk? By banning IS nationals from coming back home and not taking any responsibility for them, or by repatriating and prosecuting them? Balkan countries have also faced this dilemma in recent years. More than 1000 men, women and children from this region travelled to Iraq and Syria between 2012 and 2016 (See Table 1).¹ 1/3 of them were killed, 1/3 have returned, while 1/3 of them are still there.

Table 1. Balkan FTFs and their families who left for Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016.²

Country of Origin	Men	Women	Minors
Kosovo	256	52	50
Albania	79	29	38
N. Macedonia	146	10	-
Montenegro	18	5	3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	192	67	104
Serbia	37	12	10

In February 2021, UN human rights experts made a new call for states to repatriate their citizens from the camps in northeastern Syria.³ Two years after the IS “caliphate” was defeated in Syria and more than three years after the fall of the last IS territory in Iraq, 13,500 foreign women and children remain in camps held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). There are also 2,000 male foreign fighters in prisons in Syria. It is hard to

estimate the exact number of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), as some of them have dual citizenship and others have already had their citizenship revoked deprived of their nationality.⁴ They represent around 60 different nationalities.⁵

The prosecution of Balkan FTFs has been seen as problematic for several reasons. The first is the governments’ reluctance to repatriate their citizens. As there is no international framework stipulating how states should tackle the issue, countries in the region have taken individual approaches. In addition, governments in Europe show no political interest in repatriating their citizens, which has made Balkan countries more reluctant.

Second, data on individuals who are still in Syria is contradicting. Many people in the camps are undocumented: either lost, or they have destroyed their passports. This, combined with limited administrative capacities, mean the Kurdish authorities have failed to provide comprehensive information concerning FTFs’ nationalities. There is a likelihood that a number of IS members lied about their countries of origin for various reasons, including an unwillingness to be repatriated, or no longer identifying with their home country.⁶ In addition, there are many children who were born in the warzone but still do not have citizenship anywhere.

Third, governments in the Balkans are not able to provide reliable information either, as they have a limited capacity to collect information themselves directly in the camps and prisons. Countries whose citizens are still in Syria often have little more than estimates based on data from several sources: the Kurds, US intelligence, families, and open sources shared by international organizations with access to the camps.⁷ There are practical, operational,

and legal challenges, as multiple actors are involved in collecting frontline evidence, including military personnel, the Commission of inquiry Syria (CoI), UNITAM (the UN investigation team), and specialized NGOs.⁸ Consequently, there are prosecution challenges related to the lack of evidence. Local authorities do not always possess information on every individual who committed a crime in Syria.

There are further questions concerning the success of reintegration programmes and the capacity of Balkan countries to implement them. National counter-terrorism policies point to prisons as a particular type of environment in terms of both the risks of radicalization and opportunities for deradicalization.⁹ On the one hand, a prison is a place, in which individuals with no previous experience in politically motivated violence could be exposed to radical ideas. On the other hand, a prison could be a venue for a 'peaceful change and transformation'.¹⁰ Peter R. Neuman lists several operational purposes of a prison when analysing radical actors: this is where terrorists form networks, develop strategies, establish hierarchies, and plot attacks.¹¹ There are significant differences among countries in Europe concerning the processes and procedures following the release of an extremist offender.¹² Some lack an integrated approach towards prison and probation.

POLICY OPTIONS

There are several policy options Balkan countries can choose from:

- Leave FTFs there
- To allow them to be prosecuted by Iraqi or SDF courts
- Strip FTFs of their nationalities
- Reluctantly repatriate
- Active repatriation.¹³

Leave FTFs there. The first option has been preferred by most countries in Europe. According to the UN's published guidelines from April 2019, states have the primary responsibility for their own citizens.¹⁴ However, European countries have overwhelmingly refused to actively repatriate their nationals. Despite the high number of FTFs from Europe, many governments pretend that this is not their problem. They maybe hope that it will disappear, but it will not. Leaving their citizens in camps and prisons leads to three major concerns. This policy option abuses FTFs' human rights and, more specifically, the right to a fair trial. The time spent in Syrian camps and prisons with very poor security and socio-economic conditions increases the risk of further radicalization, and the potential release or escape of FTFs.

Prosecuted by Iraqi courts or the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) courts. The general approach in Europe is that FTFs should face prosecution in the country where they have committed their offences; in this case, Syria or Iraq.¹⁵ Establishing an international tribunal has been another idea previously under discussion in Europe.¹⁶ France, among other countries, is insisting that Iraqi courts deal with French FTFs.¹⁷ In fact, more than 20 Europeans have already been convicted in Iraq. However, Iraq still upholds the death penalty and fails to meet international fair trial standards.¹⁸ Iraqi courts do not have the framework for international crimes developed in their legislation, therefore it is a challenge to prosecute European citizens for crimes committed in Syria, which is the case for most FTFs. The other option is to rely on the Syrian Democratic Forces to conduct the trials, yet the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also known as Rojava, where the majority of FTFs are detained, is not a recognized state actor and, therefore, cannot

prosecut FTFs. Neither does SDF have the legal capacity to prosecute FTFs, nor can they give permission for them to be transferred to their countries of origin. This means that the Kurdish autonomous administration (AANES) has no legal right to deal with European FTFs due to the status of such judiciary decisions.¹⁹

Strip FTFs from their nationalities. This controversial policy response worryingly appears across Western countries without providing a long-term solution to the problem. Among others, the UK, Canada, Belgium, and the Netherlands have deprived some of their IS fighters of their nationalities and, thus, depriving them of the opportunity to return. One case which has received much publicity is that of Shamima Begum, a London schoolgirl who married a Dutch IS fighter in Syria.²⁰ Another FTF, known as “Jihadi Jack”, caused a dispute between the United Kingdom and Canada.²¹ Jack Letts, a British-Canadian man who travelled to Syria to join IS, has been stripped of his U.K. citizenship and left solely with his Canadian one; this is despite the fact that he was born in the United Kingdom, went to school there, converted to Islam there, and left for Syria from there.²² By applying this approach, Western governments send a message: FTFs are not our problem. This policy abuses FTFs’ human rights and, even worse, deprive children born in Syria of citizenship and protection from their parents’ home countries.²³

Reluctant repatriation. This policy response has become evident through a number of cases of FTFs who escaped from camps and prisons in Syria, reached Turkey, and were detained by local authorities.²⁴ Some were escapees from Ain Issa and al-Hol, while others had been unaccounted for until they managed to exfiltrate themselves into Turkey. In other cases, FTFs had been in Turkish custody for some time already.²⁵ In 2019, Turkey officially

announced the deportation of captured Western FTFs to their home countries, even if their citizenship had been revoked.²⁶ This process has been encouraged by Turkey as the country does not have any interest in keeping European FTFs on their territory. According to data from Turkey’s Interior Ministry, as quoted in the media, the country has deported 2764 FTFs of 67 different nationalities since 2019.²⁷ This number includes FTFs who traveled to Syria to join jihadi groups like IS and Al Nusra Front, but also foreigners who went to join the Kurdish forces. Out of this number, 224 have been sent to EU countries: 66 French, 57 German, 22 Dutch, 14 Swedes and 7 Swiss.²⁸

Active repatriation is the most favoured option by non-governmental experts and researchers. It stresses the need for the prosecution of FTFs for the actual crimes committed in Syria. It also focuses on the home countries’ responsibility to comply with human rights and fair trial standards, as well as to secure individuals’ reintegration into society. However, this option inevitably raises concerns among policymakers. Among other fears, governments are worried about FTFs committing terrorist attacks despite terrorism recidivism appearing in only a small number of cases. Another concern is the low sentences given to returning FTFs due to lack of evidence. These aspects translate into no political will for active repatriation. Prosecuting FTFs for crimes they actually committed can involve: ordinary crimes such as murder, terrorism, transnational organized crimes, sexual and gender-based crimes (slavery, human trafficking), and international crimes. In recent years, several countries in Europe (such as France, Germany, and Sweden) have explored options to prosecute FTFs for transnational organized crimes (recruitment, smuggling weapons, faking documents) in an attempt to give FTFs longer sentences and bring more justice to the victims.

Taking Balkan FTFs back and prosecuting them in their countries of origin is not on the region’s political agendas. At the same time, their governments have a responsibility to provide a response on several grounds: security, legal, moral, and human rights. First, the risk of more IS fighters escaping prisons and camps in Syria is a security concern not only for that region but also for the Balkans and the EU. Their prolonged detention in Syria or Iraq creates risks of further radicalisation and networking with other IS members.²⁹ A number of Europeans have managed to escape the al-Hol camp since October 2019.³⁰ Concerning international security, the question of what should be done with these FTFs in detention in north-eastern Syria is thus more urgent than ever.³¹ Second, The UN resolutions UNSC2178³² and UNSC2396³³, provide states with sufficient legal ground to implement a process of active repatriation. From a human rights perspective, governments are obliged to defend their citizens’ right to be free from torture, to have a fair trial, to protect children born in a war, and secure children’s right to development.³⁴

RETURNS AND REPATRIATION OF BALKAN FOREIGN FIGHTERS

There are two groups of returnees that can be distinguished in the Balkans. Individuals who returned to the region between 2012 and 2016 did so voluntarily. These individual returns were often followed by police arrests and prosecution, especially after 2015 when new legislation concerning foreign fighters was introduced among countries in the region. In most cases, women have not been indicted. According to the available data, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are the countries with the highest number of returnees belonging to this group of people who voluntarily returned to the region (See Table 2).

Table 2. Returning FTFs to Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2013 – 2016).

	Male	Female	Children
Kosovo	108	5	3
BiH	45	13	4

*No returns were reported in 2017; In 2018, 1 man and 3 children returned to Kosovo and 1 man, 2 women, and 3 children returned to BiH.³⁵

As part of the total number of returned FTFs (See Table 3), a smaller group includes individuals who have been repatriated from the warzone to their home countries with the assistance of local institutions and the U.S and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Several such operations took place in 2019. In total, 110 individuals were repatriated to Kosovo (4 men, 32 women and 74 children) and 25 to BiH (7 men, 6 women, and 12 children, 11 of which were born in Syria). In addition, one man, one woman and two children were also repatriated to North Macedonia in early 2020.³⁶

Table 3. A number of individuals who returned from Syria and Iraq per country (2013 – 2020).³⁷

Country of Origin	Men	Women	Minors
Kosovo	124	38	80
Albania	30	7	8
N. Macedonia	73	1	2
Montenegro	8	1	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	56	11	27
Serbia	9	1	2

Balkan countries have chosen various approaches to the issue of FTFs. Their decisions have been based on a political will, as well as their individual capacities for prosecution,

detention, and reintegration. States like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have made steps towards repatriation and are often seen as positive examples, especially in comparison to Western Europe. The assumption behind this approach is that governments can control the issue and not contribute to the further radicalization of their citizens by abandoning them in Syrian camps and prisons. While countries with a legacy of conflict in the Balkans are more familiar with the need to address security concerns, they are also dependent on international cooperation and U.S. support in the decision-making process concerning repatriation.

Table 4. The number of individuals from the Balkans who are detained in camps and prisons in Syria, per country.³⁸

Država porijekla	Muškarci	Žene	Maloljetnici
Kosovo	46	8	43
Albanija	23	20	30
S. Makedonija	13	4	23
Crna Gora	3	4	2
Bosna i Hercegovina	39	43	133
Srbija	16	10	4

As of May 2020, the number of Balkan FTFs and family members remaining in Syria was over 460. Over half of them are from BiH, Kosovo, and Albania. Only 1/3 are men, while almost half this number are children (Table 4). These approximate estimates show that repatriation efforts should focus on the needs of children, and assess the risks of bringing the entire contingent back to the region.

Kosovo has been among the very few countries in Europe choosing active repatriation of FTFs. There has been an emphasis on the obligation

to repatriate, prosecute and rehabilitate their citizens. Unlike most states in Europe, Kosovo's approach shows a political will and seeks to demonstrate institutional capacity in security risk management.³⁹ The political narratives use a vocabulary of inclusion rather than exclusion from the society concerning FTFs. Returned individuals are called "citizens" or "Kosovars" in contrast with European states where some FTFs have immigrant roots, often dual citizenship and, thus, have been seen not as "true" citizens worthy of repatriation and reintegration.⁴⁰ However, comparing Kosovo to Western European states, it is less likely that a small, young, post-war, non-EU country will have all the resources in place to reintegrate their FTFs.

Around 400 citizens of Kosovo travelled to Iraq and Syria between 2012 and 2016. This number includes 255 women and children.⁴¹ A major operation took place in April 2019 when Pristina, backed by the U.S., facilitated the return of 110 citizens (32 women, 74 children, and 4 men).⁴² 30 men, 49 women, and 8 children from Kosovo are believed to be still in Syrian camps and prisons.⁴³ Around 76 children with at least one parent from Kosovo were born in the warzone.⁴⁴ Overall, 242 (124 men, 38 women, and 80 children) individuals have returned to the country either individually or being repatriated.⁴⁵ All four men from the major operation were detained upon their arrival; three have since been convicted, and received sentences between six months and 5.5 years.⁴⁶

The repatriation of children from Syria deserves special attention, as Balkan countries have become more hesitant to bring all minors back to the region. At least 180 children remain in camps; some were brought by their parents, but the majority were born in the conflict zone. Among the Balkan countries, BiH ranks first in

the number of children who either travelled with their families from BiH or were born to Bosnian mothers in Syria. In December 2019, 24 Bosnian citizens were brought back home with the assistance of the U.S. Out of this number, the men (7) faced trials, and the women (6) and children (11) are going through rehabilitation programmes. This number is rather small compared

to the 133 who are still in Syrian camps. The responsibility of local governments in the Balkans does not end with repatriation. In many cases, children are undocumented, thus needing birth certificates and registered citizenship. These challenges may partially explain the reluctance of countries in the region, and Europe more generally, to speed up the process of repatriation.

Table 5. Convictions for domestic terrorism, recruitment, and foreign fighting in the conflict zones in Syria and Ukraine (2010 – 2020).

Location of trial	Total cases	Location of crime	Sentence total (years)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	45	Domestic: 16 Syria: 28 Ukraine: 1	176
Albania	12	Domestic: 3 Syria: 9	146
Serbia	23	Syria: 7 Ukraine: 16	70
Montenegro	2	Syria: 1 Ukraine: 1	1
North Macedonia	29	Domestic: 11 Syria: 18	164
Total	111	Domestic: 30 Syria: 63 Ukraine: 18	556

*Information on Kosovo is missing from the original database. Source: BIRN Regional Terrorism Database⁴⁷

PROSECUTED AND CONVICTED FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE BALKANS

Balkan states face significant challenges in dealing with FTFs and their families, who either have returned or are expected to return. This is due to insufficient evidence in many cases, slow judicial procedures, and a lack of comprehensive rehabilitation in and out of prison. More than 160 individuals across the region have been jailed for joining the wars in Syria or Ukraine.⁴⁸ While Serbia and Kosovo have sentenced the largest number of FTFs, North Macedonia and BiH have had the highest number of convictions for domestic terrorism (See Table 5). In Serbia, there is great

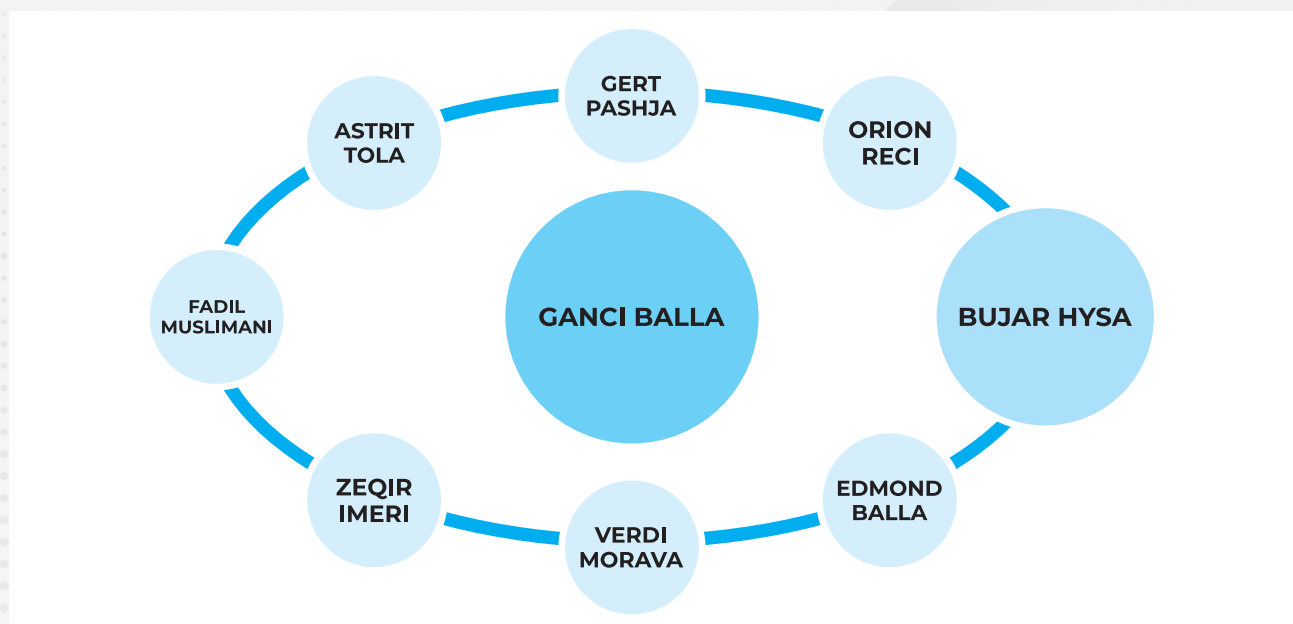
variation between convictions of FTFs who fought in Syria versus in Ukraine. In the majority of cases, FTFs from Ukraine received suspended sentences or house detention, while FTFs from Syria were convicted for up to 11 years.⁴⁹ According to the BIRN Regional Terrorism Database, there are no final verdicts for domestic terrorism in Montenegro, and Albania has not convicted any returned FTFs in the second instance of the criminal proceeding (data until July 2020).⁵⁰

For the majority of returnees who were FTFs in the Syrian War, these were their first sentences. The data on BiH shows previous criminal

records in only 4 out of 28 cases, whereas in Serbia and North Macedonia, none of the sentenced individuals had a criminal history. In a very small number of cases, individuals stood trial for both domestic terrorism and participation in a foreign conflict. One prominent individual is Munib Ahmetspahić. In 2013, he was convicted of destroying evidence after another suspect, Mevlid Jašarević, attacked the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo in October 2011. In April 2019, Ahmetspahić was sentenced to three years in prison for going to Syria as a foreign fighter between 2013 and 2018.⁵¹ Ahmetspahić was further declared “deradicalized” by the court, as he expressed his regret for going to the front line.⁵²

There are several distinguishable patterns of prosecution and conviction when looking at cases related to the Syrian War. Kosovo has taken a comprehensive approach of prosecuting both recruiters and recruits. However, this has been heavily criticized for being rather performative and not always being supported by solid evidence about an individual’s activities in the warzone. Albania has given the longest sentences to the “recruitment ring” convicted for sending FTFs to Syria. What is described by local security agencies as a “recruitment ring” refers to one authority figure who held major leadership functions in the recruitment of FTFs from Albania, and relied on a circle of eight associates sharing the same ideological views (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Recruitment Ring of Albanian FTFs.



The size of the circles in Figure 1 indicates the concentration of power that the radical influencers possessed, according to local security authorities. From data collected by the prosecution, it is evident that the two self-proclaimed imams, Balla and Hysa, were the leaders, while the rest of the network performed various supportive functions, including

funding and facilitation.⁵³ In 2016, the group was sentenced to a collective 126 years in prison by the court in Tirana.⁵⁴ The group was found guilty on charges of recruitment to terrorism, calling for terrorist acts, and inciting hatred.⁵⁵ While everyone in this “recruitment ring” shared the same ideological views, four of them were also subject to international arrest

warrants, which testifies to the significance of their radical influence at the local level. Yet, Tirana has been slow in prosecuting and sentencing people who have come back from the conflict zone. In May 2017, Almir Daci, a self-proclaimed imam from Pogradec, Albania, was sentenced in absentia to 15 years for foreign fighter recruitment but never returned from Syria and is believed to be dead. Unlike him, some 45 others returned to Albania in the early days of the recruitment process and even before the legislation on foreign fighting was introduced in 2014. Thus, these individuals were not subjected to court proceedings.

In contrast, BiH's focus has been on FTFs in addition to recruiters, especially in the early phase of returns (2014-2015). Individuals who travelled to Syria to join IS or the Al Nusra Front have been jailed upon their return. The BiH's approach has been criticized due to the, on average, low sentences given to FTFs: less than two years in prison. In total, there have been 16 second-instance verdicts issued by BiH courts in relation to the recruitment of foreign fighters. Consequently, 25 people were sentenced to 47 years for travelling or attempting to travel to the warzone in Syria, or for recruiting people at the local level. The longest sentence of 7 years was given to Hussein Bosnic, expected to be released in 2021. In nine cases, eight defendants received a sentence of one year each after pleading guilty.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, six out of seven Bosnian citizens who were extradited from Syria in 2019 are still in custody. The former IS fighter Jasmin Keserović, who was a part of this group, was sentenced to 6 years in prison by the Court of BiH. He was found guilty of travelling to Syria in 2013 and joining IS.⁵⁷

In the case of Kosovo, the majority of male FTFs have been prosecuted, and those who

were convicted received average sentences of 3.5 years.⁵⁸ Individuals who were convicted for recruiting FTFs or for planning terror attacks received higher sentences of up to 10 years. According to data from the Special Prosecution Office in Kosovo, there are 171 individuals with issued indictments for terrorism, while 123 were sentenced on terrorism-related cases. Concerning participation in foreign wars, courts in Kosovo have ruled on 87 indictments, and at least 50 other cases are ongoing.

The available data shows that the number of women indicted by Kosovo courts is growing: **24 women and 11 men** were indicted on terrorism-related charges between September 2019 and February 2020. However, their sentences are more lenient than those of their male counterparts.⁵⁹ All women returnees were placed under investigation upon their return.⁶⁰ At least 20 of them were indicted.⁶¹ In 2020, 16 women received suspended sentences after pleading guilty to either joining or organizing and participating in a terrorist group. The suspended sentences range from two to three years.⁶² This security response reflects a social bias in defining the security threat that women returnees may pose. It is likely influenced by an assumption that they were not involved in the violence, thus underestimating the agency of women in foreign fighter recruitment, and later in their warzone experience.⁶³

Overall, FTF sentences in EU countries are much longer than the ones they receive in the Balkans. This can be partially explained by the individual threat assessment of each state, the perception of the threat from terrorism, and finally, the way FTFs are defined in the political discourse. Balkan countries treat the issue of FTFs as a domestic security issue, as it concerns their own citizens. The expectation is that after being released from prison, they

need to be reintegrated into their home society. On the other hand, for many EU countries, FTFs, especially those with immigrant roots, are perceived as outsiders. The most recent terrorist attack in Vienna, committed by a radicalized individual with a migrant background, has only further increased interest and polarized debates on religion, integration, and ideology in Western Europe. This political discourse may influence the prosecution and the sentencing practices of a country.

Furthermore, assessing the security risk concerning returned FTFs is a serious challenge. It is even harder to judge if individuals sentenced for participation in a foreign conflict represent a threat upon their release from prison. In addition, there are many attempts by individuals to travel to Syria, but there is no further evidence that can bring any legal consequences. For instance, 107 cases of attempted departures to Syria were suspended by courts in Kosovo. As the attention of security institutions and experts has been on returning FTFs, this additional cluster of “wanna-be fighters” remains invisible when assessing prosecution, conviction, and rehabilitation practices.

REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES

Among the first to begin the repatriation of their citizens, Balkan countries have faced security and socio-economic challenges. Despite their efforts to tackle the issue, there are a lot of reasons to doubt whether fragile Balkan, non-EU countries have the resources in place to reintegrate their jihadi returnees.

Sentencing practices in the Balkans may be criticized for being shorter compared to those given to FTFs in EU countries, but longer sentences are not necessarily a solution unless

combined with a well-tailored process of rehabilitation and integration. This is another challenge to the region, as such policies are new, often underfunded, and underdeveloped. On the one hand, Balkan countries lack the capacity and expertise to reintegrate FTFs and their families into local societies; on the other hand, the ideological networks which had become a venue for radicalization processes and foreign fighter recruitment are still active across the region.

At the administrative level, countries are struggling to provide their returned citizens with documents confirming their citizenship and residency. This poses serious challenges for local security institutions, in addition to other concerns such as welfare services. The provision of access to healthcare, kindergartens, and school is a challenge which shows the limitations of local welfare institutions to respond to specific cases such as individuals returning from a warzone. Putting IS children back in school or finding opportunities for their mothers poses a challenge in countries with high unemployment, low education levels, and poor socio-economic conditions.

The capacity for intelligence and information collection and sharing, border management, and prison rehabilitation programs are further concerns. Constraints in budget and expertise may also limit the opportunities to provide law enforcement agencies with training to ensure the fair and consistent treatment of IS family members.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Even if Balkan countries manage to repatriate all of their citizens from Syria, there are reasons to doubt their ability to successfully reintegrate the returnees. Apart from the practical limitations and scarce resources in some cases, the question is whether the full reintegration of FTFs and their families can be achieved, and how to assess the risk of someone turning to crime and violence or further radicalizes due to marginalization and lack of better opportunities.⁶⁵ Thus, countries in the region should focus their efforts on a risk-management approach and closely analyze the outcomes of the repatriation process at various stages. Although the security threat posed by returnees is a primary concern in the decision of most EU states to “leave them there”, Balkan countries have the opportunity to show good practices in managing the risk from which other countries can learn. It is not hard to imagine that a small number of individuals who returned from Syria will continue to radicalize and maybe get involved in terrorist activities in the future. However, if they become aware of such individuals, security agencies may be able to prevent any plots planned by or with the participation of returned FTFs. Keeping an eye on them is one way to monitor how the threat evolves over time and how to develop adequate counteractions.

The bigger security concern is in not repatriating the FTFs and their families from Syria in the short term. When Balkan countries do not take all of their citizens back, they contribute to the risk of these individuals being further radicalized in Syrian camps and prisons. Moreover, their anger and frustration with not receiving help from their home countries may fuel a desire for revenge, and thus become a threat to regional and European security. The

sense of marginalization and generated grievances against state actors have been seen as drivers of radicalization by security experts and scholars. Thus, governmental decisions not to proceed with active repatriation is likely used as a radicalization narrative to justify violence against the West.⁶⁶

Most importantly, the repatriation and reintegration of children is a moral responsibility of governments across the region. Children born in, or brought to the warzone by their parents are an at-risk group and need special protection and attention. Older children who have already spent years in the camps are particularly vulnerable and are likely to be subject to the IS ideological influence, which is still very present among people living there.

The risk posed by returned FTFs and their families cannot be entirely extinguished/eliminated. Nonetheless, the steps undertaken by Balkan countries, especially Kosovo and BiH, show that repatriation is a more responsible approach to the problem. At the same time, there is much work to be done concerning the investigation, prosecution, and integration of returned FTFs. This requires improved coordination among institutions at the national and regional levels, greater involvement of civil society, and a long-term rehabilitation strategy.

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