



# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This Special Report focuses on efforts to rehabilitate former fighters who have participated in violent extremist groups abroad and to reintegrate them into their home society. With an aim to drawing lessons from previous programs, it looks at European exit programs for members of violent groups and criminal gangs, and first-generation deradicalization programs in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, as well as demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration programs.

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*Georgia Holmer and Adrian Shtuni*

# Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative

## Summary

- As the conflict in Iraq and Syria continues to evolve, many countries are facing the complex and pressing challenge of effectively responding to the return of those who traveled to participate in the conflict.
- Given the scale and scope of this wave of foreign fighters and the nature of the conflict, concern is high that some returnees may come home intending to commit violent acts.
- Effective programs to rehabilitate and reintegrate returning foreign fighters are crucial not only to preventing acts of violence but also to mitigating further radicalization among the youth population and building overall community-level resilience to violent extremism.
- European “exit programs” are mostly voluntary, use psychosocial modalities, and rely on personalized interventions. Potentially useful in designing deradicalization initiatives for other contexts, their success relies heavily on long-term and sustained investment and specialized expertise.
- The most promising feature of first-generation deradicalization programs implemented in Middle East and Southeast Asia is their three-pronged intervention effort that addresses affective, pragmatic, and ideological bonds concurrently, thus emphasizing the role of social and community relations in the reintegration process.
- Demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) is a distinct process from efforts to deradicalize and reintegrate returning foreign fighters or those convicted of terrorist crimes, yet learning from postconflict DDR programs is helpful. In particular, DDR programming has highlighted the importance of community participation in reintegration and the need for specialized programs for women and children.

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- If they are to succeed, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts need to be coupled with programs to address the conditions and dynamics that enable radicalization, to reform the criminal justice sector, and to build broader social and political resilience to the influence of violent extremism.

## Introduction

Various countries, especially in the Balkans and North Africa, now face the challenge of managing the return of their citizens who have fought in the Iraq and Syria conflicts. As of early December 2016, for example, at least eight hundred of the more than six thousand Tunisian nationals categorized as foreign fighters have returned home, as have more than one hundred Bosnians, 117 Kosovans, and eighty-six Macedonians.<sup>1</sup> According to official data, eight hundred nationals of these three Balkan countries have traveled to Iraq and Syria since 2012.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, returnees are defectors from the movement they joined and have come home disillusioned and disappointed. Others have returned but remain committed to violent action and extremist beliefs. The authorities are faced with effectively identifying, triaging, and managing this potential threat at the same time that they allow space for rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society. The terms *rehabilitate* and *deradicalize* are often used interchangeably to refer to cognitive disassociation from a violent group identity and ideology. *Reintegration* refers to the reestablishment of social, familial, and community ties and positive participation in society. Developing successful reintegration programs is crucial not only to preventing recidivism among returnees but also to mitigating further radicalization among the youth population and building overall community-level resilience to violent extremism.

The decision to travel to participate or fight in a foreign conflict is not a new trend: clear examples include the American Revolution, the Greek War of Independence, and the Spanish Civil War. In recent decades, the world has seen at least four distinct waves of foreign fighters drawn to fight in the name of defending Islam—the conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Bosnia, Iraq, and now Syria and Iraq (see box 1). Parallels can be drawn between those mobilized to defend democracy abroad in the 1850s or communism in the 1930s, or even ethno-nationalists who supported wars of liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, but the rise of Muslim foreign fighters is a more recent dynamic. It first emerged with the doctrinal shift among some Islamic leaders at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, which legitimized and encouraged—and in some cases obliged—violent jihad and advanced a narrative that presented these conflicts as posing an existential threat to Islam.<sup>3</sup>

A population of veteran fighters from these wars share a transnational identity as global jihadists, some of whom are now stateless—but they represent only one component of the current wave of foreign fighters.<sup>4</sup> The flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria is unique in scale and in the diversity of their origins and backgrounds. More than forty thousand fighters from more than 120 countries are estimated to have traveled to Syria and Iraq since 2011. Almost seven thousand originate from the West, as many as five thousand of whom are European Union citizens.<sup>5</sup> These numbers are a significant departure from the trends observed in previous armed conflicts involving Muslim foreign fighters. Yet, the overwhelming majority of foreign fighters and relatives who have traveled with them to the region originate from the Maghreb and the Middle East. Countries like Tunisia have been particularly affected, about 6,500 Tunisian nationals traveling to the conflict theater and an additional fifteen thousand barred from travel because authorities suspect their intent.<sup>6</sup> Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, and Jordan are other major foreign-fighter origin countries.<sup>7</sup>

This unprecedented flow has been enabled not only by modern communication technology, ease of travel, and aggressive recruitment campaigns—but also by the reaction and interventions of the West, which have heightened a narrative of a global, religiously based divide.

Unique also to this modern wave of foreign fighters is the degree to which home countries perceive their return as a security threat. Because the conflict is not contained to the region—well evidenced by the lethal attacks in Europe over the past five years—concern is high that some returnees may come home with intent to commit violent acts in those home countries. At least six of the individuals who carried out the deadly Paris attacks in November 2015 were Belgian and French fighters who had returned from Syria.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, at least three of the five who carried out the Brussels attacks in March 2016 were returnees.<sup>9</sup> Previous waves did not present this same heightened concern, and the fear of significant “blowback attacks” by returnees was not realized.<sup>10</sup>

### **Box 1. An Evolving and Dynamic Trend: Four Waves of Muslim Foreign Fighters**

Foreign fighter mobilizations for conflicts in the Muslim world were rare before 1980. Wave I was composed of Muslim foreign fighters from different countries of the Middle East traveling to wage war against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. These individuals had primarily upper- and middle-class backgrounds and religious families. Wave II comprised Muslim foreign fighters who fought in Chechnya, Bosnia, Kashmir, or the Philippines in the 1990s. These individuals were often expats from Middle Eastern countries who were attending Western universities and primarily originated from a middle-class background. Wave III is often associated with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. It was made up of fluid networks of largely unskilled individuals from middle- or lower-class backgrounds who were often self-trained and self-funded. Those from the West were largely children of Muslim immigrants. This wave is sometimes referred to as *leaderless jihad*. The start of the sectarian armed conflict in Syria in 2011 marked the beginning of Wave IV, which is defined by the emergence of new international militant groups such as the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham. These groups are increasingly heterogeneous and less selective and successful in attracting younger demographics. In the case of French nationals, for example, a quarter of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq are converts to Islam.

*Source:* Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks for the 21st Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010): 53–94; Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann, eds., *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, April 2016).

## **Who Are Foreign Fighters?**

The term *foreign fighters* is imperfect and controversial from both legal and academic perspectives. Traditionally, it describes nationals of one country who travel to participate in a conflict in another country. The definitions in contemporary scholarship in international law are more nuanced, however, in that they include the group identity factor: “individuals driven mainly by ideology, religion, and/or kinship who leave their country of origin, or their country of habitual residence, to join a party engaged in an armed conflict.”<sup>11</sup> In this way, foreign fighters are distinguished from *mercenaries*, whose motivations are rooted in financial gain. This distinction, however, is helpful only in the context in which a foreign fighter is understood to be a legitimate combatant, bound to the international laws and norms of war, and afforded the protections and rights outlined in the Geneva Conventions. Given that today’s foreign fighters are, to a large extent, joining groups classified as terrorist organizations, international humanitarian law is a limited framework for understanding what foreign fighters are.<sup>12</sup>

***The term foreign fighters is imperfect and controversial from both legal and academic perspectives.***

Other contemporary definitions of foreign fighters underscore this distinction and emphasize participation in a nonstate armed group or insurgency.<sup>13</sup> The international community, in part to navigate the limits of existing legal tools to address nonstate actors and terrorist groups, has developed the term *foreign terrorist fighter*. According to UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (September 24, 2014), foreign terrorist fighters are individuals “who travel or attempt to travel to a state other than their states of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts, or the providing or receiving of terrorist training.” The United Nations has asked all countries to criminalize the act of fighting in support of designated terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS), Jabhat al Nusra, and other cells, affiliates, splinter groups, or derivatives of al Qaeda. This move provides some legal distinction, but the term also illustrates the blurring of criminal justice and international conflict paradigms, tools, and language that have come to characterize the international community’s response to this serious transnational security threat. Foreign fighters are combatants when in theater but criminals once they come home—a dynamic that greatly complicates efforts by governments and civil society to rehabilitate them.

Legal distinctions aside, research on foreign fighters is often challenged by a lack of differentiation among those who travel to support conflicts other than as combatants and those who arguably may not support it at all, such as the wives, children, and other family members who may have been compelled to travel (see box 2). Many who have migrated to the region to support IS do not engage in violence—jihadi brides, for example, or those who heeded the call to help build the caliphate in nonviolent ways.<sup>14</sup> Further, research sometimes also fails to distinguish which side those who travel to fight support. A number of fighters have traveled to support the Kurdish Peshmerga or indeed the Syrian armed forces and irregular units who are fighting IS, and their involvement further complicates responses to returnees.<sup>15</sup>

### **Box 2. A Complex Mosaic: A Diversity of Actors Among Kosovan Fighters**

According to official data, the overall number of Kosovan nationals known to have traveled to Syria and Iraq as of mid-2016 is 314. The largest group (77 percent) is composed of young military age men in their mid-twenties and early-thirties who have for the most part joined designated terrorist organizations such as IS and Jabhat al Nusra (about 45 percent of whom have since returned to Kosovo). The second group (14 percent) is females between fifteen and forty-three who have mostly traveled with their husbands, and some of them with their children. A smaller number have traveled with relatives or friends. A few have returned after their husbands have been killed in battle. Although they overwhelmingly play noncombatant roles, a few are reportedly actively recruiting other women online. The third group (9 percent) are juveniles who have traveled to Syria or Iraq with at least one parent. Although a few have since returned to Kosovo, more children have been born to Kosovan nationals while in the conflict theater. Some of the male juveniles have received combat training and possibly participated in armed hostilities.

*Note:* See also Adrian Shtuni, “The Dynamics of Radicalization in Kosovo,” USIP Special Report No. 397, December 2016.

***The prison environment in many countries often serves more to reinforce a combatant identity and commitment to the cause.***

Comprehensive criminal justice responses are required to manage returnees, especially when a true security threat is present, but not all countries have this capacity. Human rights abuses within the judicial and penal systems do little to ensure that returnees abandon their commitment to violent activity and identities as combatants. Although some countries have attempted to introduce rehabilitation programs within the prison system, with varying degrees of success, the prison environment in many countries often serves more to reinforce a combatant identity and commitment to the cause.<sup>16</sup> Further, many prisons are home to hardened extremists who reinforce a group identity rather than enable rehabilitation—or,

at a minimum, encourage criminality. The criminal justice system in many countries is working to tackle these challenges, but a commitment to supporting effective programs to help move individuals away from their affiliation with violent extremist groups after detention and to ensure their successful reintegration back into society is sorely lacking.

## The Reintegration Imperative

The path away from violent extremism is a complex process rooted in ideas of identity, psychosocial dynamics, and practical considerations. Research in this field often distinguishes between deradicalization and disengagement, many scholars agreeing that a cognitive shift away from a commitment to violent extremism often occurs after disassociation with a group. Thus, disengagement usually precedes deradicalization but does not ensure it.<sup>17</sup> It is a false assumption, however, that a returnee has disengaged from the movement on return—first, because affiliation is not confined to formal group membership or being in a particular place, and, second—perhaps more importantly—the individual is often returning to the social networks and community in which he or she was radicalized in the first place.

Radicalization is a complex psychosocial process best understood as being driven by a combination of individual traits and circumstances, social dynamics, and external enabling conditions. A person may be disillusioned in the cause, disappointed, or indeed even traumatized by the experience of violence, but many of the circumstances that led to engagement still exist; more importantly, some of the relationships that encouraged participation are intact. Further, the act of participating in a violent conflict is profoundly transformative to a person's identity and outlook. Research has illuminated the entrenched identity that comes from being a combatant, and especially from the sense of loyalty and devotion to fellow fighters.<sup>18</sup> The path to rehabilitation, then, is about not only a change in individual mindset, but also a shift in social relationships and personal circumstances.

Complicating this process is the community's potential rejection of the returnees, especially those who carry the stigma of criminality. Additionally, some returnees risk retribution from their former affiliates. Access to a social support group and a receptive environment that allows for true disengagement and the creation of a new identity is vital.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars who have studied motivations for the return of foreign fighters point to disillusionment, intergroup strife, injury, burnout, and a desire to reconnect with family and have more stability.<sup>20</sup> Others have noted that return is often triggered by a traumatic event, providing a cognitive opening for change.<sup>21</sup> Veteran foreign fighters aside, evidence shows that many of the young people who travel to support the conflict in Iraq and Syria are unprepared for war and its hardships, and return with both physical and psychological wounds.

Given these dynamics, disengagement and deradicalization require sustained and concerted effort. In the absence of such programs, recidivism is significantly likely among youth released from prison. Even if they do not return to violence, their identity as combatants can inspire and further radicalize others. Those who do successfully forge a new positive identity and social group can play a powerful role in helping build increased resilience to violent extremism in their communities.

Efforts to rehabilitate those who have participated in violent groups and to reintegrate them into society have been implemented in many contexts in recent decades. Two clusters of programs offer lessons that are especially relevant to the challenge of developing effective postdetention programs for returning foreign fighters and those convicted of terrorist crimes. This report looks at both. First are northern European "exit" programs that target members of violent right-wing groups and criminal gangs. Second are first-generation derad-

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icalization programs developed in Indonesia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen to address former al Qaeda members and affiliates such as Jemaah Islamiyah. In addition, relevant lessons are drawn from internationally led demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programs in several postconflict countries.

The number of programs designed for both prison and postdetention settings has proliferated in recent years, especially across Europe, in an effort to respond to returning fighters from Syria and Iraq. However, evidence of impact at this early stage is limited. One of the key challenges in measuring the effectiveness of rehabilitation and reintegration programs is the time it takes to assess its impact; long-term data are difficult to obtain. Further, the definition of recidivism is problematic in the context of deradicalization programs because disengagement from violence is not indicative of abandonment of the ideology.<sup>22</sup> Those who evolve into nonviolent extremists might not participate directly but may still help radicalize others or advance objectives of the movement. A few high-profile cases of recidivism into violence, especially in a lethal terrorist attack, can be particularly damning in these programs and undermine the political will and popular support needed to advance reintegration programs.<sup>23</sup> Yet reintegration is a necessary component of any comprehensive strategy to counter violent extremism (CVE) and crucial to building more resilient communities.

Some lessons from other contexts could be relevant to the contemporary challenge. The contexts examined are all quite different, and though the ideology of IS is distinct from that of al Qaeda, neo-Nazism, and certainly the dynamics of civil war, the assumption is that some of these lessons are transferable. Many of the cognitive psychological dynamics that allow one to reject or change a previous identity and commitment to violence cut across ideologies and types of groups, but the process of reintegration and sustained disengagement—reinsertion into a community and adoption of a new social role—is rooted in unique cultural and contextual factors. Cultural norms around ideas of redemption and the role of an individual in a community are often well defined, and capacities and interests in any given community to support reintegration vary. In this way, learning from other contexts can support the objectives and theory of change in community-level reintegration programs, but how programs are designed and implemented must reflect the social dynamics and cultural norms of that community.

### ***Lessons from European Exit Programs***

Over the past two decades, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the Scandinavian countries have developed and implemented a number of *exit* or *off-ramp* programs for members of criminal gangs and right-wing groups. Originally focused on biker gangs, neo-Nazis, and quasi-criminal groups with strong identities and social bonds, some of these programs have been tailored in recent years to address violent religious extremist groups. They function both as preventative and disengagement efforts in that some who participate in the programs may have not engaged significantly in violent activity or crimes, and others have been incarcerated. Lessons from these programs can be helpful in designing deradicalization initiatives in other contexts.

What programs such as Slotervaart in Netherlands, the Violence Prevention Network, Hayat, and EXIT Deutschland in Germany, the Aarhus model in Denmark, and Fryhuset Sweden have in common is that they were developed in countries with a strong popular and government commitment to the ideas of individual human rights and social welfare.<sup>24</sup> Prisons and sentencing practices, especially in the Nordic countries, show a strong inclination toward rehabilitation and providing opportunities for former criminals to build new lives and become productive members of society. This rehabilitation ethos is enabled by a generously resourced social welfare apparatus, in which government-funded and directed

psychosocial care can be harnessed for these objectives as well as skills training and job placement programs.

These exit programs are, in a sense, an outgrowth of a normalized rehabilitative approach to incarceration and aftercare. They mostly use psychosocial modalities and rely on individual mentoring and personalized interventions, coupled with efforts to repair family ties and community relationships and build technical job-relevant skills.<sup>25</sup> Engagement is long term and sustained. In some cases, when separation from the violent group is deemed a physical threat, these programs help relocate an individual or provide other forms of security.

Exit programs are also, for the most part, voluntary. This is a significant feature of their success, because many of those that participate have already progressed a certain cognitive distance toward disengagement from the group and are actively seeking assistance. Further, they rely on an accountable and trust-based relationship between the care providers and local authorities.<sup>26</sup> These programs must not only be able to alert police to any real risk of violence they might encounter but also be managed in such a way that they do not become—and are not perceived as—mechanisms for criminal intelligence collection or counterterrorism operations.

Clearly, the success of these programs relies largely on the resources and expertise that are a feature of social welfare programs more generally in Europe, but they also benefit from other factors unique to the European context. First is an assumption of scale. These programs originally addressed members of marginalized groups who represented a small subset of society. On a relatively small scale, personalized mentoring and support is possible, but likely untenable when considering more inflated numbers—such as the more than six thousand who left Tunisia to fight alongside IS and other designated terrorist organizations, or the more than fifteen thousand who remain in Tunisia, barred from traveling because of their suspected support of violent extremism and intent to travel to the conflict theater. Second, the European exit programs as originally conceived were designed to address members of groups whose ideologies and activities did not receive broad popular support. Helping move an individual away from a commitment to violence can be enabled by repairing relationships, assuming that the communities themselves do not see value in the ideology and practices of violent extremist organizations. Third, an investment in the practical aspect of skills development can be a counterproductive exercise that only fuels frustration if no jobs are available. Further, providing jobs to former foreign fighters can be a controversial feature of a reintegration program if implemented in a struggling economy and stagnant job climate. It can foster perceptions that formers are being rewarded for their activities, or that they receive an unfair advantage over others in the community, further inhibiting reintegration.

### ***Lessons from First-Generation Deradicalization Programs***

The first-generation deradicalization programs tailored to Islamist militants were designed and developed in response to the September 2001 terrorist attacks carried out by al Qaeda in the United States and the October 2002 bombings by Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia. These experimental deradicalization programs, part of soft counterterrorism strategies, were rolled out primarily in Middle East and Southeast Asia in countries like Saudi Arabia (Prevention, Rehabilitation and After Care in 2004), Yemen (Committee for Dialogue in 2002), Singapore (the Religious Rehabilitation Group in 2003), and Indonesia (2003).<sup>27</sup> Most included both a prison-based program and some component of post-incarceration monitoring and aftercare. Similar programs were also eventually introduced in other Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Malaysia. Others have proliferated since.

Singapore and Saudi Arabia took a comprehensive approach to designing and implementing their deradicalization programs.<sup>28</sup> Scholars agree that the most promising feature is their three-pronged effort to break and replace all levels of an individual's commitment to a violent extremist group, including affective (defined by social factors such as emotional support, sense of community, and social obligation), pragmatic (logistical factors such as financial stability, education, vocational training, and skill-building), and ideological bonds. These components, when combined, may facilitate reentry of former detainees into society, reduce social alienation, foster stability, and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. In this way, these early efforts emphasized the critical role of social and community relations in a person's entry and exit into a violent extremist group or movement.

A strength of these efforts has been the attempt to include a wide spectrum of professional actors and credible interlocutors (psychiatrists, psychologists, professors, clerics, and law enforcement personnel) to provide psychosocial support, job training, and economic assistance not only to the detainees during and after detention but also to their families.<sup>29</sup> However, this component was hard to fund and sustain in less financially able Indonesia and cash-strapped Yemen—whose program was discontinued in 2005.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, no meaningful aftercare services are or have been provided in either Indonesia or Yemen.<sup>31</sup>

An innovative feature of these programs was the use of cultural norms and indigenous traditions to influence a cognitive and behavioral shift away from violence as well as affective family relations and ties to bolster post-incarceration reintegration into the community. The Saudi program relies heavily on familial obligations, notions of honor, and other cultural mores. The Yemeni program leveraged unconventional approaches such as traditional poetry recitations and religious dialogue.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the Indonesian program has experimented with traditional wayang kulit puppet shows and conflict management training.<sup>33</sup>

These programs have significant limitations, however. First, unlike European exit programs, which are decentralized and for the most part voluntary, these early-stage deradicalization programs are or were for the most part mandatory, largely centralized, and state controlled. This feature detracts from the credibility of claims of genuine deradicalization or even disengagement, and undermines the legitimacy of the programs, specifically because it is hard to make the case for forced cognitive deradicalization or behavioral disengagement. That these programs are often leveraged for intelligence collection and counterterrorism operations further undermines their credibility in the eyes of the participants.

Second, all the early-stage efforts in question focus heavily on theological-ideological dialogue and religious reeducation to encourage detainees to moderate their views and renounce violence.<sup>34</sup> This overreliance on religious reeducation as a kind of broad-spectrum antibiotic may be misplaced and problematic given that the complex set of motives and dynamics that drive people toward violent extremism often may have little, if anything, to do with religion.

Third, many of these programs rely on so-called former extremists and clerics to build trust with program participants, even though some of these interlocutors hold immoderate views and promote intolerant ideas, and it is not clear how they are vetted or their credibility established. The use of former extremists, despite being a popular approach, presents problematic dynamics and liabilities that must be understood well. Of concern is the short-term focus on disengagement and a lack of commitment to moving away from the underpinning extremist beliefs.<sup>35</sup>

Last—and closely linked to the mentioned deficiency—is the often-decried lack of transparency and clear evaluation metrics used to assess the effectiveness of these programs. Despite claims of relatively low recidivism rates, their impact is hard to assess objectively. Some high-profile Saudi detainees, who went on to join al Qaeda-affiliated militias in other

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countries and perpetrate terrorist attacks on release from prison, have had a strong negative effect on the Saudi Arabian program's reputation.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Lessons from DDR Practice***

Over the last twenty years, efforts to demobilize, disarm, and reintegrate combatants into society after the cessation of hostilities—a process referred to as DDR—have become integral components of peace processes. The United Nations in particular, through its peace-keeping operations, has launched numerous DDR programs in many postconflict states in Africa as well as Nepal, Kosovo, Timor Leste, and Colombia. These programs include efforts to collect and dispose of weapons, disassociate combatants from their military affiliations, and help them transition to civilian status by providing social and economic assistance.

Much has been learned about the effectiveness of the reintegration components of such programs over the years, and many experts argue that this learning should be applied to today's challenge of returning foreign fighters. Such a transference of practice is not easy, however, for a number of significant reasons.

First, as outlined earlier, foreign fighters who support groups that are understood as international terrorist organizations are treated within a criminal justice paradigm. Their activities are criminalized and penalized, and they lack the legitimacy that combatants in other conflict contexts might have, a status that is often the basis for a DDR process. Because foreign fighters who support violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are often understood as criminals and not combatants, a stigma can be tied to their role that is qualitatively different than that tied to former combatants—regardless of the scale or nature of violent activities—that can inhibit reintegration. Of course, the issue of legitimacy is further complicated by the hybrid nature of many groups that have both criminal and political elements.

Second, DDR practice often involves resettlement and at minimum assumes a postconflict environment in which ex-combatants can transition to a new life. Foreign fighters, however, are more often returning to the same environment and social network in which they were initially radicalized, and the war as they understand it is not over. The same structural conditions, the same influences, and the same grievances that drive engagement are often still present, as well as active recruitment dynamics, all of which make efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate particularly challenging.

Third, DDR practice has traditionally focused heavily on economic and employment assistance, and severance payments are often a feature.<sup>37</sup> Economic assistance to former foreign fighters, especially those who have been convicted of terrorist crimes, is controversial in that popular support for providing what is perceived as a reward or benefit to former criminals is limited, especially in environments in which jobs are scarce and many are vying for economic survival.<sup>38</sup>

However, certain features of DDR practice stand to inform efforts to reintegrate foreign fighters after detention. Most postconflict reintegration efforts focus on economic and employment support, often framed as a larger political and social recovery effort, and implementers have emphasized the importance of social networks and rebuilding family and community ties.<sup>39</sup> Empirical research on the social reintegration of ex-FARC members in Colombia showed that community participation was critical to reducing recidivism rates, not least because ex-combatants were more likely to participate when more community members were involved.<sup>40</sup>

Analysis has shown also that working toward social reconciliation and reconnection needs to be facilitated by credible local interlocutors, and that former combatants must be willing to participate. This finding underscores the importance of the voluntary nature

of participation but also the need for trusted facilitators and a perceived legitimacy of the programs.<sup>41</sup> In the case of reintegration of former foreign fighters in noncustodial settings, the role of the government and law enforcement must be carefully managed. If the program is coerced and threat management and intelligence collection are emphasized, reintegration efforts are less likely to succeed.

Evaluations of DDR processes have also highlighted the need for specialized and tailored support for women and children, who—whether as former combatants, victims, or both—face unique barriers and challenges to reintegration.<sup>42</sup> DDR efforts have raised awareness about the pervasive impact of violence after conflict, and how the emotional and psychological scars of war often pose significant barriers to social reintegration. One often-cited example is that postconflict environments have some of the highest rates of domestic violence.

Although few have returned, a considerable number of those who traveled to Iraq and Syria are women or juveniles. Women, for example, make up about 20 percent of the EU contingent, 14 percent from Kosovo and 18 percent from Bosnia and Herzegovina. No clear statistics are available for children from EU countries, but for Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina the rates are about 9 percent and 25 percent respectively.<sup>43</sup> Although women's motives for traveling are as diverse as those of adult men, their experiences of and exposure to violence is often different, especially if sexual crimes are committed or participation is coerced.<sup>44</sup> This situation underscores the importance of psychosocial treatment modalities as part of a comprehensive reintegration strategy, and the acknowledgment that untreated trauma might both pose a barrier to reintegration and increase vulnerability to recidivism.

Perhaps the most important lesson from DDR programming for efforts to reintegrate returning foreign fighters is its limitation in the absence of broader reform. DDR experts have long understood that reintegration must happen in parallel with social, economic, and political recovery, or the conditions that spurred violence in the first place will not change.<sup>45</sup> This lesson is particularly true for reintegration programs in the context of violent extremism: the “conflict” is not over. Reintegration efforts must be matched by programs that work to address the structural conditions and community dynamics that enable radicalization. In this way, reintegration works only when coupled with successful CVE programs, and at a minimum should be conceptualized in tandem.

***Reintegration efforts must be matched by programs that work to address the structural conditions and community dynamics that enable radicalization.***

The criminalization of support to violent extremist groups such as IS, Boko Haram, and al Shabaab has strengthened protection for many of those countries that provide fighters to these groups and face the risk of blowback attacks from those who return and those who remain in country. Yet, effective security responses depend not only on the existence of accountable and capable criminal justice systems, but also on the availability of resources for the individualized programs necessary to rehabilitate and disengage recruits from violent extremist groups. What then of countries that face numbers of potential recruits and actual foreign fighters that exceed the capacity of the criminal justice sector? Or those fragile and emergent democracies that face significant reform challenges in the criminal justice sector and where experience with the penal system might actually further entrench commitment to VEOs or criminal groups?

If only 20 percent of those who traveled from Tunisia to Iraq and Syria as foreign fighters returned, the criminal justice sector—and the prison system in particular—would be overloaded. It is well documented that prisons in many parts of the world facing significant levels of political violence serve more as incubators for terrorists than places of transition to society.

Further, when dealing with numbers of a large scale, one must look not just at the recruitment dynamics of the VEOs but also at the push factors in the countries of origin

that make so many vulnerable to their appeal. VEOs are successful because they tap into perceived or real grievances related to weaknesses in governance, and economic, political, and social marginalization. Ideology is often a secondary factor in recruitment and effective disengagement is tied to larger structural realities.

It is hard to project that rehabilitation and reintegration programs can be successful on a large scale or in the context of fragile environments. Perhaps a different framework—one rooted in conflict management practice that addresses the process of deradicalization more as combatant demobilization and transition—is more relevant in these contexts? At a minimum, these efforts need to be coupled with significant investment in criminal justice sector reform and to support building, more generally, social and political resilience if they are to succeed.

## Lessons and Recommendations

This report suggests several important guiding principles in designing and developing effective noncustodial programs to reintegrate former foreign fighters and those convicted of terrorist crimes back into society.

First, theological reeducation by itself is unlikely to prevent radicalization or to move a person away from affiliation with a violent extremist group or identity. Research converges around the importance of addressing affective, social, and cognitive factors in any effort to rehabilitate and reintegrate individuals into society. In addition, rehabilitation programs also need to be based on a solid understanding of the unique social and cultural dynamics that led to radicalization and mobilization, and the factors that brought the fighters home again. In this way, designing effective reintegration programs requires multiple levels of analysis and a merging of technical expertise with local wisdom and capacity.

Also, no single model of rehabilitation and reintegration can be applied across cultural contexts. Ideas of social and familial obligations, honor, shame, forgiveness, and reconciliation are all culturally defined. The ways in which communities interact and are structured vary tremendously, as do the roles and influence of families, community leaders, and institutions. Successful programs have greater impact and greater legitimacy when they are developed by communities and informed by a local understanding of social norms, community relationships, and cultural traditions.

The active participation of family members and communities is key to effective reintegration for returnees. In many ways, family and community experience the reintegration process together with the returnee and require aftercare support and assistance as well. This is particularly critical and requires a different level of effort when families have helped enable radicalization. Rebuilding family and community ties helps bolster postcustodial reintegration.

An investment in long-term psychosocial treatment, monitoring, and individualized mentoring programs is crucial. Disengagement from an affiliation with a violent extremist group takes time and is not linear. Participants vulnerable to recruitment often have unaddressed psychosocial issues, and those who have experienced war often bring back the emotional damage of exposure to and participation in violence. Programs must be professional, flexible, iterative, sustained, and capable of accommodating the special needs of women and children and addressing the residual impact of trauma.

For programs to be sustainable, their objectives need to be transparent and their interlocutors credible. These characteristics permit the establishment of clear metrics for success. Interlocutors must be carefully vetted to minimize the possibility of their promoting illiberal and undemocratic values or agendas that may prove harmful in the long term. In some

instances, *formers*—individuals previously affiliated with violent extremist or extremist groups—have been part of deradicalization programs and, despite advocating nonviolence, have continued to support extremist ideologies, undermining efforts at true rehabilitation.

Safe, accountable, and effective lines of communication need to be developed between law enforcement entities and the credible interlocutors supporting these efforts—a challenging aspect of any deradicalization or prevention program. Law enforcement plays a crucial role, indeed the lead role, in keeping communities safe from the threat of violence, and their involvement is necessary when a threat emerges. Those managing reintegration programs, however, must ensure some separation from security actors so that participants are given the opportunity to fully rehabilitate voluntarily, civil society organizations are not instrumentalized in the collection of intelligence, and civil rights of participants are fully respected.

Nesting rehabilitation and reintegration programs into larger efforts of economic, social, and political reform and stability—especially in fragile and emerging democracies—will enable their chances of success. It is unrealistic to expect that programs will produce lasting rehabilitation and meaningful reintegration outcomes if the local structural conditions and grievances that fuel radicalization are not addressed. Doing that means, in particular, ensuring a parallel focus on security and justice sector reform and good governance.

## Conclusion

Experience suggests that rehabilitating returned foreign fighters and terrorist offenders who continue to harbor ideological commitment to the cause will be more complex and significantly more challenging than repentant returnees. It will be in large part because these individuals refuse to recognize the authority of governmental and mainstream religious institutions, and are often resistant to punishments and economic incentives. In such cases of entrenched extremist viewpoints, finding interlocutors who are both credible to the returnees and acceptable actors to the authorities is difficult. Yet, the realization that not all returnees are viable candidates for rehabilitation programs should not detract from the general validity and significant benefit of the programs. It should instead bring more attention to the importance of proper and continued evaluation of candidates during and after detention, and a concentration of efforts on those who show promise of benefiting from the programs.

The intervention of foreign state and nonstate actors in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq has been critical in galvanizing this unprecedented worldwide wave of foreign fighters. Likewise, the success of rehabilitation and reintegration efforts targeting returning militants will be influenced, to some extent, by the dynamics of the ongoing conflict. As long as peace is elusive in Syria and Iraq, as long as the war continues to claim lives and generate scores of refugees, and as long as reactive terrorist attacks persist outside the conflict zone, the process of rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees in their home countries will be faced with added tensions and challenges. Countries affected by the foreign fighter phenomenon will need to redouble their efforts and commitment to these critical programs.

This report aims to help policymakers and practitioners navigate the challenges of developing effective programs to rehabilitate and reintegrate foreign fighters returning from Syria and Iraq into their societies. Ultimately, holistic and comprehensive reintegration efforts designed to transition returnees from religious militancy into a nonviolent and tolerant way of life address not only the needs of returnees, but also those of the entire society, and are critical in building more resilient and safer communities.

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