

RETURN OF FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS AND THEIR FAMILIES TO EUROPE AS A POTENTIAL SECURITY PROBLEM

Marija Đorić¹, PhD

Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade, Serbia

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper examines the return of foreign terrorist fighters and their families from Syria to Europe, that is, their countries of origin. For several years now, dozens of thousands of terrorists have resided with their families in camps (such as Al Hol and Al Roj) previously controlled by the Kurdish forces, with the financial and logistical help of the US. After the fall of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and the arrival of Donald Trump as the head of the United States, the attitude towards this phenomenon changed. There is an intention to disband the camps and return the terrorists with their families to their countries of origin. The fundamental research question is: Are the European countries ready for their return?

Design/Methods/Approach: Using the content analysis of the existing deradicalization and disengagement programs, the author examines to what extent Europe is prepared for the return of these people. Further, relevant studies were also used, with a special reference to the Western Balkans. The author also used in-depth interviews to collect relevant data.

Findings: The conclusion is that the return of terrorists and their families represents a serious security risk and a threat to European countries. Even though a vast number of programs with the participation of multi-sectoral teams (social workers, political scientists, psychologists, psychiatrists, criminologists, and the security sector, etc.) were created, Europe will be able to speak of the success of deradicalization only after conducting an evaluation, and this takes time. One of the biggest challenges in the return process can be a disbalance between human rights and security measures.

Originality/Value: The importance of this paper is to identify all potential security problems posed by the return of terrorists (and their families, children, and women) from the battlefield. In addition, the author's intention is to point out certain advantages and disadvantages of modern deradicalization programs through existing examples.

Keywords: FTF, terrorism, deradicalization, Syria, Europe, extremism.

About the author

Marija Djoric is a deputy director for scientific research and principal research fellow at the Institute for Political Studies in Belgrade. She is a consultant/expert for several international organizations (UN, OSCE, Council of Europe, RAN...). Prof. Djoric has published 7 books and more than 100 papers on extremism, radicalization, hooliganism, terrorism, and political violence. She is Editor-in-Chief of the journal *The Policy of National Security*. Marija Djoric is a visiting professor at Charles University in Prague and American University in the Emirates.

¹ mara.djoric@yahoo.com



INTRODUCTION

According to the UN data, around 40,000 individuals from over 120 countries of the world departed for Syria and Iraq during the armed conflict (UNODC). Of this number, 80% of them decided to join some terrorist organization (mainly the “Islamic State”² and “Al Nusra Front”), making an army of a total of 100,000 fighters. Without a doubt, the war in Syria, which began in 2011, was the main generator for the recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters.

The most dominant action among terrorist organizations in the Syrian conflict was achieved by the “Islamic State”, which lost control over the majority of territories in 2017. This had some significant consequences not only for terrorists, but also for their families, which they brought along with them (or founded in the meantime, in the so-called caliphate of the “Islamic State”). A certain number of foreign terrorist fighters were killed in action, some escaped to other countries, there were some located in Syrian prisons (such as the one in Hasaka), and some individuals returned to their countries of origin (independently or organized), where they are serving prison sentences.

During 2024, two turning-point events occurred, which would, to a great extent, define the future of the terrorists and their families. The first one was indeed the victory of Donald Trump and the new US administration, and the second one was the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the arrival of the former HTS³ terrorist, Al-Shaara (Jolani), to power. Trump’s victory in the elections led to significant changes in foreign policy, among which is also the decision of the US to cease financing different international projects. Among them is also the decision to disband camps in the northeastern part of Syria (Al Hol and Al Roj), predominantly holding women and children of foreign terrorist fighters, controlled by the Kurdish forces. According to the estimates (OCHA) for the time being, there are “around 2,600 individuals, of whom 65% children, in Al Roj camp” (Djoric, 2025). On the other hand, Al Hol camp is much bigger and is currently housing around 23,000 individuals from more than 60 different countries from all parts of the world (not including Syria) (Djoric, 2025).

On the other hand, Jolani and the HTS were removed from the list of terrorists in a certain number of countries, with a promise that the new Syrian government would establish peace and fight against the remainder of terrorist groups. As a “reward” for such transformation of former terrorists, lifting of international sanctions and putting under control the new Syrian leadership was expected.

One significant question remains within these geopolitical games, which is as follows: What will happen with terrorists and their families who are still trapped in Syrian camps? The response is simple – they will return to their countries of origin. However, this process is not easy at all, because it carries along a series of security, social, health and psychological, economic, and political issues. It seems that a big challenge will be working with women and children returnees, for whom no evident proof has been found regarding their participation in war crimes or terrorism, and for whom there is a big possibility that they are radicalized (besides the fact that many of them are also the victims). Some countries accepted a certain number of their citizens from Syrian camps, while others are just preparing for this process. One is sure – they will all return to their countries of origin. Because of that, in this paper, we will research some models of the return of the FTFs and their families to create a comprehensive image of the challenges of their return and potential solutions, and, above all, to see how prepared primarily Europe is for their return. The focus of this research will be on several key EU countries, as well as the countries of the Western Balkans.

2 There are different names and acronyms used for this terrorist organization: IS, ISIS, ISIL, DAESH. They changed depending on the time of existence and the territory controlled by this terrorist organization.

3 HTS (Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham) is a terrorist organization, previously a chapter of Al Qaeda.



THE PHENOMENON OF FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

The foreign terrorist fighters represent a phenomenon that has relatively recently been defined within the academic and institutional context. The UN Security Council defined foreign terrorist fighters in Resolution 2178, passed in 2014, as “individuals who 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” (OHCHR, 2018). By the way, the term foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) was mentioned for the first time in the UN Security Council Resolution 2170, even though its definition was not explicitly provided. The said resolution condemned violence conducted by terrorists of the “Islamic State” and “Al Nusra Front”. When speaking of other international documents that deal with the issue of FTFs, the Additional Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on the prevention of terrorism from 2015 should be mentioned as well. Several important articles from this document deal with the issue of FTFs (Council of Europe, 2015):

- Article 4. Traveling abroad for the purpose of terrorism
- Article 5. Funding traveling abroad for the purpose of terrorism
- Article 6. Organizing or otherwise facilitating traveling abroad for the purpose of terrorism

It can be said that the contemporary phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters developed in three phases (Đorić & Obrenović, 2024a):

1. The first phase corresponds with the war in Afghanistan, when predominantly Arabs from the Middle East joined Al Qaeda in the fight against the Soviets in the 1980s of the 20th century.
2. The second phase is characteristic of the Middle Eastern elite, which was mainly educated in the countries of the West, only to join Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan in the 1990s.
3. The third phase is shaped by the so-called principle of the “leaderless Jihad”, based on a non-fragmented structure. This phase was not that much (unlike the previous two) oriented towards camps, but towards the use of social networks and online communication.

It is believed that currently a “fourth wave” of the development of foreign terrorist fighters is underway, who are (primarily) predisposed by the emergence of the “Islamic State” terrorist organization, and for whom decentralization, online radicalization (Dobrucka, 2024) and massiveness of a global character are distinctive.

It is quite important to differentiate the terms *foreign terrorist fighters* and *foreign fighters*, which are of a similar character, but at the same time differ in some important ways. The most significant difference lies in the fact that foreign terrorist fighters exclusively join terrorist organizations, while, on the contrary, foreign fighters become an integral part of some armed groups, such as, for example, official army in wars. However, the *genus proximum* of these two phenomena is the departure from the country of origin abroad to join the fighting, usually motivated by a specific ideology.⁴ This is also accompanied by the definition provided by the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, which defines the term foreign fighters as “individuals who leave their country to join an armed group abroad, driven by ideology, religion, or kinship” (Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 2014). The example of foreign fighters can be found in the times of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), when General Franco was supported by Hitler, Mussolini, and Salazar with their fighters, while around 40,000 volunteers originating from more than 50 countries of the world fought on the side of the Republic (Muzej istorije Jugoslavije, 2006). The best example of contemporary wars in which foreign fighters take part is the war in Ukraine, in which fighters motivated by ideology, but also money (i.e., military companies) can be found.

⁴ Besides ideology, one of the most common motives found is money.



Some theoreticians attempted to classify foreign terrorist fighters using relevant criteria (Venhaus, 2010). Thus, using that classification, we may single out the following types:

1. Revenge seeker - we are speaking mainly of the frustration-aggression of an individual who reaches his goal thanks to the revenge through a terrorist act.
2. Status seeker – here we have individuals who strive towards acquiring respect and status (they usually do not possess) through destructive action, i.e., terrorism.
3. Identity seeker – terrorists often need to belong, which they realize through group identity, i.e., by joining a terrorist organization. For such individuals, a terrorist group represents a sort of surrogate family and a place where they feel safe “in their skin”.
4. Thrill seeker, i.e., the adrenaline type – this is a type of foreign terrorist fighters who possess an adventurous spirit, and thus, through terrorist actions, they find the meaning of life that moves them and incites them to activism.

Even though this classification is a little bit archaic (since it predominantly referred to Al Qaeda members), it is still applicable to contemporary FTFs. Three more categories of contemporary terrorist fighters could be added as follows:

- Ideologically motivated FTFs – we are speaking of terrorists exclusively motivated by the value system they fight for, i.e., the ideology. At the same time, they are most problematic when speaking of the deradicalization process, since they have difficulties denouncing their value system.
- Mercenaries or popularly called “dogs of war” – these are individuals to whom money, i.e., lucrative interest, is the only category. When the flow of money ceases, they are no longer interested in terrorist activities, since that is their primary motive.
- The last category of FTFs refers to individuals who suffer from some sort of mental disorder. At this point, some caution is needed upon making conclusions, because suffering from a mental disorder does not necessarily correlate with violence, i.e., terrorism (Đorić, 2024b). On the other hand, some researches have shown that depression, narcissistic personality disorders, PTSD, etc., can be generators of terrorist actions.

Essentially, the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters today predominantly refers to those who departed for Syria and Iraq to join some of the terrorist organizations (“Islamic State” or “Al Nusra Front”) active there. Since their return is imminent (including their families), it is of crucial importance to examine whether the countries of Europe are ready to receive them. First, we will provide a review of some Balkan countries, and then, the focus will be on the EU countries.

FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS AND THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

The Western Balkans is a political (and not geographical) construction which includes the ex-Yugoslav countries (without Croatia and Slovenia, as they are the EU members) and Albania. In fact, we can say that the Western Balkans represents European countries that are in the waiting room of the EU accession striving towards full membership (Đorić, 2024c). Besides numerous political and economic problems, the Western Balkan region faces specific security problems as well. One of them is surely the return of foreign terrorist fighters and their families from Syria to this region.

It is believed that in the period from 2012 to 2016, around 1,110 adults departed from the Western Balkans for Syria and Iraq to join terrorist organizations (Buljubašić & Azinović, 2023: 20). Three countries from this region (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia), as well as



the Autonomous Province Kosovo and Metohija, are in the top ten countries with the highest number of foreign terrorist fighters compared to the total number of inhabitants (Florida, 2016). This is at the same time the reason why the focus in this paper will be on the countries of the Western Balkans. Besides this fact, it should be mentioned that the Western Balkans (and especially the Kosovo and Metohija region) are the “black hole” of Europe in terms of crime and terrorist activities, which then spread to other European countries as well.⁵

In the majority of the Western Balkan countries, the repatriation process is conducted in four phases: preparation, logistics, reintegration, and resocialization with rehabilitation. In the following section, we will provide several characteristic examples of how Balkan countries prepare for the return of terrorists from Syria through case studies of the countries of this region.

Serbia is a country from which a total of 49 adult citizens (37 men and 12 women) departed for Syria and Iraq (Đorić, 2024d: 73).⁶ At this moment, this number has reached 56, because, in the meantime, some children who departed with their parents became adults (Djoric, 2025). The Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime filed charges against seven individuals accused of conducting serious crimes regarding terrorist activities in the territories of Syria and Iraq. Out of seven convicted individuals, three were arrested in 2014, one was deported from Turkey in 2016, while the last three are still out of reach of the competent authorities. During 2019, all these individuals were sentenced to a total of 69 years and 9 months of imprisonment.⁷ Until now, the return of children has not been registered, while in 2024, we registered one (illegal) return of a woman, who reached Serbia from Syria via Turkey (Djoric, 2025). She had left two underage children in Turkey, for whom she filed a request to be deported to Serbia. In 2021, the Republic of Serbia passed a plan for dealing with foreign terrorist fighters and their families. It includes (Đorić, M. 2024d):

1. Preparation activities phase
2. Direct reception of individuals phase
3. Accommodation in the reception center phase
4. Reintegration into the local community phase

When speaking of the so-called Kosovo*⁸, the situation is much more complex, bearing in mind the fact that in April 2019, 110 individuals returned from Syria, and that before that, around 400 individuals, predominantly Albanians, had departed for the Syrian-Iraqi warzone. Upon their return, the men were arrested, while the women were accommodated in the “Vranidol” reception center located near Pristina. Multidisciplinary teams concluded that the majority of the returnees suffered from PTSP, as well as from other illnesses. Since then two types of programs for the returnees have been implemented: the penitentiary-restorative and the program that includes social integration. The said programs have been conducted in cooperation between the Kosovo* institutions and the NGO sector, which is indeed the model practiced in the rest of Europe as well.

North Macedonia was the first country of the Western Balkans to repatriate FTFs and their families in 2018 (NEXUS, 2022). This was conducted at a time when this country was not ready in the institutional and operational context, thus leading to recidivism of terrorism.⁹ The next big wave of returnees was organized on July 17, 2021, when a total of 23 citizens arrived to this country, of which five were

5 The toxic influence of the Western Balkans can also be seen on an international level, since some Balkan crime groups are quite tightly linked with Latin American narco-cartels.

6 Of this number, 10 returned to Europe, 12 were killed, while the rest are most probably located in camps or prisons in Syria.

7 By the way, Serbia is one of the countries in the region with strict penalty policies regarding prison sentences for criminal acts linked with terrorism.

8 Reference should be understood in full compliance with United Nations’ Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

9 Upon serving the prison sentence, some of them recommitted the criminal act of terrorism.



women and 14 children (Đorić, 2024d: 82). By the end of 2021, a total of 103 citizens returned, while 37 of them were killed; five of them are still deemed active fighters. Official data show that 156 citizens of North Macedonia departed for the Syrian-Iraqi warzone (Đorić, 2024d: 82).

At this moment, 15 foreign terrorist fighters are serving prison sentences – 10 individuals are located in the Idrizovo Prison, while five of them are in the Štip Prison (NEXUS, 2022:4). The potential problem with Macedonian prisons is that FTFs are mixed with other prisoners (they are not isolated), which can easily stimulate radicalization of the rest of the prisoners. Prison sentences last from six to nine years; they were imposed upon 13 individuals for participation in foreign warzones (Đorić, 2024d).

In 2020 North Macedonia adopted the “National Plan for Reintegration, Resocialization, and Rehabilitation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and the Linked Family Members”, in which the phases of their return are defined.

1. Gathering security intelligence.
2. The arrival of FTFs and their families (security and medical check-ups, DNA analysis of children to determine who their parents are).
3. Two-week quarantine of the returnees in case they will not be prosecuted (medical and social programs for women and children), and incarceration for the ones who will be prosecuted.
4. Integration into the local community.

Besides state institutions, international subjects such as GCERF, MYLA, MCMS, and UNICEF have taken part in this process of repatriation, reintegration, and rehabilitation to a significant extent.

As regards **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, between 250 and 300 of its citizens departed for the Syrian-Iraqi warzone according to official data (Đorić, 2024d). According to other sources, this number is much higher, reaching 360 people (Slobodna Evropa, 2021). From 2014 to 2022, “35 individuals were processed before the Bosnia and Herzegovina Court for the criminal acts linked with terrorist organizations in foreign warzones” (Buljubašić & Azinović, 2023: 14).

It is hard to state the exact number of individuals who returned to the country, since in the beginning, there were a lot of individual illegal returnees, but it is believed that, until now, a total of 62 adults and 22 children were repatriated (eight children of parents who had the B&H citizenship departed to other countries). It is believed that around 50 people are still located in prisons and some camps in the northeastern part of Syria. A big collective repatriation was organized with the help of the US in December 2019. At that point, 25 individuals returned to B&H (7 men, 6 women, and 12 children) (Đorić, 2024d). Upon their return, they were accommodated in the Delijaš Reception Center, where they were provided with the necessary medical aid. After nine days in this center, the women and children were transported to their previous places of residence (Hadžići, Zenica, Tuzla, Čelić).¹⁰ The newest information shows that Bosnia and Herzegovina is expecting new repatriations during 2026.

Interestingly, information from the field (from Al Hol and Al Roj camps) shows that, for example, children from B&H speak the Bosnian language, which is not the case with the Albanian children – they predominantly speak Arabic.¹¹ It is believed that around 100 individuals (women and children) are waiting for the return to B&H. The Ministry of Security of the B&H has, with the assistance of the Netherlands and international organizations (and especially IOM), provided financial funds used for conducting rehabilitation and reintegration of the returnees.

The majority of the Western Balkan countries qualified participation in foreign warzones as a criminal act in the period of 2014-2015, using the institutional and legal mechanisms. The length of the penalty differs from country to country. Moreover, it should be stressed that the Balkan countries have passed

¹⁰ Information that some children feared silence is interesting, given that it points to the existence of a traumatic disorder.

¹¹ Information from an international gathering (Chatham House Rules).



some strategic documents that deal with this phenomenon and which are included within strategies for the fight against terrorism (Đorđević & Miljković, 2025) and extremism.¹²

The current security situation in Syria is such that Al Shaara (Jolani) is accepted by the international community as a legitimate leader, within whose ranks of the government, there are the former jihadists from the Western Balkans. So, for example, the Albanian from North Macedonia, Abdul Samrez Jashari (also known by the name Abu Qatada al-Albani) was given a high position within the military organization structure (France 24, 2024). This Islamist, who has been under the US sanctions since 2016, was the leader of the “Xemati Alban” terrorist group, which predominantly consisted of jihadists of Albanian origin. The said facts can pose a significant security challenge for the FTF punishment policy in their countries of origin, and can also act as a generator of terrorist activities not only in the Balkans, but in the rest of Europe as well.

FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS AND THE EU COUNTRIES

Around 5,000 individuals departed from the EU for Syria and Iraq to join some of the terrorist organizations, while 30% of them have already returned to their countries (European Council). Of the total number of women, only 20% returned to their countries of origin.¹³ This data shows that the European Union countries are expecting the return of a significant number of the FTFs and their families. The main question is whether Europe is ready for this undertaking. In order to understand this situation best, we will present several examples from the EU in terms of programs that are being implemented regarding repatriation, reintegration, and rehabilitation.

France is an interesting case for analysis, above all because it conducted the highest number of repatriations in comparison to other European countries. This country identified around 1,500 of its citizens who departed for Syria and Iraq in the previous years (Foreign terrorist fighters info, 2025). France is still the forerunner regarding the number of female departees, which makes up 30% of the total number of individuals who departed for the Syrian warzone. Besides that, for many years now, it has been at the top of European countries in terms of arrested terrorists. It should also be mentioned that it has created a significant number of programs for the FTFs and their families.

A dozen years ago, this country formed one of the first centers (boarding) for deradicalization, called CPIC in Beaumont-sur-Vernon. This project was housed in the Château de Pontourny castle from the 18th century, and the participants aged 18 to 30 volunteered for the deradicalization process.¹⁴ The program they attended consisted of various fields, such as culture, philosophy, sports, religion, etc., led by multisectoral teams consisting of psychologists, psychiatrists, pedagogists, and social workers. France invested a large sum of money (2.5 million euro) into a project that fell apart soon. This experience led to the abandonment of the deradicalization process (Đorić, 2021: 84). Namely, this country is increasingly advocating for the de-engagement process in the work with violent extremists and terrorists.

The main institution dealing with the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism is the Interministerial Committee for the Prevention of Crime and Radicalization (*Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance et de la radicalisation* – CIPDR). It includes the Secretariat, which is, as an administrative body, in charge of solving the problem in practice and on a local level. Based on the law passed in 2016, all FTFs are systematically being prosecuted. Speaking of children, we must point out that they can face legal consequences as well if there is proof of their participation in criminal acts.

12 In some countries, the strategies regarding the fight against extremism and violent extremism are separated, and in some, they are united.

13 Information from an international gathering (Chatham House Rules).

14 The principle of voluntariness is, at the same time, the biggest weakness of this process.



If there is no evidence, underage individuals are included in a specific rehabilitation and reintegration program. The procedure for child returnees includes the following phases:

1. First medical check-up
2. Departure to the child protection service
3. Second medical check-up
4. Investigative procedure and educational measures
5. Schooling

In the course of eight weeks, the Unit for Radicalization Assessment (consisting of trained professionals and experts) evaluates individuals who are held in regular detention or isolation. The creation of five such units is planned, able to cover 183 places in which these assessments would be conducted.

The departmental unit for the prevention of radicalization and family support has quite a significant role – to identify the reasons for the radicalization of individuals and entire families. This is exactly why this department is working on the following processes:¹⁵

- Help to develop social potential.
- Help to develop critical thinking, freedom of thought.
- Support families to consolidate their bonds and to face psychological distress.
- Support socio-professional accompaniment and access to rights.

Based on the data from 2024, we can state the following conclusions regarding the de-engagement programs:¹⁶

- 362 families are being monitored in the context of the prevention of extremism and radicalization.
- 5,000 individuals are under some sort of monitoring (there is a slight increase in comparison to 2023).
- 56% are men.
- 63% are younger than 18.

When speaking of **Germany**, the German Federal Domestic Intelligence Service (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*) estimates that more than 1,050 people departed from this country for Syria and Iraq to join some of the terrorist organizations (ICCT, 2019). Other estimates state that the number is around 1,150 people (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat ²⁰²²). The existing data show that predominantly men departed (79%), while women represent a minority (21%), as well as that they were predominantly younger people with an average age of the foreign terrorist fighter being 25.8 (Heinke, 2017).

This country has several programs focused on the deradicalization of the returnees from war zones. One of them is the PERSIST (Project on the long-term Education, Rehabilitation and Social Integration of children in extremism-affiliated family Structures) program, under the jurisdiction of the BAMF (Federal Ministry of Migration and Refugees).¹⁷ The basic goal is to ensure long-term support to children residing in radicalized families.

The current experience has shown that the biggest challenges to children in such problematic families are as follows:

- Emotional dysregulation
- Concentration issues
- Attachment disorders
- Cognitive developmental delays
- PTSD, depression, anxiety

¹⁵ Taken from an international gathering of an expert group (Chatham House Rule).

¹⁶ Chatham House Rule

¹⁷ It was launched in January 2024 and will last until December 2027.



This program pays special attention to mothers with children returning from Syria to Germany. The previous practice has shown that these children are traumatized, and that they usually exhibit a delay in development, which demands learning assistance (in schools). The lack of knowledge of the German language for child returnees is another in the series of challenges, since they predominantly speak Arabic.

There is often a common problem in the family dynamics of returnees. It is not a rare occasion that, upon their return from Syria, children are taken to foster families, and thus, there is often a conflict occurring between the mother and the foster family. A large number of family members, lack of language proficiency, cultural differences, etc., are just a few of the common issues faced by child returnees and their families. The lack of cognitive and emotional capacities among mothers of these children has also been registered, which only shows that the deradicalization process is quite dynamic and complex.

There is an interesting example within the NGO sector and state institution regarding this issue, depicted in the actions of the Green Bird Organization (*Grüner Vogel*). This is a non-governmental organization in Germany that is a close partner of state institutions, such as the BAMF/BMI, acting with the goal to fulfill tertiary prevention of extremism and violent extremism, as well as de-engagement. Since 2021, the Grin Bird has been a part of the Federal Working Group on Religiously Motivated Extremism (BAG RelEx), and since 2024, it has been a part of the Task Force on Islamism Prevention of the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI) (Grüner Vogel, 2021).

In the European Union, there is a common effort to assess the process of the fight against violent extremism, terrorism, and radicalization. The EUKH (EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalization) is the major initiative aimed at bolstering the EU's efforts against radicalization leading to violent extremism and terrorism. The EUKH emerged from the EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda 2020, and its main goal is to gather experts from Europe (politicians, academicians, practitioners, NGO...) to create a community of experts from various fields. One of the topics covered by the EUKH is also the issue of the return of FTFs and their families.

The actions of the EUKH are linked with various types of panels participated in, besides the EU member states, there are the Western Balkan states as well (and other countries outside the European continent). Within the seven existing panels, experts meet several times a year, analyzing the most current topics. Even though the thematic panels have their fixed members, *ad hoc* experts from the side are invited quite often if the said topic requires such action.

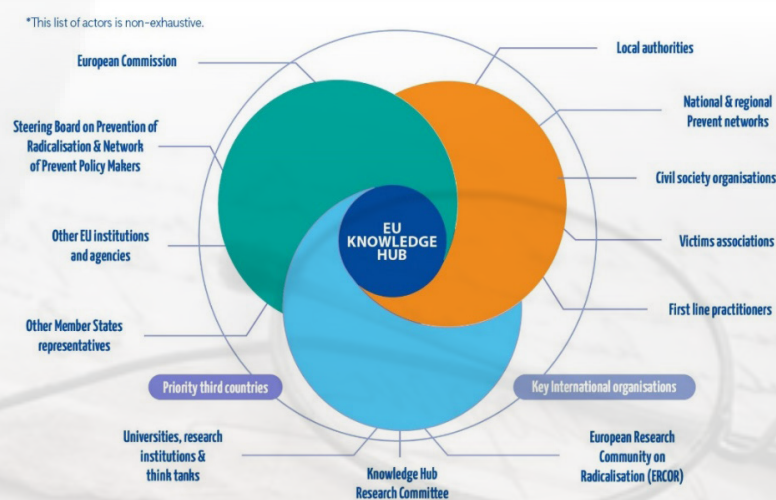


Figure 1: EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalization

(source: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/eu-knowledge-hub-prevention-radicalisation/about-eu-knowledge-hub-prevention-radicalisation_en)

The EUKH organizes activities of various types to prevent radicalization and extremism: professional training, study visits, projects, mentorship programs, etc. One of the panels directly dealing with the topic of FTFs is Panel 6 - Management of Foreign Terrorist Fighters, Volunteers and Their Families. Several times a year, experts from Europe (and other parts of the world) meet at this panel and discuss the issues regarding to the return of foreign terrorist fighters, including the challenges, analysis of the current state, and present examples of good practice.

Based on all the previously listed examples, we can conclude that each country in Europe is individually developing its FTFs and their families' repatriation programs. Of course, in this quite complex process, they rely on each other, learning from the existing practices. What is the great unknown for the EU countries and the countries of the Western Balkans is that the efficiency of the existing programs is still vague. We have examples of terrorists who even acquired official certificates that they are deradicalized, which did not prevent them from repeating the criminal act of terrorism, thus making the deradicalization process senseless.¹⁸

It seems that the biggest problem will be the work with children returning from the camps located in the northeastern part of Syria (Al Hol and Al Roj), exactly due to many years of living in quite toxic conditions. In these camps, children are not allowed to play or sing (because of the value system of terrorist ideologies), and thus, the possibility of their radicalization is quite high (including trauma). Women, too, have a chance to radicalize in these camps. The majority of them refuse to return to their countries of origin, while the male members of their families are in prisons in Syria (such as the one in Hasaka).¹⁹ International organizations have identified a high suicide potential among women who spent years in camps.²⁰ Besides that, various forms of violence, including murders²¹, suicides, torture, rapes²², etc., are present in the camps located in the northeastern part of Syria.

The countries of Europe can apply several return models²³:

- To hold FTFs and their families in camps (and prisons) without the possibility of repatriation (which is no longer a sustainable option).
- To repatriate them to their countries of origin and process them (if there is proof).
- Mass repatriation (of a humanitarian character).
- The work of expert teams with a small number of selected returnees.

The return of FTFs and their families will involve numerous security risks, economic, political, social, and cultural issues. One of the main questions is how the domestic environment will accept them: as heroes or as a threat. Moreover, we can also pose the question regarding how the returnees from war-zones who are serving prison sentences will affect the security dynamics (the danger of radicalizing other prisoners as well). Unfortunately, we will get our responses only after the evaluation process, which needs time. The fundamental question is: Does Europe have that luxury of time?

18 Here, we must take into consideration the principle of *taqiyah* in Islam, which often enables terrorists to act as if they were deradicalized.

19 Illnesses such as diphtheria and tuberculosis were identified in prisons.

20 Chatham House Rules

21 There is a case when a mother strangled her daughter due to frustration.

22 Rapes are predominantly conducted by young men (teenagers) who have been stranded in camps for years.

23 Chatham House Rules



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