

*Mareeva Elizaveta**

Charles University – Faculty of Social Sciences

THE REPATRIATION OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND THEIR FAMILIES TO HOME COUNTRIES IN EUROPE

Abstract

One of the modern problems of international security has become the phenomenon of foreign fighters who, as inhabitants of European states, go to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups. Some of the fighters subsequently decide, for one reason or another, to repatriate back to Europe. This creates a security dilemma for many states that need to be addressed. The goal of this paper is to identify the best strategies for dealing with foreign fighters and their relatives. In order to achieve this, the paper examines how individual countries around the world have dealt with the repatriation of foreign fighters and their families and how they have followed up with their reintegration into society. The study found that few countries choose to let ex-combatants return and not persecute them. However, those countries that do decide to assist or at least let allow them to come back pay little attention to the psychological assistance and social reintegration of these people.

Keywords: Foreign fighters, Middle East, repatriation of foreign fighters, terrorism, Syria, Iraq

* E-mail address: marlisa1210@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of foreign fighters is one of the contemporary security dilemmas facing both the countries to which fighters travel to support insurgent groups and those to which they consider their home and potential return. For insurgent countries such as Syria and Iraq, where fighters are sent to support terrorist groups, foreigners are a source of money, technology, knowledge, weapons, and military power. However, foreigners are not the only influence on the development of insurgent groups and the development of their activities. This symbiosis poses a security problem for European states, as even after voluntary return to their homeland, former fighters can pose a threat to domestic security and the security of citizens, as returnees may still be exposed to radical ideology and the influence of terrorist groups. As a response, many European states are developing strategies to repatriate, deradicalize and reintegrate their citizens, as well as solutions to mitigate the potential consequences of returnee returns. In doing so, measures should take into account the return of not only the fighters themselves but also the families that they had made or brought with them during their stay in a foreign country. This paper examines how European states formulate a response to address this issue - how states deal with the issue of repatriation of foreign fighters and their families, and what measures they develop to deradicalize returnees and their relatives to ensure their safe return to society. This will help clarify what methods are most effective to resolve the dilemma of repatriating foreign fighters while taking into account their subsequent integration into social life.

REPATRIATION OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Some European countries have adopted repatriation policies for residents of their countries who took part in hostilities on the side of extremists. One of the most lenient policies toward returning foreign fighters is in Italy. The European Foundation for Democracy tells the story of Samir Bougana, 25, with Moroccan roots and an Italian passport (The European Foundation for Democracy 2021). He went to fight on the side of Islamist organizations in the Middle East in 2013 and surrendered to a Kurdish organization in 2019. A joint effort by Rome and Washington allowed him to be returned to Italy. In 2021 he was sentenced to four years for involvement in a terrorist organization. Such an example illustrates the Italian authorities' approach to dealing with people who left Italy to fight for the Islamists: they were not afraid to bring some of them back,

and although the man will have to spend several years in prison, after that he can become a full member of Italian society again. It is worth noting that one of the reasons why Italy can afford such repatriation is that according to a study by Marone and Vidino, as of 2019 less than 20% of the studied foreign fighters who went to Syria, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern countries were Italian nationals (Marone and Vidino 2019). Moreover, Marone notes that by 2021, of the 29 returned fighters in Europe with ties to Italy, only 10 were in Italy (Marone 2020). However, a minority of them, like Bougana, were convicted of terrorist activities when the majority remained at large.

Another European country that has set itself the task of returning and reintegrating into society its citizens who left to fight on the side of the Islamists is Kosovo¹. The example of this country is unique - with a relatively small population (less than 2 million), the number of those who left is estimated at more than 400. About 100 of them were taken back in 2019. In other words, the ratio of returning Islamists to the population in Kosovo^{*} is one of the highest in Europe. Pristina has taken a multi-faceted approach to deal with returnees. Just as in Italy, some of the returnees have been sentenced to prison, while others have received suspended sentences or have generally remained free. It is also noteworthy that the returnees received financial support from the government upon their return: vouchers for food and clothing, as well as various housing options (Avdimetaj and Coleman 2020).

The example of Italy, Kosovo^{*}, and other European countries, which have taken a relatively lenient approach (return assistance and partial absence of trials) to citizens who have left to fight on the side of ISIS and other Islamist terrorist organizations, is remarkable in that the level of threat to residents of these states has not increased significantly since the application of such measures: there is no data on terrorist acts carried out by people who have returned from ISIS on the territory of these countries. It is not possible to say that Rome, Pristina, and others show a definite trend of greater protection of countries that have applied such an approach, largely because of the need for an individual approach to each such person and the huge variety of reasons for which a person joins the Islamists. However, the experiences of Italy and Kosovo^{*} show that this approach has at least the right to life and at least partial implementation in other countries.

1 Important Resolution on Kosovo and Metohija is: United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, S/RES/1244 (1999).

REFUSAL TO REPATRIATE FIGHTERS

The issue of repatriating fighters is not only a security dilemma but also a political issue for many politicians. Few countries do not agree to repatriate their citizens from war zones and territories occupied by terrorists, as this represents not only an internal security problem for the state but also a politically unpopular decision.

The reaction of the European Union on this issue has been very mixed, but there is a clear trend toward reducing repatriation opportunities for its citizens. The authorities' reluctance to facilitate the repatriation of foreign fighters is also supported by the fact that many of them burned their own passports and went through the procedure of stripping citizenship when they moved to Iraq and Syria. In 2014 Europol stated that returnees could pose a danger as they are "logistical, financial or recruitment cells and may serve as role models for individuals in extremist communities" (European Police Office 2014). This statement indicates that the European Union views foreign fighters as a threat to the national security of allied countries. It does not matter if an individual has been involved in terrorist activities and violent acts. Politicians are reluctant to discuss laws related to repatriation, in part because taking unpopular decisions could cost them their careers.

Opinion polls in some European countries confirm this. In France, for example, 89% of respondents voted against repatriating adult foreign fighters in 2019 (Odoxa 2019). At the same time, in the same poll, 67% of the French voted not to repatriate children of fighters in Iraq and Syria either. A similar question in the United Kingdom showed that 77% of subjects believed that the state should limit the possibility for foreign fighters to return home from ISIS (Furlan and Hoffman 2020, 15). At the same time, 42% of those surveyed were in favor of stripping combatants of their nationality. This shows that the societies of many European countries as well as their governments are not ready for combatants to return home.

As part of the article, Hoffman and Furlan did a study in which they looked at the laws of 64 countries to see how they deal with foreign fighters and their return (Furlan and Hoffman 2020). For our study, the most valuable information is from European countries. Among the members of the European Union and the UK, most allow but do not facilitate the return of foreign fighters (e.g. the Netherlands). In most of these countries, such as Latvia and Bulgaria, the arrest and trial await the fighters upon return. Some countries, such as Belgium and Germany, only facilitate repatriation for children and women. Only some countries, such

as Italy, allow combatants to return home and facilitate their repatriation. Also, citizens of Luxembourg and Sweden are not subject to prosecution for repatriation, but the government does not facilitate the repatriation of such citizens. There is also a pool of countries that strip combatants of their citizenship (UK) and prohibit even their wives and children from returning (Denmark). Despite the many unifications in European countries, it cannot be claimed that strategies and measures for foreign fighters and their relatives are developed jointly. But even with this autonomy in decision-making on this issue, there is a general trend toward criminalizing wrestlers and being more lenient towards their wives and children.

For this reason, many European states are still reluctant to repatriate nationals from areas controlled by ISIS and other terrorist organizations. Different countries limit the possibilities for return to varying degrees - some feel that it is sufficient not to assist in this matter, others put such citizens on terrorist lists, while others revoke citizenship. It is very difficult to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of these measures, as many fighters have left the country without being forced to do so while being stripped of their citizenship. Also, some states question the disinterestedness of those wishing to return to their homeland, as well as their departure from radical ideologies and willingness to reintegrate into society. That said, each specific case of repatriation of a combatant and his or her family may differ. This is why it is so important to continue further research in this area.

HANDLING THE RELATIVES

The issue of repatriation and assistance to relatives and families of fighters in terrorist camps has become increasingly urgent. Many foreigners come to the war zone with their wives and children or find wives among local women. The situation is particularly difficult for children born in terrorist camps because of their ambiguous citizenship and legal status. At the same time, many states and international organizations have expressed concern about the fate of these women and children. In 2019, for example, the UN issued a statement that the situation of many women and children living in camps of terrorist organizations was unacceptable (The Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate 2019). The following year, the European Council expressed concern about children trapped in terrorist camps and described this as “an acute humanitarian disaster” (Schennach 2020). As seen in the previous section on the refusal to repatriate fighters, their wives and children are treated with more

sympathy by European countries. Even opinion polls show that the public is more willing to help with the return of the women and children, although there is still a fear that they, like their husbands and fathers, may pose a security problem.

It is worth noting that, unlike foreign fighters, their wives and children may both be hostages to the situation and truly believe in the ideology of the terrorist organizations in whose territory they have long been based. This raises the dilemma of how to determine their true intents in each case.

There are various programs that facilitate the return of women from Syria and Iraq to Europe. However, they face a number of challenges when dealing with women, as they need to develop specific procedures to determine the extent to which the woman has been involved in extremist activities. The process is complicated by the fact that the woman herself is often the only source of information and only the professionalism of psychologists and specialists can make a reliable determination of her commitment to extremist ideas. Difficulties are also encountered in dealing with the gender and religious characteristics of women who have lived in a terrorist camp for a considerable period of time. For example, at a UN meeting in 2021, representatives of European Union countries announced the preparation of programs to help women with all the specificities of the issue. There are also challenges in prosecuting women, as opposed to men's trials of female fighters. Often, there is no direct evidence of women's involvement in extremist activities and they are prosecuted for other criminal offenses. This means that they cannot count on support from organizations dedicated to assisting and deradicalizing people who have been in terrorist groups.

The return of children is also a contentious issue for people dealing with the repatriation of foreign fighters' families. The question arises whether children can be considered a threat to the national security of European countries, as there is ample evidence that extremist ideology is often inculcated in terrorist organizations from childhood. Many countries do not take the risk of repatriating children as their rehabilitation process is complicated by their association with radicalized parents. Although many children relay extremist ideas, countries often do not prosecute juveniles. Most often, their custody is transferred to other family members or they are left in the custody of the state and are rehabilitated. Despite the many concerns of European citizens, there have been no reported cases of reintegrated children involved in extremist/terrorist activities in Europe so far (Koller 2020). However, this does not mean that work with children should not take place. Children are in many ways hostages

to the situation and subject to the will of adults, which means they have a long way to go when they return home and have to work on their psychological traumas.

PSYCHOLOGICAL HELP AND REINTEGRATION

Psychology is an important focus of counter-extremism programs. According to many researchers, returnees pose a threat not only because of their involvement with terrorist groups and their initial desire to return to carry out attacks but also because of their unstable emotional background and mental disorders. For example, most women and children who have returned from ISIS to Kosovo* have been diagnosed with a post-traumatic personality disorder (Avdimetaj and Coleman 2020). For this reason, many countries have made various attempts to provide psychological help to such people.

In addition, the emotional instability of such people may arise not only from their experiences of war but also from the social difficulties they encounter on their return home. Social inequalities, feelings of exclusion, and economic problems are major negative factors. This is why countries in Europe look at reintegration not only from a human rights perspective but also from a national security perspective.

The issue of women's rehabilitation is more acute because, due to the culture, traditions, and religious practices instilled in women during their time in the terrorist organization, it is more difficult for them to find employment and therefore to re-integrate into society. On this basis, there is a need to select professionals with whom women can have confidence. Also, most such women look for jobs related to care and assistance for children and the elderly, but because of their backgrounds, in many countries, such women are not allowed to work in these areas because of their close association with people and the chance for recruitment. Therefore, deradicalization and disintegration programs should take into account further assistance to integrate them into society, even in employment issues.

Some countries already facilitate the rehabilitation of children. Belgium and the Netherlands have published their support systems for children who have returned from terrorist camps. However, for the moment some of the participants in these programs point out their imperfections and lack of consideration, as well as the lack of an inclusive approach towards the different problems and situations of children. (Koller 2020). Rehabilitation of children is a more complicated process because, unlike adults, the age and gender of the child are a big factor. Considering these

characteristics and the extent to which adults have engaged the child in extremist activities, organizations develop different methods and advice on the deradicalization and reintegration of children into society. The main methods are considered to work with specialists in psychology as well as education of children in kindergarten and school. The parents' authority, who have long influenced the shaping of the child's worldview, cannot be taken away.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis presented, several conclusions can be drawn about the current situation of returnees from Europe and their families. Developing an attitude toward the repatriation of citizens and their families who have gone to terrorist camps in the Middle East is still a security dilemma and a political issue for many European countries. Politicians have been reluctant to take steps toward helping foreign fighters return to their home countries, partly because of ambivalent public attitudes towards this problem. At the same time, the few countries that are willing to provide the necessary conditions for the families and returnees themselves to reintegrate into society are still not paying enough attention to the subtleties of the work and are not fully aware of the complexity of the work in each individual case. As a result, the deradicalization and reintegration of ex-combatants, as well as the development of measures for dealing with foreign fighters who have independently returned to their homeland or have taken part in repatriation programs, should be one of the priorities of international security specialists as well as for national and international organizations, that focused on counterterrorism.

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