

# Successes and Challenges of PRR in Central Asia

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While four Central Asian countries have made significant efforts to meet their state obligations under UN Security Council Resolutions and implement appropriate Prosecution, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (PRR) strategies, they are now facing unprecedented challenges in securing long-term rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) goals.



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UN Security Council resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017) played a significant role in establishing expectations and parameters for prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their family members. Notably, Resolutions 2178 and 2396 call on UN Member States to develop and implement PRR strategies for returning FTFs and their families. While Resolution 2396 stresses the importance of assisting FTFs-associated women and children who may be victims of terrorism themselves and urges countries to do so by considering gender and age sensitivities, Resolution 2427 (2018) stresses that children linked to armed groups should be treated primarily as victims, even they might have committed crimes.

Central Asian countries have taken a lead by carrying out large-scale repatriation operations, bringing back dozens of ISIS-associated men and women, as well as children, from Syria and Iraq. The Central Asia region has been a significant source of foreign fighters travelling to the Middle East to join terrorist groups such as ISIS. Indeed, around 5,000 fighters and their dependents travelled from the region to Syria and Iraq and joined terrorist groups.<sup>[1]</sup>

After the severe degradation of ISIS in 2018, the United Nations urged Member States to repatriate their nationals from the Al-Hawl and Roj camps in northeast Syria, stressing in particular the need to repatriate children and treat them primarily as victims rather than perpetrators. With Operation "Zhusan", Kazakhstan became the first country to carry out a state-organized repatriation operation. Since 2019, about 700 Kazakh citizens, including 37 men, 188 women and 475 children, were repatriated during the five phases of Operation Zhusan.<sup>[2]</sup> Later, Uzbekistan was applauded by the UN Special Rapporteur as a model of repatriation and reintegration, offering "a road-map for other governments to return their nationals from conflict zones" after returning 535 women

and children from camps in northeast Syria.<sup>[3]</sup> On 25 July 2022, Tajikistan brought back 42 women and 104 children from two camps in northeast Syria controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces.<sup>[4]</sup> Tajikistan had already dealt with returnee children in 2019 when the country brought back 84 children back from Iraqi prisons, while Kyrgyzstan brought back 79 children from Iraq in 2021.

All four Central Asian countries have had success in some aspects of the PRR process. The main common step toward implementing Resolutions 2178 and 2396 was the criminalization of travel with the intention to join terrorist groups abroad. Following the adoption of UNSCR 2178, in April 2014, Kazakhstan introduced amendments into its criminal code to establish sentences of up to seven years in prison for participating in armed conflicts and in other armed activities abroad. Kyrgyzstan also criminalized fighting abroad by approving punishments of up to 15 years of jail for taking part in conflicts, military operations, or terrorist and extremist training in a foreign state.<sup>[5]</sup> Likewise, in 2014, Tajikistan's legislature proposed charges ranging from 12 to 20 years in prison for joining terrorist groups abroad. In October 2015, the first case under this new law was brought to court in Tajikistan, and as a result, a resident of the Sogdiy region of Tajikistan was sentenced to 16 years in prison for traveling to Syria and joining ISIS.<sup>[6]</sup> Despite such court decisions, Tajikistan is the only country in Central Asia to offer forgiveness towards its FTFs, having announced a policy of amnesty toward Tajik fighters who voluntarily return to the country and confess to their crimes.<sup>[7]</sup> Since 2014, 150 Tajik citizens have returned from the Middle East voluntarily and been pardoned after confession and repentance.<sup>[8]</sup>

While Tajikistan received more than 800 self-returnees after announcing this policy, its neighbors have generally left males to languish in Middle Eastern prisons, prioritizing instead the repatriation of children and women.. For instance, Uzbekistan fully rejected any possible return or repatriation of ISIS associated males. As one Uzbek official, who wished to remain anonymous, told the Bulan Institute for Peace and Innovations, the official position of Uzbekistan is that "all male fighters should be [tried] in the Middle East," leaving it to "the international community [to] find a common solution about where and how to try them."<sup>[9]</sup> In 2019, after repatriating 37 men during Operation Zhusan, Kazakhstan immediately arrested and convicted them. In July 2019, all of these men were received sentences from 8 to 18 years in prison for joining terrorist groups and committing crimes in the Middle East.<sup>[10]</sup> Kazakhstan also charged 17 female returnees based on the possession of clear evidence of their participation in ISIS recruitment and propaganda activities by the country's law enforcement agencies.<sup>[11]</sup> In other cases, rather than being imprisoned, Uzbek and Kazakh women were assigned to deradicalization and rehabilitation programs.

There are promising practices in Central Asia in the rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children. In line with Resolution 2396's emphasis on holistic governmental approaches to R&R and its recognition of civil society organizations' (CSO) role in this process, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan delegated important phases of the R&R programs to many civil society actors. Local CSOs "filled many gaps in terms of building trust, preparing, and mobilizing essential practitioners across disciplines, and gaining from a wealth of experience in working with returnees and other vulnerable groups"<sup>[12]</sup> Groups such as Barqaror Hayot, Pravo, Shans, the Center for Analysis and Development of Interconfessional Relations, Ak-niet, and Future of the Country have played significant roles by providing returnees with legal, social, and health services. As Atlantic Center fellow Noah Tucker highlighted, while Central Asian governments used to crack down on local NGOs, when they were confronted with the repatriation and PRR challenges, they decided to involve CSOs in the rehabilitation processes, recognizing their relevance and potential: "Uzbekistan is a country that, at least before 2016, had a very justly earned reputation as an extremely authoritarian and closed country that had almost destroyed what was left of its civil society. But one of the most important decisions that the government of Uzbekistan made was to partner with the existing civil society organizations in the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees. And this was a remarkable effort, of which we see the successes now."<sup>[13]</sup>

Another positive highlight here is that these four Central Asian countries chose to frame their repatriation operations (rather than security) actions, and constructed several important narratives to uphold this framework. These narratives were conveyed to the public to minimize stigmatization and prepare communities to accept ISIS-related returnees. The first narrative spoke to culture, mentality affirming that "we never abandon our children and women", while the second framed ISIS-related returnees as "misled and deceived people." For example, the Uzbek government took a hands-off approach by not imprisoning repatriated women and by referring to them publicly as "adashganlar", which translates to misled or misguided.<sup>[14]</sup> However, returned women have been strictly monitored by Uzbekistan's law enforcement agencies and have been subject to "court restrictions placed on the freedom of movement of returnees for up to five years, depending on their roles and lengths of stay in Syria".<sup>[15]</sup>

More than three years have passed since the first group of returnees arrived in Kazakhstan, and in that time, all Central Asian countries have faced challenges in building long-term, sustainable R&R programs. There are significant challenges that can be resolved only with the assistance of international donors and mentors who can supervise local practitioners. The first issue these countries face is an urgent need to secure sustainable funding for mental health and psychological assistance, as all returnees, especially women and children, will need long-term psychological support.

The next acute problem is the region's shortage of practitioners and specialists. Those working with returnees are exhausted and suffer from burnout. According to Gulnaz Razdykova, director of Center for Analysis and Development of Interconfessional Relations in Kazakhstan, local psychologists in the country are exhausted and underpaid, resulting in a constant outflow of specialists. In all four countries, there remains a shortage of practitioners such as psychologists, social workers, teachers, and theologians who can



[9] The interview with the Uzbek official was conducted by the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations in Vienna on February 11, 2020, during the OSCE conference on foreign fighters.

[10] Aidar Asjimov, "Former Kazakh Fighters returned from Syria are sentenced to long jail terms." Asia News, June 20, 2019, accessed on August 15, 2022, available at [Бывших казахстанских боевиков, вернувшихся из Сирии, приговорили к длительным тюремным срокам \(asia-news.com\)](#).

[11] Read the story of the Kazakh woman charged with terrorist organization membership and recruitment after having been repatriated, accessed on August 15, 2022, available online at [Second Chance: Jailed Kazakh Islamic State Widow 'Optimistic' About Future \(rferl.org\)](#).

[12] The Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, "Report. The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children from Syria and Iraq The Experiences of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan", (June 2021), accessed on August 15, 2022, available at [The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of ISIS Associates in Central Asia, Report – Bulan Institute](#).

[13] Noah Tucker, Interview by the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, August 5, 2022.

[14] Nodirbek Soliev, "Syria: Uzbekistan's Approach to IS Detainees", *RSiS Commentary* (October 2019), accessed on August 15, 2022, available at [Syria: Uzbekistan's Approach to IS Detainees – RSiS](#).

[15] *ibid.*

[16] The Bulan Institute for Peace, *Report. Innovations, The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of ISIS Associates in Central Asia*, (August 2022), accessed on August 5, 2022, available at [The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of ISIS Associates in Central Asia, Report – Bulan Institute](#).

[17] Gavin Helf, Interview by the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, August 5, 2022.

[18] Noah Tucker, Speech at the workshop organized by the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, August 5, 2022.

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