

# WESTERN BALKANS EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM

Policy brief – Kosovo

September 2018

## REINTEGRATION OF RETURNEES: THE CHALLENGE OF STATE AND COMMUNITY RESPONSE IN KOSOVO

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### Introduction

Between 2012 and 2018 around 400 Kosovo citizens have participated as foreign fighters in the Middle East conflicts, most predominantly in Syria.<sup>1</sup> Although the number of outgoing foreign fighters from Kosovo has reduced, the governing structures continue to face the problem pertaining to returnees, which include: (i) those that are serving sentences in prison; (ii) those soon to complete their sentences; and (iii) possible returnees. While most of the 130 Kosovo citizens that have already returned comprise combatants,<sup>2</sup> the majority of those remaining in conflict zones with the possibility of return are non-combatants, mainly women and children. The above mentioned aspects continue to press various policy making circles in Kosovo as they are often perceived through the lenses of threats and national security. However, among the three above mentioned aspects, of most concern are risks associated with those who may possibly return, and evidently there is little awareness among policy makers, and most critically, the community, on how to handle the possible consequences.

### Policy response

Since 2015, Kosovo adopted new legal and policy frameworks which set out its determination to prevent Kosovars from joining various terrorist organisations abroad. The first major step was taken in the first part of 2015 when the Law No.05/L-002 on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory was passed.<sup>3</sup> The second major step was the adoption of the National Strategy on Countering

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<sup>1</sup> Perteshi, S. (2018) Journalist Guide: Violent Extremism and Terminology. Kosovo Center for Security Studies. Available from: [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Udhezues\\_per\\_gazetar\\_797776\\_\(1\)\\_302167.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Udhezues_per_gazetar_797776_(1)_302167.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Assembly of Republic of Kosovo, Law No. 05/L-002 on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory. Available from: <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=10763>

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Extremism Leading to Terrorism – a strategy that covers a five-year period between 2015 and 2020.<sup>4</sup> While the law fills some gaps in punitive measures against those who take steps to join conflicts abroad or related sympathising groups inside the country, the strategy serves as a sound base for implementing different measures in (i) early identification; (ii) prevention; (iii) intervention; and (iv) de-radicalisation and reintegration through economic, social, and educational approaches. Furthermore, the Government of Kosovo has created the division of re-integration of the returned foreign fighters and their family members. This programme is set to be implemented with the support of ICITAP on behalf of the Ministry of Interior.<sup>5</sup> However, this programme is still in its early phases of development and there is little information on the specifics of how the intervention will deal with varieties of profiles of those that have returned, as well as those that may potentially return.

Apart from government efforts, there is only one non-governmental attempt to work with returnees. Two former participants in the conflict in Syria, Albert Berisha and Liridon Kabashi, have established the Institute for Integration, Security, and Deradicalization; however, not much progress has been made by this initiative, due to the fact that both of these returnees were eventually imprisoned<sup>6</sup> on various terrorism related charges.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noting that, among different approaches suggested in Kosovo's state strategy, the involvement of "[r]eligious organisations or organisations of other nature, where radicalised persons would feel closer" has also been identified as important in the re-integration process. Religious organisations and authorities can play a positive mediating role between those who have been radicalised or with the potential to be, on the one hand, and general society and state institutions on the other. Kosovo institutions have also begun identifying religious authorities who could also be involved with those individuals already serving sentences in prisons.<sup>8</sup>

While these have so far served as useful approaches in responding to one aspect of the problem – those who have already returned - the policy frameworks and approaches that are currently in place are limited in addressing another policy relevant aspect of the phenomenon, identified in recent research

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<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister's Office of the Republic of Kosovo. *Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020*. Available from: [http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY\\_parandalim\\_-\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_-_ENG.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> *MPB themelon njësi për deradikalizimin e personave që janë në luftërat e huaja*. (8 June 2018) Telegrafi. Available from: <https://telegafi.com/mpb-themelon-njesi-per-deradikalizimin-e-personave-qe-jane-ne-lufterat-e-huaja/>

<sup>6</sup> The institute was established on their return, and before imprisonment sentences were issued for their travel to Syria. Neither of the two individuals were involved in any criminal or violent activity following their return; rather they were open to engage with the media and the community to explain their experience and regrets.

<sup>7</sup> Krasniqi – Veseli, L. (25 October 2016) Nga radikalizmi në tolerancë. Radio Evropa e Lirë,. Available from: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/28073866.html>

<sup>8</sup> *MPB themelon njësi për deradikalizimin e personave që janë në luftërat e huaja*. (8 June 2018) Telegrafi. Available from: <https://telegafi.com/mpb-themelon-njesi-per-deradikalizimin-e-personave-qe-jane-ne-lufterat-e-huaja/>

conducted as part of the British Council's Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum (ERF). This includes those potential returnees (combatants and non-combatants) that are still in the conflict zones. Currently there is a wide gap between policies in place and the problem of potential returnees, to which this brief turns next.

## The potential problem of further returnees

The research conducted as part of the ERF suggests that potential returnees are often viewed as a high-risk problem for state institutions; while an obvious observation, the ERF research findings reveal more detailed nuances to the issue of returnees, taking into consideration the profile of the returning combatants and non-combatants.

**Figure 1:**  
*Women and children in conflict zones*

*Women in conflict zones:*

• Married:	47
• Single:	6
• Divorced:	1
• No information:	1
• Returned:	7
• Dead:	1

*Children in conflict zones:*

• Born in Kosovo:	55
• Born in conflict:	40
• Returned:	3

Viewing the potential returnees as one category of individuals, i.e. as a single category of risk, is problematic. A first consideration is that the majority of those that remain in conflict zones are non-combatants.

- There is an estimated number of more than 50 women and more than 90 children, i.e. a total of around 140 individuals, the majority of whom can safely be said to be non-combatants<sup>9</sup>.

- An estimated 66 men, the majority of whom are active combatants, also remain in conflict zones.

The ERF research findings for Kosovo suggests that of the 66 remaining men, it is highly probable that the actual number is lower, considering the likelihood of capture by Syrian and Iraqi authorities, and loss of life, especially with ISIS having lost significant ground.

<sup>9</sup> In the Islamic State, women generally were confined to household duties, due to the conservative ideology that the group employed (reluctance to engage women in public activities, including fighting). This has also become clear from accounts in discussion with two Kosovo women participants in Syria who have returned in 2015. See also: Jakupi, R. & Kelmendi, V. (2017) Women in Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Kosovo. Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Note that there are some secondary accounts that suggest that since the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018, the Islamic State began engaging some women on the frontline, owing to recent losses of manpower, see: Dearden, L. (8 February 2018) Isis propaganda video shows women fighting for first time amid 'desperation' to bolster ranks. *Independent*. Eggert, J. P. (2017) Women in the Islamic State: Tactical Advantage Trumps Ideology. *IPI Global Observatory*. Thus, if women continue to stay further beyond 2018, it is difficult to know if and how many Kosovar women may engage in fighting.

What adds further complexity is that not all children of Kosovo-born mothers were born themselves in Kosovo. In fact, data from the Kosovo Police suggest that close to half of the children of Kosovo-born mothers were born in the conflict zones.<sup>10</sup> Among all children, 40 were born in conflict zones, while another 55 were born in Kosovo (before being taken with their parent(s) to the conflict zone from Kosovo).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, not all children born in conflict zones are of Kosovo originating parents. The available information suggests that some of the children of Kosovo-born mothers have non-Kosovo related fathers, as women from Kosovo (and other places) married foreign fighters of other nationalities when their Kosovo-born husbands and partners perished in conflict.

While this issue has been in the attention of security structures in Kosovo for some time, it is not until recently that the topic has entered the public sphere. In discussions with the authorities at the Kosovo Police, there are clear indications of issues that exist in and between families in Kosovo with regards to women and children that are in Syria, who could possibly return.<sup>12</sup> Kosovo women who travelled to conflict zones (often with their first husband and their children), but who remarried while there and bore additional children with another Kosovo combatant, present a very particular problem – largely related to the risk of social stigma from more conservative and traditional sectors of society in some parts of Kosovo. An issue that the authorities also face is how to mediate between different families in Kosovo, who propose that the women and (some) of her children return to the first husband's family, while she may also have children from a husband from another family in Kosovo, who lay claim to custody rights over those children. This issue becomes even more complex with women who have children with non-Kosovo originating husbands – the extent of prejudices may be even more acute, with added difficulty in their social reintegration.

## **The challenge of state and community response**

There is little awareness among policy makers, and most importantly, the community on how to handle the problem. Perturbingly, there are already derogatory statements being made by high level policy-makers regarding the women who are in the conflict zones, and the fact that some of them may be having children with other foreign fighters. References to these women and their children often include “ISIS women”, “children of ISIS commanders”, and alike.<sup>13</sup> Such rhetoric risks exacerbating prejudice on the issue among policy makers as well as society.

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<sup>10</sup> Data from one of the security related agencies

<sup>11</sup> Data from one of the security related agencies

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Kosovo Police, Anti-Terror Directorate

<sup>13</sup> Nemtsova, A. (2018) Why Kosovo Wants Trump's Help. *DailyBeast*. Available from: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-kosovo-wants-trumps-help>

Relatedly, some surveys conducted with the general population in Kosovo also indicate that on average, Kosovo citizens would not share positive attitudes towards potential returnees. According to the 2017 Kosovo Security Barometer published by the *Kosovar Centre for Security Studies*, close to 60 percent of Kosovo citizens refuse to accept the returned foreign fighters to be reintegrated in their surrounding environments; only 15 percent were open to accept them.<sup>14</sup> This is in line with how Kosovo citizens perceived threats emanating from the potential returnees a year before, where 75 percent of respondents of the 2016 Kosovo Security Barometer considered returnees as a threat.<sup>15</sup> Therefore the reintegration of returnee combatants and non-combatants presents a very probable and potentially imminent challenge for the state and society.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Taking stock of the major concerns that exist among policy makers and the community in Kosovo regarding the potential returnees from conflict zones, this policy brief has emphasised that, from policy perspective, the returnees should not be treated as a single category of risky or threatening individuals. In line with one of many other key findings of the ERF report on Kosovo, which emphasises the close family ties as both a motivation and facilitator of the emergence of foreign fighter phenomenon recommends the following:

- Kosovo institutions need to create clearly differentiated categories of potential returnees, which in turn should also be handled differently. The categorisation of potential returnees should be sensitive in distinguishing men (usually combatants) and women (usually non-combatants), but also women who have children from a mix of husbands that are Kosovo or non-Kosovo originating;
- When issues of intra-family cleavages emerge with regards to which family should women (and some-or-all-of their children) return to, the decision should be left to women returnees themselves – as final decision-making agents, and not to the different families who may propose claims over women and especially children. A “third-way” should also be made possible to these women (including those with children) in case they want to return to neither of their former husbands’ families, but want to remain alone. There should be an institutional support for the “third-way” if and when chosen by women returnees;

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<sup>14</sup> Vrajolli, M. (2017) Citizens' perceptions on Violent Extremism. Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available from: [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/KSB\\_MENTORI\\_FINAL\\_798765.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/KSB_MENTORI_FINAL_798765.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Kelmendi, V. (2016) Special Edition: The citizens' views against violent extremism and radicalization in Kosovo. Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available from: [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Raporti\\_final\\_CVE-Barometri\\_anglisht\\_583308.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Raporti_final_CVE-Barometri_anglisht_583308.pdf)

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- In addition to general approaches proposed in current Kosovo policy frameworks, specific policies should be devised to target families who may expect potential returnees. This is in line with the ERF report on Kosovo findings, which highlights the importance of the close-family dynamics in both exacerbating the phenomenon but also in preventing it. Family members who have not shown signs of radicalisation, interest in such matters, or who continuously strongly condemned actions taken by their family members that decided to join foreign conflicts, should be considered as key “cells” in the re-integration process. Mothers and siblings especially can play an important role here;
- Institutions should encourage the already returned (including those whose terms in prison may soon pass) to engage in community work should such individuals be considered by authorities to have already regretted their previous decisions to engage in fighting. Their voice may weigh much higher than that of any policy-maker speaking from the centre (capital);
- Policy makers active in the public sphere through various media outlets should refrain from using derogatory identifiers towards potential returnees. While there is a considerable awareness among the general community in Kosovo of the risks that potential returnees may pose, the language and discourse used to refer to them, especially those that may pose no threat whatsoever - most of the women and especially children - should be handled with care. Otherwise, any defamatory reference may make re-integration much more difficult.
- Government institutions, as well as the donor community, should focus more on reaching the public more widely and working with communities (including in partnership with NGOs and CSOs, as well as religious organisations) to raise awareness and creating more inclusive perceptions of returnees (especially vulnerable groups such as women and children) within society.

*The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or the British Council.*