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Navigating Complexity: Approaches to Repatriation and Reintegration of Foreign Fighters from ISIS-Controlled Territory

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**NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY: APPROACHES TO
REPATRIATION AND REINTEGRATION OF
FOREIGN FIGHTERS FROM ISIS-CONTROLLED
TERRITORY**

*Reine Radwan
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1. Introduction	2
2. Background.....	4
3. Legal Frameworks	6
4. Case Studies	8
4.1. France.....	8
4.2. Denmark	10
4.3. Kazakhstan	11
4.4. Comparative Analysis	13
5. Forewarnings	15
6. Recommendations	16
7. Conclusion	18

1. Introduction

The reintegration of former members, fighters, or associates of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), including those who have committed violent acts, is a multifaceted concept frequently discussed alongside terms like disengagement, demobilisation, deradicalisation, counter-radicalisation, and reconciliation. Despite its importance, there is no universally accepted definition for these terms, nor strategic plans for their implementation, leading to ambiguity in their conceptual boundaries and applicability. Furthermore, it is unclear whether many of those awaiting repatriation were ‘active members’ of ISIS, meaning that a nuanced approach should always be taken when discussing this issue. In a new report by Amnesty International, it was revealed that thousands of people in the camps have no connection to ISIS. They were Syrians and Iraqis who fled the war and ISIS’ expansion and ended up in Al-Hol camp prior to the final battles with ISIS¹. For the purpose of this text, reintegration will be defined “as a process by which ex-combatants or associates assume functional roles in society”². The goal of reintegration is the social rehabilitation of former combatants, which is intricately linked to the cessation of hostilities and violence and then to the achievement of sustainable peace³. Importantly, there is no one-size-fits-all reintegration program; instead, reintegration is driven by highly localised and grassroots processes that evolve over time⁴.

The fall of ISIS and the subsequent loss of its territory in Syria and Iraq by 2019 shifted the focus to the critical issue of foreign fighters. As ISIS territory shrank, countries began to face the urgent task of managing the return of their foreign fighters. France, for instance, began its repatriation programs in 2019, focusing on individuals who had been detained in camps for approximately three years⁵. The central issue now is determining how to deal with those who have joined ISIS and are now seeking to return to their countries of origin, while also alleviating the pressure on groups controlling ISIS camps such as the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Northeast Syria. Since 2011, over 42,000 foreign fighters from more than 120 countries have joined armed groups, with around 5,000 coming from Europe⁶. The importance of effective repatriation and reintegration programs cannot be overstated. However, most states have struggled or been extremely reluctant to find adequate, coherent, and consistent responses⁷. These states are also encountering pressure from international actors. For instance, a global campaign has been launched to free female prisoners held by the SDF⁸. An organisation led by Dutch ISIS women took legal actions against the Dutch state for not repatriating

them⁹. Debates about the fate of foreign fighters returning from Syria to Europe have been ongoing since 2017, becoming more urgent after the collapse of ISIS's territory and the mass surrender of its fighters in early 2019¹⁰. The complexity of the issue is compounded by the diverse experiences of those involved; many were indoctrinated or coerced into joining, raising questions about the adequacy of prison sentences that have been the solution in a number of countries. Furthermore, the wives and widows of ISIS fighters present an even more difficult problem. Their experiences vary greatly, with some having suffered horrific ordeals, being exchanged as sex slaves, or reassigned to new partners after their former spouses were killed¹¹.

Repatriation efforts continue, albeit on a relatively small scale, with the U.S. repatriating 11 citizens, including five children, in May 2024. Blinken also claimed that the U.S. participated in an effort to repatriate "six Canadian citizens, four Dutch citizens, and one Finnish citizen, among them eight children"¹². Similarly, Russia repatriated 32 children including 20 boys and 12 girls from the Sphinx camp¹³. Nevertheless, Middle Eastern countries, with exception of Iraq, are the least able to repatriate their citizens for a number of reasons. Arab countries are in the midst of security concerns having been the birthplace of a number of armed Islamic groups, giving rise to concerns that returning ex-fighters with experience could potentially inspire a new wave of recruitment. For example, during the Syrian civil war, some former al-Qaeda members joined ISIS. Moreover, many countries in the Middle East face serious economic, political, and social challenges exacerbated by foreign intervention and internal turmoil in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In addition, there is a lack of legal frameworks and resources to effectively rehabilitate, prosecute, or deradicalize ex-combatants. Fair trials, managing prison populations, and implementing effective monitoring strategies are major challenges. On the other hand, Iraq has a clear and vested interest in the closure of the camps and the return of its citizens. Iraqi officials see the camps, located on the Iraqi-Syrian border, as a major threat to their security as it is "a hotbed of the militants' radical ideology and a place where thousands of children have been growing up into future militants"¹⁴. Iraq's repatriation program involves taking the detainees to the Jadaa camp near the city of Mosul where they undergo rehabilitation programs with the support of UN agencies. The Iraqi Foreign Ministry spokesman warned other countries that the Al-Hol camp was a 'source of terrorism' and urged them to repatriate their citizens to reduce the risk of a resurgence of ISIS. A different approach has been taken by Tunisia and

Morocco, which have been reluctant to repatriate their citizens, citing destabilization and security concerns. Both have slowly and selectively returned women and children but have been unwilling to return men¹⁵. Overall, the approach has varied across the globe and within regions. Ultimately, however, it appears that the lack of a concerted effort to repatriate and rehabilitate ex-combatants may lead to further complications in the future.

This article aims to examine existing repatriation and reintegration programs and assess their effectiveness. It focuses on scenarios where states decide to actively repatriate or allow the return of their nationals. By analysing these programs, the article aims to contribute to the understanding of reintegration processes and provide insights into best practices for managing the return of foreign fighters. The case studies that will be analysed are the reintegration programmes of France, Denmark, and Kazakhstan, as they differ in terms of their processes, obstacles, and successes. Firstly, the backdrop of the rise and fall of ISIS and its recruitment of foreign fighters will be outlined. Secondly, the legal frameworks framing reintegration and repatriation efforts will be detailed. Next, the French, Danish, and Kazakh cases will be evaluated including their policies and programs. Following this, a comparative analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the three programmes will be undertaken. The learnings from each of these cases will be applied at a global level to elucidate the forewarnings that countries should heed when deciding to leave their people behind. Lastly, a list of recommendations for reintegration programmes will be presented to provide some holistic and practical solutions to the issue. It should be noted that due to lack of public information from governments, the inability of news outlets and NGOs to access the camps in Syria and Iraq, and the biased media coverage, this article is limited in its ability to provide a comprehensive overview.

2. Background

The history of ISIS and its global impact has left a profound mark on international security and humanitarian efforts. Following the US-backed SDF's recapture of ISIS-held territory by March 2019¹⁶, a significant number of foreign fighters were either captured or retreated to northwestern Syria. In the aftermath of Raqqa's liberation in 2017, the SDF established several makeshift prisons and camps, including seven prisons in southern Raqqa holding approximately 10,000 detainees, among

them 2,000 non-Syrians and non-Iraqis¹⁷. Concurrently, women and children associated with ISIS fighters have been held in three camps – Al-Hol, Al-Roj, and Ain Issa – where conditions have deteriorated drastically due to overcrowding. Al-Hol, for example, was originally designed for 10,000 residents, but as of 2019, it housed 73,393 people, mostly women and children, reflecting the immense humanitarian strain¹⁸. 70% of the camp's population was under the age of 18 and 65% were under the age of 12. In 2024, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that “all humanitarian activities have been suspended except for some elements of life-saving activities, including bread distribution, water provision, solid waste management and health services”¹⁹. There is also a severe shortage of fuel for cooking and heating. Currently, the camp population stands at 43,473 people, 61.8% of whom are children and 16% are third country nationals (neither Iraqi nor Syrian). In one of the detention facilities, Sini, the detainees are deprived of their basic needs such as water, food, and medicine, and are routinely subjected to physical abuse, humiliation and brutalization²⁰.

The decision by the Trump administration to withdraw US forces from northeastern Syria in October 2019 prompted significant geopolitical shifts. Kurdish forces, which had been instrumental in managing ISIS detainees and guarding camps, faced pressure from Turkey, which was unwilling to bear the burden of housing ISIS detainees indefinitely²¹. Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu's statement that Turkey was “not a hotel” for ISIS members underscored regional concerns and sparked international debates about the repatriation and legal treatment of detainees. Advocates for managed repatriation argue that returning individuals could mitigate the security risks posed by radicalisation within detention facilities and prevent potential escapees from carrying out future attacks²². This perspective is based on the understanding that leaving detainees in the lawless environment of Syria could foster radicalisation among children and allow ISIS remnants to regroup.

However, these efforts are complicated by historical precedents and contemporary geopolitical realities, that require nuanced approaches to threat assessment and policy formulation. Operational challenges further complicate matters, particularly in conflict zones where coordination with local authorities and reliance on digital evidence for legal proceedings pose significant hurdles²³. The international community is at a critical juncture in defining effective strategies to address the complex humanitarian and security challenges posed by ISIS detainees and their families. This requires cohesive, holistic, and comprehensive policy responses from

concerned states and global organizations alike, balancing security imperatives with humanitarian considerations in dealing with the aftermath of ISIS's territorial defeat. These humanitarian considerations are directly related to the insecurity of the future based on the trauma that prisoners develop due to the widespread brutality, mistreatment and neglect in the camps.

3. Legal Frameworks

Transitioning from the complex humanitarian and security challenges posed by ISIS detainees, the focus now shifts to the international legal obligations and varied national responses regarding the repatriation and prosecution of ISIS fighters and their families. The UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights has underscored in 2023 that countries refusing to repatriate women and children have an absolute obligation under international law to protect the right to life of their nationals²⁴. This obligation is enshrined in Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and General Comment No. 36 of the Human Rights Committee, emphasizing the duty to provide necessary medical care and ensure access to essential medications.

In response to the issue, states have adopted diverse tactics, reflecting their political systems and legal traditions²⁵. These approaches can be grouped into four main categories:

1. Some countries argue that foreign fighters and their families should be prosecuted by local authorities in Syria or Iraq. The United States, for example, supports the idea that its citizens should be prosecuted locally in Iraq and Syria, and has widely advocated for this approach for others to followed.

2. Others seek to prevent the return of foreign fighters by depriving them of their nationality or contesting their citizenship on technical legal grounds. Notably, the United Kingdom has adopted this approach. This tactic has been used in high-profile cases such as that of Shemima Begum, whose British citizenship was revoked to prevent her return on security and legal grounds²⁶. As of 2023, 214 British citizens have been stripped of their citizenship since 2012, with a peak in 2017²⁷.

3. Some states recognize the right of foreign fighters to return, but refrain from actively facilitating repatriation efforts. Belgium, for example, has recognised the right of its citizens to return, but has not actively

participated in or supported their return. The Belgian authorities have adopted a more passive stance, neither completely blocking nor facilitating returns. After public pressure, and given that Belgium had the highest number of European citizens travelling to Syria in 2012, the Belgian government repatriated fighters' children under the age of 12 in 2021²⁸.

4. Alternatively, some countries actively repatriate foreign fighters and subject them to prosecution at home, accompanied by post-return monitoring, rehabilitation, or reintegration measures. Germany has repatriated a number of its citizens from Syria, particularly children and women associated with ISIS fighters. Upon arrival, they were subjected to legal proceedings and offered rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

However, the challenge of assessing crimes committed by foreign fighters and gathering admissible evidence from conflict zones such as Syria and Iraq remains significant²⁹. The conditions of war make it difficult to secure evidence as there is a lack of established judicial mechanisms abroad to support prosecutions. Furthermore, foreign fighters often use aliases online, complicating efforts to link cyber identities to specific individuals. Countries also vary widely in their legislation on foreign fighters, with some lacking specific legislation altogether. Even where legislative frameworks exist, such as in France and Australia, retroactive application to those who left before such laws were enacted poses legal challenges³⁰.

A critical concern is the fate of women and minors who wish to return, particularly those whose initial decision to join ISIS was coerced or influenced by psychological subjugation. Assessing the culpability of these individuals for crimes and balancing punitive measures with recognition of their vulnerabilities poses ethical and legal dilemmas. For instance, some women under ISIS were engaged in combat roles or worked in enforcement roles within the organisation, complicating their legal status and moral responsibility³¹. Children associated with ISIS, often referred to as "cubs of the caliphate", present an even greater challenge. While infants and toddlers are considered innocent under international law, older children may require specialised psychological support to address the indoctrination and trauma of their experiences in ISIS schools and camps³². Given these complexities, calls for a UN special investigation into ISIS crimes and the establishment of a Nuremberg-style international tribunal to prosecute returning foreign fighters, reflect the urgency and scale of the legal and humanitarian issues at stake³³.

4. Case Studies

4.1. France

France's approach to the repatriation and reintegration of individuals associated with ISIS in Syria and Iraq provides a detailed illustration of the complexities involved in managing returnees from conflict zones. This includes an examination of the French legal framework, which allows for the prosecution of returning foreign fighters on charges such as association with terrorist groups³⁴.

The judicial process is often outsourced to Iraqi courts. On repatriation, France has a special procedure for segregating women considered dangerous in separate detention facilities – a departure from standard practice for male detainees³⁵. Women are immediately detained in the facilities of the General Directorate for Internal Security (DGSI), while children are handed over to social welfare services³⁶. This initial separation has been criticised for its emotional impact on children, many of whom are traumatised by being separated from their mothers. France's repatriation efforts were highlighted in October 2022, when 15 women and 40 children were brought back from Syria³⁷ in a major operation. These people had been housed in camps under Kurdish control in north-eastern Syria, after being captured following the fall of ISIS-held territory in 2019. Seven of the repatriated children were identified as orphans or isolated cases, many of whom were born in Syria. Previously, France used to repatriate on a 'case-by-case' basis orphaned children or children whose mothers agreed to waive their parental rights. However, France has faced widespread international and local condemnation from families and international organisations, leading to 'larger scale' repatriations of approximately 15 women and a few dozens of children at a time³⁸. Currently, 160 children and 70 women who are French nationals remain in Syria, underscoring the difficulty of the ongoing efforts for their possible repatriation.

This judicial approach is led by the DGSI, which has a specific antiterrorism branch, in coordination with the *Parquet National Antiterroriste* (PNAT), which represents the government in all public matters before the courts. Since 2015, it has been the 16th chamber of the tribunal, composed of 3 judges, who examine the accusations and can decide on prison sentences of up to 10 years. On arrival, women are subjected to intensive interrogation, often within 24 hours, with a state-appointed lawyer, who is

usually not an expert in the field³⁹, and are immediately brought before a judge. Most are investigated for “association to a terrorist organization” and placed in provisional detention. In a recent operation, 16 women were repatriated, eight with search warrants and eight with arrest warrants. Additionally, a 19-year-old woman, originally brought to Syria as a minor by her parents, is being investigated for her decision to remain there. Meanwhile, the children are being placed under the care of social services, with efforts being made to identify extended family members not associated with ISIS to facilitate family reunification. This process involves a gradual reintegration into society, beginning with correspondence and progressing to supervised meetings over several months⁴⁰. Moreover, France has implemented specific reintegration programs for returning children, including socio-medical follow-up and psychological counselling to address the trauma and indoctrination experienced in conflict zones. This process is overseen by a joint committee of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Education and Youth, and the Ministry of Labour, Health and Solidarity. When the children arrive in France, they undergo a preliminary psycho-medical examination in the plane hangar where they have landed⁴¹. The children are then given two minutes to say goodbye to their mothers who are then handcuffed. The children are then placed in foster homes, usually in the part of France where they have extended family. The judge then has 15 days to decide whether the child can be reunited with his or her mother or extended family, or must remain in the hands of the social services. There is a 6-month investigation into the extended family to see if they can take the child, and if they are, a social worker follows the family for up to two years. At the same time, the child undergoes a series of psycho-medical assessments over a period of three to six months and is followed up by a psychiatrist. Their report determines what further services the child needs. Finally, an academic liaison is responsible for enrolling the child in a school whose name and teacher the parents are not allowed to know. Schooling takes place as normal, with special accommodations, and the teaching staff are not aware of the child’s journey, only that he or she has had a pause or break in schooling⁴². In practice, however, this support is not systematic enough and does not reach all those who need it due to a lack of resources and staff. The French Prime Minister's instructions stress the right of children to education and the need for specialized support to facilitate their reintegration into society⁴³.

Furthermore, in response to the complex challenges posed by returning fighters, France has established specialized units within its prison system,

such as the *Unité de Coordination de la Lutte Antiterroriste* (UCLAT), which coordinates the efforts of police, prison, probation, and prosecution services⁴⁴. These units operate in medium to high security facilities and conduct regular risk assessments to manage the threat posed by returnees⁴⁵. Despite ongoing efforts, France's approach has faced legal challenges and criticism. In September 2022, the European Court of Human Rights condemned France for its inadequate response to repatriation requests and highlighted delays in processing cases⁴⁶.

France's experience provides valuable insights into the complexities of repatriating and reintegrating individuals associated with ISIS, and highlights the delicate balance between security imperatives and human rights considerations in managing the aftermath of ISIS's territorial defeat.

4.2. Denmark

Denmark's approach to the repatriation and reintegration of individuals associated with ISIS involves a structured process aimed at both prevention and reintegration. Aarhus in particular has been a focal point, with the city's police and municipal council working closely with national and local NGOs and Muslim communities. This cooperation includes proactive measures such as an “early prevention program” to discourage individuals from travelling to war zones, and an “exit program” to facilitate the return of those already abroad⁴⁷.

The Aarhus model, based on Preben Bertelsen's research on “life psychology”, emphasises the possibility of de-radicalisation by addressing fundamental issues related to social inclusion and meaningful life experiences⁴⁸. This approach aims to equip individuals with essential life skills and promote their reintegration into society with the support of local people. Denmark enforces strict measures regarding the return of foreign fighters, prosecuting those with proven involvement in terrorism, while providing support to others, including employment, housing, education, and psychological counselling⁴⁹. The Danish Dignity Institute plays a crucial role in these efforts, focusing on early intervention and comprehensive treatment, particularly for individuals from families affected by trauma⁵⁰. Mentoring programs are an integral part of Denmark's reintegration strategy, where each participant is paired with a mentor for regular meetings and activities aimed at promoting positive personal development and social integration.

The success of the Danish approach is illustrated by the results of the Aarhus model. Initially implemented in 2013, the model significantly reduced the number of individuals from Aarhus who joined conflicts abroad. For instance, after engaging with the leadership of the Grimhojvej Mosque, where 22 followers had initially left for Syria, the following years saw a dramatic decrease, with only one member travelling in 2014⁵¹. Of the 33 people from Aarhus who have left since 2011, 16 have returned, with the support of the authorities and counsellors, and none have been involved in serious crime, with many successfully employed or back in education. Some children have also returned, but their mothers were left behind⁵². This has come with a shift to the right in the Danish government, which has led to a change in this process. Central to the success of the Aarhus model is its community-based approach, which emphasises personal relationships, educational opportunities, and employment prospects. The model engages different stakeholders – parents, community leaders, faith leaders, and law enforcement – at different stages, and ensures clarity about their roles and responsibilities to avoid duplication of effort and increase community engagement⁵³. This inclusive approach aims not only to reintegrate returnees effectively, but also to prevent future radicalisation by fostering a cohesive and supportive community environment. Although Aarhus has had great success despite having the largest number of fighters leaving, the Danish government has taken steps to revoke the citizenship of dual nationals who have gone to fight for ISIS⁵⁴.

4.3. Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has actively undertaken repatriation efforts involving numerous foreign fighters, initially prompted by the dissemination of a compelling ISIS video showing 150 Kazakh family members in Syria, which catalysed preventive measures to curb further emigration to conflict zones⁵⁵. Humanitarian operation Zhusan was launched after ISIS's last stand in Baghuz, Syria, and repatriation operations began a few months later. In the period from 2016 to 2018, Kazakhstan facilitated the return of 27 families⁵⁶. Operation Zhusan, named after the bitter wormwood plant, that symbolises grief and nostalgia for the homeland in Kazakh folklore, saw a number of successes in repatriation as opposed to reintegration. The operation unfolded in three distinct phases:

1. The initial phase (Zhusan-1), carried out on 5-6 January 2019, after five months of preparation, resulted in the repatriation of 47 citizens,

including 30 children, 6 women, and 11 men. This operation involved coordination with the Syrian authorities under a short safe zone agreement, facilitated by the Kazakh military and special forces, which ensured a successful evacuation operation.

2. Zhusan-2, characterized by heightened risk management measures, was implemented on 10 May 2019. President Tokayev issued a directive for the evacuation of 231 Kazakh nationals from Syria, including 156 children, 59 women, and 16 men, 107 of whom were under the age of 7. 18 children were classified as orphans of unknown parentage, and some returnees had suffered serious injuries. Upon their return, 16 men and 4 women were immediately detained on suspicion of involvement in terrorist activities while with ISIS. The remaining 55 women and children were quarantined in a specialised adaptation centre near Aktau before being reintegrated into society. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the logistical support of the US and the SDF.

3. Zhusan-3, conducted on 28-31 May 2019, facilitated the evacuation of 171 children and 67 women, marking the culmination of Kazakhstan's concerted repatriation efforts.

Initially shrouded in secrecy, Kazakhstan's repatriation initiatives were made public through a statement issued by the SDF⁵⁷. Public announcements focused primarily on the repatriation of women and children, strategically aimed at maintaining positive public sentiment. Geographically isolated, Kazakhstan benefits from robust border surveillance and security measures inherited from the Soviet era, which effectively prevent clandestine travel and limit exposure to extremist networks and propaganda post-reintegration⁵⁸. Furthermore, Kazakhstan maintains strict control over religious institutions and internet access to limit access to jihadist ideologies, thereby reducing the risk of re-radicalisation among returnees. The absence of significant pre-existing ISIS networks within Kazakhstan reduces the risk of returnees continuing militant activities upon their return. Kazakh society generally views individuals returning from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq as compatriots, fostering a compassionate societal response and a collective imperative to assist in their reintegration⁵⁹.

4.4. Comparative Analysis

<i>Aspects and Practices</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Kazakhstan</i>
Legal and Policy Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prosecution under terrorism laws ▪ Immediate judicial action on return 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Aarhus model integrates community engagement and mentoring ▪ Focus on prevention and rehabilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Operation Zhusan: security-focused ▪ Strict border controls and surveillance
Reintegration Programs and Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emphasis on security and legal procedures ▪ Limited rehabilitation programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comprehensive programs: mentoring, education, employment ▪ Social inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quarantine and adaptation centres ▪ Focus on security and social adaptation
Successes and Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rapid legal accountability ▪ Potential limitations to long-term rehabilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reducing radicalization ▪ Community engagement ▪ Sustainability of programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Effective security measures ▪ Secrecy challenges transparency and public trust
Comparative Insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Legal-centric approach that prioritises national security ▪ Potential impact on rehabilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Community focus ▪ Success in social integration ▪ Challenges of funding and sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Security driven ▪ Effective in minimising the risk of re-radicalisation ▪ Transparency issues

Overall, each approach also has its own weaknesses. France's limited rehabilitation programs and overreliance on the legal system and immediate judicial action may overshadow any long-term rehabilitation efforts, potentially hindering the necessary psycho-social support that individuals need to successfully reintegrate into society. Similarly, while legal accountability has had its successes and ensured swift justice, it is almost impossible to gather hard evidence from Syria and Iraq and make a fair judgement. Moreover, this form of justice does not address the

underlying factors that have led individuals to join extremist groups in the first place, such as socio-economic marginalisation, social isolation, and psychological trauma. In France, as in many countries, public perception is crucial. Stigmatisation of returnees can easily affect their reintegration prospects, and rejection by the community can encourage re-radicalisation. Furthermore, a process based solely on the criminal prosecution may not ensure swift justice due to the complexity of the situation, from recruitment, to acts committed abroad to arrival in the camps. This is an additional factor that can encourage re-radicalisation.

Although Denmark has one of the most successful reintegration programs, it also has its own potential weaknesses. The Aarhus model relies heavily on community engagement, social inclusion, and mentoring, which are resource-intensive activities that require sustained funding and commitment from both civil society and the government. The current shift to the populist right in politics may mean that government support is lost, thereby creating challenges for the future in sustaining these programs in the long term. Secondly, as community engagement is the key to the success of these projects, if these networks become strained or weakened, the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts could falter. Finally, multi-stakeholders coordination is complex to maintain effective communication between law enforcement, community leaders, and local NGOs. This may mean that the project has been successful because of the small and rural nature of the area to which returnees have returned. Ultimately, megacities of over 10 million people may not be able to adapt similar models of reintegration at such large levels of coordination and in places where public opinion is highly diverse.

Kazakhstan's reintegration program also has its weaknesses. Firstly, there are obvious problems of secrecy and transparency regarding research. The Kazakh government has created a strong external image for its reintegration programs, but journalists are not allowed access to the 'reintegration' schools that women are required to attend. Furthermore, its emphasis on strict surveillance and security to keep potential foreign fighters in the country has been criticised for its lack of transparency. Keeping repatriation operations secretive can lead to public mistrust and challenges to accountability. Secondly, despite Kazakhstan's focus on security and initial quarantine measures, there are concerns about the adequacy of rehabilitation infrastructure and long-term support systems for returnees, such as socio-economic reintegration and psychological counselling. Finally, Kazakhstan's geographical isolation and historical

Soviet-era security measures present challenges in balancing security concerns with effective rehabilitation and society reintegration strategies.

These strengths and weaknesses highlight the complex nature of repatriation and reintegration efforts, thereby underscoring the need for a balanced approach that addresses both the security imperatives and the multifaceted rehabilitation needs of individuals returning from war zones. However, we can learn from the different approaches of the three countries to formulate certain recommendations and forewarnings for countries that are not ready to reintegrate foreign fighters.

5. Forewarnings

If foreign fighters and their families are not effectively reintegrated into society, there are significant risks for both the ex-fighters and the local and global community across humanitarian, security, and human rights dimensions. The first risk is radicalisation and the spread of terrorism. Leaving individuals in extremely insecure and unsanitary conditions, such as in the Al-Hol and al-Roj camps risks exacerbating radicalisation. The UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights highlighted the lack of transparency and ambiguity regarding the record-keeping and safety of the camp population. She found that they failed to uphold human rights standards and exacerbated the vulnerability of detainees⁶⁰. Without a structured deradicalisation program, there is an increased risk that these camps will become breeding grounds for a new wave of jihadists, perpetuating instability and posing a long-term security threat to the region and beyond. An article in 2024 reported that ISIS mobilisation and practices continue to occur in the Al-Hol camp. For instance, an area known as the 'Annex', which houses more than 6500 people, has become inaccessible to NGO staff to provide aid due to violence and backlash from the new 'ISIS cell'. At the same time, women's brigades, made up of former members of ISIS, patrol areas of the camp, checking in tents that individuals are abiding by ISIS' versions of Islamic law and collecting taxes in the name of *zakat*⁶¹. This illustrates the threat of keeping people in inhumane conditions, without education, and access to support. In times of desperation, re-radicalisation has been seen time and time again. The second risk is highlighted in the report of the OHCHR technical visit. Severe humanitarian crises, daily insecurity, violence including murder, sexual assault, rape, and coercive control among detainees were reported⁶². The lack of adequate investigations or preventive measures has exacerbated fear and anxiety, thereby affecting

women and children, who are disproportionately vulnerable. Attempts by detainees to escape have often resulted in prolonged and inhumane detention in prisons, thereby highlighting the systemic human rights violations and disregarding legal protections against arbitrary detention and family unity. Finally, states and all people have a legal and ethical responsibility towards the ex-fighters. Inadequate international cooperation and support, lack of ethical responsibility on the part of the states involved, and inadequate compliance with legal norms all risk future radicalisation. The mass separation of children from their families, justified by their association with ISIS, is contrary to fundamental human rights principles and international legal standards, especially considering that the children were born into this situation without a choice⁶³. The authorisation or cooperation of third states in such practices implicates them in potential systematic human rights abuses, thereby violating norms and principles. Failure to effectively reintegrate foreign fighters and their families not only perpetuates humanitarian crises and systemic human rights abuses in detention camps but also increases the risk of perpetuating extreme violence worldwide. To address these challenges, states need a comprehensive plan for international cooperation, basic compliance with legal standards, and prioritisation of humanitarian concerns in order to mitigate long-term security risks and uphold fundamental human rights. Furthermore, if states are concerned about their national security, they should address the return of foreign fighters rather than leaving them to fester in inhumane situations.

6. Recommendations

Based on the above comparative analyses and forewarnings, certain recommendations can be made⁶⁴. Effective reintegration strategies should therefore include:

1. Using positive religious support services to enable returnees to live religiously if they so choose. Providing services to construct alternative narratives to violent extremist narratives, while enabling people to live freely and religiously, while being informed to reduce vulnerability to false narratives. This recommendation also helps to reduce stigmatisation, for the wider society to better understand the phenomenon of violent extremism, and to avoid attempts to create false equivalences between Islam, Muslim communities, and violent extremism, which are currently on the rise in Denmark and France.

2. A tailored and inclusive approach for each returnee: Implementing individualised plans that consider specific circumstances and individual needs can enable proper reintegration. Involving and encouraging the local community to play a crucial role of support and to also provide an early warning mechanism. Mentoring programmes in Denmark, for example, illustrate the success of these efforts.

3. Establishing effective and robust interagency coordination mechanisms will ensure a seamless and comprehensive process for returnees. Coordinating the efforts of multiple agencies to address the social, legal, and psychological aspects of reintegration.

4. Thorough risk assessments on return and follow-up with psychosocial support can identify risks and enable appropriate management strategies to be developed.

5. Developing effective communication strategies at the local level can foster community understanding and support.

6. Formulating structured intervention plans will allow for an outline of the rehabilitation, support, and monitoring of returnees.

7. Prioritising resocialisation and reintegration efforts over imprisonment or probation allows people to be more integrated in society. Furthermore, if returnees are incarcerated, specialised training for staff should be provided, and tailor-made prison placements and transfer options should be facilitated.

8. Building supportive relationships and providing comprehensive support to returnee families. This may include training and equipping all those in contact with returnees, with a focus on mental health support and practical assistance.

9. Emphasizing normalisation and resocialisation for child returnees at the earliest opportunity. Developing expertise in dealing with child trauma and indoctrination, and training frontline workers to provide the necessary support. Ensuring that there is a local team of multi-disciplinary and culturally sensitive experts who can be involved in this process and who are properly trained.

10. Engaging in consistent and open dialogue, recognising that returnees may still strongly support other ideologies and reject other religions, in order to enable social cohesion.

These recommendations and measures are critical to upholding legal standards and human rights principles but also to mitigating security risks

and ensuring the effective reintegration of returnees into society. They reflect a holistic approach aimed at addressing the complex needs of ex-fighters affected by war and extremist ideologies, thereby promoting long-term stability and resilience in affected communities.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the complex and multifaceted issue of repatriating and reintegrating foreign fighters and their families from conflict zones, particularly from ISIS-controlled territory, presents significant challenges and requires nuanced approaches from the international community. Throughout this academic exploration, we have examined different national strategies – from France's legal-centric approach to Denmark's community-driven model and Kazakhstan's security-focused measures – each of which offers unique insights into the complexities and dilemmas involved.

Key lessons emerge from these case studies. France's strict legal framework underscores the importance of swift accountability but raises concerns about long-term rehabilitation and social integration. In contrast, Denmark's Aarhus model highlights the effectiveness of community engagement and comprehensive support systems in promoting reintegration and preventing radicalisation. Kazakhstan's approach, characterised by security measures and geopolitical considerations, emphasises the need to balance security imperatives with humanitarian obligations. Despite these different approaches, common challenges remain. Collecting of admissible evidence, establishing legal jurisdiction, and ensuring human rights in conflict zones and in the reintegration process remain formidable obstacles. Moreover, the social stigma and political challenges associated with reintegrating individuals associated with "terrorist" organisations require careful navigation.

Moving forward, effective reintegration strategies must prioritise individualised approaches tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of returnees. This includes robust risk assessments, the need for services that construct alternative narratives to violent extremist religious ideologies, comprehensive support mechanisms that include legal, psychological, and social dimensions, and the promotion of community understanding and acceptance. International cooperation and adherence to legal standards are essential to ensure accountability, protect human rights, and mitigate security risks worldwide. Ultimately, addressing the reintegration of foreign fighters requires a balanced and holistic approach

that not only safeguards national security but also upholds humanitarian principles. By learning from past experiences and leveraging best practices, the international community can pave the way for sustainable peace, resilience, and social cohesion in post-conflict societies. Most importantly, countries should remain responsible for their own populations, allowing them to return and engaging them on the basis of these best practices to enable their reintegration into society.

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