

Press Release

Central Asian Experience with Individuals Returned from Syria and Iraq: Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

New York, 25 September 2020 – Thousands of individuals are still stranded in camps in north-eastern Syria and Iraq in dire conditions, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and are awaiting repatriation. Most of them are women and children and some of them may have links to United Nations-listed terrorist groups. Some of the adults are victims and some are perpetrators. Some who may have committed crimes may have done so under duress or after being trafficked, coerced or while they were children.

Accordingly, all those to be repatriated must be assessed individually. The United Nations calls for the assessment, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters and their family members, in accordance with international human rights law, international refugee law, and international humanitarian law. All children should first and foremost be considered victims.

Repatriation is only one step in a larger process. Several Central Asian States including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were among the first countries to repatriate their nationals fulfilling their international obligations. Their experiences have generated valuable lessons, which may be useful to other Member States that have already repatriated, or are committed to repatriating, their nationals, or to address the situation of individuals who have returned on their own.

Against this backdrop, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) within the United Nations Office for Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) organized an online event entitled “*Central Asian experience with Individuals returned from Syria and Iraq: successes, challenges, and lessons learned*,” on the margins of the high-level segment of the 75th United Nations General Assembly.

The side event aimed to highlight the Central Asian experience and the United Nations support available to Member States that have repatriated or are committed to repatriating their nationals from camps in northeastern Syria and Iraq. An animated video “*Returning home, rebuilding lives*”, based on real stories from Central Asia, was presented at the event. Following the screening of the video, a panel discussed successes, challenges, and lessons learned during repatriation of Central Asian nationals.

Representatives of civil society and of United Nations entities that have worked to support Member States on returnees, such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), also shared their views on successes, challenges and lessons learned. The Global Framework on United Nations Support to Member States on Individuals Returned from Syria and Iraq was presented as a way forward that responds to both the humanitarian and protection needs of children and adults and promotes security and accountability.

UNOCT/UNCCT and UNICEF coordinated an effort of more than 15 United Nations entities to develop a Global Framework designed to address the urgent needs of Member States to ensure human rights-based age and gender responsive protection, repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of their nationals both returned from, and remaining in, camps in northeastern Syria and Iraq, who may have alleged or actual links or family ties to designated terrorist groups. The Framework is based on the United Nations [Key Principles](#) for the Protection, Repatriation, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children with links to United Nations-listed terrorist groups, in accordance with relevant Security Council resolutions and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Foreign Terrorist Fighters.

QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism

"The dire humanitarian situation and significant protection needs of women and children with alleged links to terrorist groups stranded in camps in north-eastern Syria and Iraq are of utmost concern. Secretary-General Guterres has underscored the urgency of an adequate international response".

Ms. Natalia Gherman, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Central Asia and Head of the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia

"I want to underline that the Central Asian states have significantly progressed in addressing repatriation issues of their citizens being stranded in Syria and Iraq, in particular women and children. The states in the region are moving towards a comprehensive approach regarding the repatriation and reintegration, with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan leading the way".

Mr. Raffi Gregorian, Director and Deputy to the Under-Secretary-General of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism

"The work done in Central Asia shows what is possible with a strong sense of duty and a firm commitment to meet international obligations. UNOCT and its United Nations partners stand ready to assist Member States that have repatriated or are interested in repatriating their citizens, addressing security concerns and upholding human rights."

Ms. Cholpon Orozobekova, Co-Founder and Director of the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations

"There are many good practices to learn from Central Asian experiences. For example, many civil society organizations in Kazakhstan were widely integrated into development, design, and implementation of reintegration, rehabilitation and resocialization processes. I would like to highlight the crucial role of the women-led organizations in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. [...] The women-led organizations have been playing a crucial role to integrate women and facilitate community acceptance of female returnees."

Dr. Sanat Kushkumbayev, Deputy Director of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan

"There is a reason why this topic has become so acute in many countries. [...] Today's discussion will widen knowledge of this problem and this opportunity to share practice will help in further working with returnees."

Mr. Sherzod Asadov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan

"Ignorance and intolerance along with other factors are at the core of international terrorism and extremism. In this regard the most important task is struggling for the minds of people, especially youth. Our key task is to provide conditions for self-realization of young people to create a barrier against the spread of the virus of violent ideology."

Mohammed Hussein Bahr Aluloom, Permanent Representative of Iraq to the United Nations in New York

“Iraq commends the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism and the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre for the work that has been done, especially during the difficult time of the pandemic. One of its valuable results is the Global Framework on United Nations Support to Member States on Individuals Returned from Syria and Iraq, which responds to both the humanitarian and protection needs of children and adults and promotes security and accountability. Accordingly, Iraq is looking forward to continue in cooperation to address the challenges related to terrorism and mitigate the scourge of terrorism.”

Ms. Sonia Khush, Syria Director, Save the Children

“It is great to see this many people coming together to learn from the vital experiences of Central Asian countries. I hope that spaces like this continue to be created so we can learn from one another. This will inform what practitioners on the ground in Iraq and Syria can do to make reintegrations around the world more effective.”

Ms. Ashita Mittal, Regional Representative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime for Central Asia

“Recent developments in the recruitment, return and cross-border movement of foreign terrorist fighters presents numerous pressing challenges for criminal justice systems in Central Asia and beyond. Addressing this threat is much more difficult given the conflicts and constantly evolving nature of the terrorist activities. This merits a “whole-of-society” approach and “whole-of-UN” support as the United Nations is a reliable partner to governments [...].”

Mr. Aaron Greenberg, UNICEF Regional Advisor Child Protection, Europe and Central Asia

“Children are resilient and can overcome enormous obstacles if we give them the support and care they need: repatriation, family-based care, and individualized recovery”.

Mr. Munir Mammadzade, Representative of UNICEF Uzbekistan

“Children returning from armed conflict zones have been exposed to horrific scenes and even have been forced to commit violent acts. Many children require specialised psychosocial counselling. UNICEF, therefore, reiterates its offer of assistance to the Government of Uzbekistan to continue addressing the plight of children previously associated with, or under the control of, armed groups – including children of foreign fighters. We are also ready to cooperate with the Government of Uzbekistan on the situation of the remaining Uzbek children that UNICEF has identified in Syria and who are languishing in appalling conditions.”

Mr. Ryszard Komenda, United Nations Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights Regional Representative for Regional Office in Central Asia

“The High Commissioner for Human Rights and our office have repeatedly called on Member States to assume their responsibilities of their nationals stranded in Iraq and Syria. It is critical for Member States to repatriate their nationals both because of the dire human rights and humanitarian situation in the camps but also because it is wrong to leave countries and communities in the conflict battered regions to bear such burden [...].”

For more information, visit bit.ly/CentralAsia25-9-20 or contact: Laurence Gerard, Information Officer, United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), Laurence.Gerard@un.org

