

**Aleksandar Nacev**

European University Skopje

ORCID: 0000-0001-6895-6912

**Dragana Kostevska**

ORCID: 0000-0002-0345-9824

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## **Repatriation of Terrorist Fighters – the Macedonian Experience**

### **Abstract:**

Within the framework of the paper “Repatriation of Terrorist Fighters – the Macedonian Experience”, the authors analyze the beginnings of 2012, when for the first time our country officially faced foreign terrorist fighters, as well as their repatriation. It was only after six years that the two Strategies for the fight against violent extremism and the fight against terrorism were adopted, i.e. in 2018. Namely, a brief review of the incrimination of these criminal acts is carried out, and we focus primarily on the part that follows the process of the return of foreign terrorist fighters and their families to their home country. Here, drawing of conclusions regarding the necessary segments and significant links in the system for an appropriate approach and completeness to deal with this issue is not lagging behind.

**Keywords:** foreign terrorist fighters, returnees, incrimination, repatriation, resocialization, reintegration, and rehabilitation of returnees and their families

**Słowa kluczowe:** zagraniczni bojownicy terrorystyczni, powracający, oskarżenie, repatriacja, resocjalizacja, rehabilitacja powracających i ich rodzin

### **Introduction**

The term *foreign terrorist fighter* represents a combination of direct participation in nearly 100 civil wars by individuals over the past 250 years (Mallet, 2015). Just to illustrate, in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), 50,000 volunteers from over 50 countries actively joined on both sides of the conflict (Faber, 2016).



Namely, the official use of the term ‘foreign fighter’ itself referred to fighters coming from outside the conflict zone to fight for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Later, the term ‘foreign fighter’ was used in the context of the terrorist-led insurgency that began in Iraq in 2003 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019, p. 8). The seriousness and complexity of the phenomenon itself, first of all, refer to the definition of the term itself. Hence, the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights points to the provision that “A foreign fighter is a person who leaves his country of origin or permanent residence to join non-state armed groups in an armed conflict abroad, and is primarily motivated by ideology, religion and/or kinship” (Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 2014).

In the RN Macedonia, official data indicate the fact that since 2012, 143 citizens left for the conflict zones: of them, 69 returned and 38 were killed. There are still five active fighters in the conflict zones, and four are in prison in Syria. None returned in 2020 and 2021. In July 2021, 23 people (four men, five women, and 14 children) were returned from Syria and Iraq (North Macedonia Report, 2021).

## **A brief international overview**

When it comes to the term ‘foreign terrorist fighters’, we note that in 2014, the United Nations Security Council took a serious step forward, specifically in Resolution 2170. Its adoption was a result of the then-escalating crisis situation in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. Condemning acts of terrorism undertaken in these territories that have led to civilian deaths, the Security Council called on member states to “suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters” to violent extremist groups in relation to both countries (United Nations, 2014).

The next step by the United Nations Security Council to specifically address the “acute and growing threat of foreign terrorist fighters” came a month later, on September 24, 2014, with the adoption of resolution 2178. The resolution underscores the urgency of addressing the problem of foreign terrorist fighters. Terrorist fighters, especially those who have been recruited and joined ISIL (Daesh), Al Nusra Front, an Al Qaeda “derivatives” (United Nations Security Council Resolution, 2014). Among other things, Resolution 2178 of 2014 makes a specific note regarding the definition of the term itself in which: Foreign terrorist fighters are “persons who travel to a country other than their country of residence or citizenship for the purpose of committing, planning, or preparing to, or participating in, terrorist acts or for the purpose of providing or receiving terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict” (United Nations Security Council Resolution, 2014).



Three years later, specifically in 2017, Resolution 2396 practically repeated the call from Resolution 2014, regarding cooperation and support of foreign efforts in dealing with the threat of foreign terrorist fighters returning or relocating from conflict zones.

In this regard, it is particularly significant to point out that the definition adopted by the United Nations Security Council contains several elements that should be emphasized. First, the definition only applies to foreign fighters traveling for “terrorist” activities. However, not all foreign fighters travel specifically for terrorist purposes. Although these combatants may be guilty of a crime in their own country based on their private involvement in an armed conflict in another country, this does not necessarily mean that they are “terrorists” and thus cannot be treated as such (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019, p. 9). On the other hand, the International Committee of the Red Cross very legitimately warns of “potential side effects” of mixing armed conflict with terrorism, as well as of mislabeling all non-state armed groups as terrorists (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2015).

Last but not least, in terms of its significance for defining the term ‘foreign terrorist fighters’ is the fact that they differ from mercenaries, who “fight abroad on behalf of governments or privately funded entities” (Lister, 2015) and are “motivated to participate in hostilities mostly due to a desire for private gain” (Protocol to supplement the Geneva Conventions, 1977). Among other things, the moment of overlap of financial, political, and ideological interests is of inestimable importance, in which case these persons completely fall under the definition of foreign terrorist fighters.

### **Macedonian context regarding incrimination of the term and official active cases**

The data listed below in the text, which are of indisputable importance for the purposes of this paper, can be found on the official website of the Public Prosecutor’s Office of the RN Macedonia. The attached analysis is particularly significant, as it provides a brief overview and transition to the adoption of the National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Dealing with Violent Extremism and Strategy for Combating Terrorism 2018–2022.

In the period of 2014, within the framework of the investigative procedure in relation to the case where seven people were suspected of having actively participated as foreign terrorist fighters in the wars in Syria and Iraq, the competent public prosecutor from the Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office for the prosecution of organized crime and corruption for one of the persons expanded the investigation. In the past period, the competent prosecutor interrogated the suspects and assessed that there is a well-founded suspicion that the suspect committed a crime – participation in



foreign military, paramilitary, or parapolice formations, provided for and punishable under Article 322a paragraph 3 of the Criminal Code, which is why he expanded the investigation and issued an Order for the implementation of an investigative procedure for this crime as well. In order to become a participant in the paramilitary formations of ISIS, the suspect, in an unspecified period from 2014 to 2016, left the territory of the Republic of Macedonia and went to Syria. There, the suspect trained and participated in the paramilitary formations of ISIS, whereas a fighter was captured by the Syrian Democratic Forces and imprisoned in Direk military prison in Al-Malikiyah, in Al-Hasaka province in Syria (Public Prosecutor of the RN Macedonia, 2018).

Five people out of the seven were in custody, who, in cooperation with the partners from the Global Coalition to Fight Terrorism and the Syrian Democratic Forces, were deprived of their freedom, investigative procedures are being conducted within the framework of the previous actions known to the public as “Cell 1” (August 2015) and “Cell 2” (July 2016). Four of the detainees are part of the investigative procedure in the “Cell 1” case, and the suspect for whom the investigation is expanding is from the “Cell 2” case. During the implementation of the actions at that time, these persons were unavailable to the law enforcement authorities, and national and international warrants were active for them (Public Prosecutor of the RN Macedonia, 2018).

In September 2014, after the Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code was adopted and legal conditions were created, the case is known to the public as “Cell 1” is the first case brought in the RN Macedonia against persons who go to foreign armies and fight in the military hotspots in the Middle East. In this case, the prosecutor’s office for the first time prosecuted 36 people for the crime of participation in foreign military, paramilitary, or parapolice formations, from Article 322a of the Criminal Code. In the action carried out, 11 people were deprived of their liberty and detained, and the remaining 25 were unavailable to the law enforcement authorities (Public Prosecutor of the RN Macedonia, 2018).

Already two years later, i.e. in 2016, an indictment was filed against 11 persons, after which, at the Public Session for evaluation of the indictment, six defendants expressed their willingness to plead guilty and requested an agreement with the prosecution. The basic court Skopje 1 – Skopje accepted the agreements with the prosecution and declared the six suspects guilty, imposing prison sentences determined in the agreements reaching a duration of 5 years to 5 years and 6 months. The other five who did not plead guilty at the main hearing before the court emphasized that they felt guilty and admitted the crimes they were charged with. On May 18, 2016, the defendants were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 2 years to 4 years and 6 months. Dissatisfied with the sentences, the prosecution appealed to the Court of Appeal – Skopje, which was upheld on February 6, 2017, and the defendants were sentenced to prison terms



ranging from 3 years to 6 years and 6 months. In the meantime, based on the issued national and international warrants, two suspects were extradited from Kosovo, one from the Republic of Albania, and one suspect was deprived of liberty in the RN Macedonia. With these persons, the prosecution entered into agreements, and the persons were sentenced to prison terms of 1 to 3 years (Public Prosecutor of the RN Macedonia, 2018).

The seven included in the “Cell 2” operation, including the suspect for whom the investigation is expanding, are charged with a committed crime – terrorist organization under Article 394-a paragraph 2 of the Criminal Code. In an operation carried out in seven locations in Skopje and Tetovo, on July 9, 2016, in the early hours of the morning, four people were arrested – former members of ISIS, and later one more person was deprived of freedom. National and international warrants were issued for the remaining three persons. The defendants, in this case, are members of the terrorist organization “Islamic State”. Three of them, on several occasions, participated in the terrorist attacks in the vicinity of Damascus, as well as on the military base near Aleppo, while the rest were part of the terrorist attacks on the city of Derizor, the Raqqa military base, the official border crossing between Syria and Iraq, and the attack on the air base in Iraq; they also released footage of the execution of about 50 prisoners. In October 2016, the five defendants admitted their guilt and entered into agreements with the prosecutor’s office in which they were sentenced to prison terms from 2 years and 4 months to 2 years and 8 months (Public Prosecutor of the RN Macedonia, 2018).

Other sources provide the data that in August 2018, the Government successfully took over seven citizens of North Macedonia who were detained by the Syrian Democratic Forces. All of them were charged according to the Criminal Code of North Macedonia, which criminalizes membership and participation in a terrorist organization. In February 2020, a foreign terrorist fighter was deported from Turkey, and a complaint was filed against him for participating in a foreign military, police, and/or paramilitary formation. In March 2020, a woman and her two children were returned from a refugee camp in Turkey. From September to December 2020, with two joint actions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) of North Macedonia and the National Security Agency (NSA), two terrorist groups were stopped and detained. During the first action in September 2020, a three-member terrorist group operating on the territory of North Macedonia was neutralized; and during the second action in December 2020, eight people were detained on suspicion of having committed the crime of “terrorist organization” and of planning terrorist attacks on the vital infrastructure of the state. In both cases, the detained perpetrators were returning foreign terrorist fighters who had finished serving their prison sentences approximately one year before these incidents (Shikova, Musliu, 2022, p. 8).



The Department for Suppression of Organized and Serious Crime – Department for Combating Terrorism, Violent Extremism and Radicalism at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, submitted criminal charges against these two groups to the Public Prosecutor's Office for crimes committed under Art. 394-a, paragraph 1 and Art. 394-b of the Criminal Code of North Macedonia – for crimes of terrorist organization and terrorism. Recently, the Government completed the procedure for the return of Macedonian citizens from Syria and Iraq, namely 4 men – foreign terrorist fighters, 5 women, and 14 children. All measures and activities undertaken by the institutions are based on the obligations arising from the National Plan and procedures for reintegration, resocialization, and rehabilitation of returnees from foreign armies and their family members (Shikova, Musliu 2022, p. 8).

According to the latest EU progress report on North Macedonia, currently, 11 foreign terrorist fighters are in prison and 6 have been released from prison in 2020 (in 2021, none have been released). This is in accordance with Macedonia's obligations arising from international law, international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and the standards and resolutions of the UN Security Council (Shikova, Musliu 2022, p. 8).

To summarize, the official data indicate the fact that since 2012, 143 citizens left for the conflict zones: of them, 69 returned, and 38 were killed. There are still five active fighters in the conflict zones, and four are in prison in Syria. None returned in 2020 and 2021. In July 2021, 23 people (four men, five women, and 14 children) were returned from Syria and Iraq (North Macedonia Report, 2021).

## **What after repatriation to Macedonia?**

After the process of repatriation, i.e. the return to the home country of returnees from foreign armies and their family members, the domain of legal matters is entered, i.e. the processing of previously provided evidence by the Ministry of Internal Affairs – Public Security Bureau begins and in coordination with the National Security Agency, appropriate criminal charges are filed in accordance with national legislation. Due to the eventual unavailability of the law enforcement authorities of the combatants on foreign battlefields, international warrants are issued for them, and in their absence, a measure of detention is determined, with the decision of a competent court. This is in the section of persons who are charged with committing a certain incriminated offense according to the Criminal Code of Macedonia.

As for the families of the returnees, especially in the period from 2020, they will not go to detention but to quarantine due to the risk of the coronavirus, and during that period the institution of the presumption of innocence will be respected as one of



the legal foundations against which every suspect or accused of a crime is considered innocent until proven guilty by a final court decision. In this quantum of time, it will be examined whether there is evidence for criminal prosecution of these persons.

In the spirit of the previously stated claims and views, we believe that the number of foreign terrorist fighters is far greater than the official ones, while the real problems arise after these people return from certain battlefields. This is where the alarm for selecting an appropriate approach regarding re-integration, resocialization, as well as appropriate rehabilitation of these persons is already being triggered. Regardless of whether we are talking about the return of individuals or, on the other hand, entire families in which only the man, for example, is the perpetrator, and the family only follows his directions, in that case, we are facing a drastically increased problem. The components of the previously mentioned phenomena in terms of reintegration, resocialization, and rehabilitation represent a problem for society as a whole.

The European Commission's Radicalization Awareness Network, in a 2013 Declaration, indicated good practices for dealing with foreign fighters on Prevention, Acceptance, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (RAN). In this direction, it is significant to highlight the Maltese principles for the reintegration of returning foreign terrorist fighters, especially in the part where they provide guidelines for the development of solutions and development of reintegration programs, referring to the problems of radicalization in the community. Namely, the approach of the whole society is emphasized here, that is, the involvement of several social actors in prevention, intervention, exclusion, as well as rehabilitation programs (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2019).

The RAN Policy Paper on Returning Foreign Soldiers and the Reintegration Challenge of November 2016 practically emphasizes the reintegration of (former) terrorists or extremists which can be seen as a process aimed at facilitating their reintegration into society, thus reducing the likelihood that they will turn to terrorist-related activities. Special programs that focus on the reintegration of "jihadist" terrorists are beginning to gain significant acceptance in recent years around the world. Some of these initiatives focus on incarcerated terrorists or extremists, others emphasize probation after detention, and a third group combines the two contexts. Despite the expansion of these programs, it is not known whether these initiatives actually contribute to reducing terrorism-related recidivism. This is mainly due to the lack of evaluation research (RAN 2016).

For completeness in terms of the relevance of the work in terms of appropriate reintegration, resocialization, and rehabilitation of foreign terrorist fighters and their families, we will refer to an analysis made within the framework of the project "Improving the understanding of the phenomenon of foreign theoretical fighters: Challenges





for rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration of returnees and helpers in the RN Macedonia”, conducted by civil society organizations HEXUS Civic Concept and the Institute for Human Rights as co-implementer. Some of the data have been transmitted in full, while some have been paraphrased and only certain segments have been highlighted (Vanchoski, Shikova, Musliu, 2020).

Hence, several aspects have been analyzed regarding the challenges, where the convicts themselves – returnees and helpers point out that the prison facilities face weak capacities for resocialization. This is primarily due to the lack of appropriate programs for acquiring professional skills or knowledge. Among other things, these people affirm the view that many educational (continuation of formal education, language course), vocational training (computer skills), and fun activities (more sports activities) are lacking in penitentiary institutions. On the other hand, certain existential things are also listed, such as bad food and lack of water for showering. The desire to play football is noticeable. Therefore, this type of research is relevant and should be taken into account during the development of customized programs for rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration as activities through which these persons can be accessed.

As for psychological support in prisons, it is mainly observed that convicted returnees and helpers do not use it or do not have access to it. Of the interviewed prisoners who are housed in Idrizovo prison, only one confirmed that he talked to a psychologist and that only at the beginning of his institutionalization, while the others answered that there is no psychologist in the prison. In this section, we note a significant discrepancy in terms of necessary psychological support for people who have returned from war (regardless of the motive and legal consequences for participating in it), taking into account the fact that they face PTSD (PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder).

From the analysis from the perspective of family members of the returnees and helpers, it can be concluded that they are not involved in any activities for resocialization and reintegration of this group of prisoners. All the family members who were interviewed openly and unequivocally confirmed that they will support the efforts for the reintegration of their relatives who have been convicted. The family members of the returning foreign fighters who were interviewed answered that they did not have any material, moral or psychological support from any state institution, including the centers for social work as well as the municipal authorities during the period while their loved ones were in Syria or while they are serving a prison sentence. They answered that they did not have any help or communication with religious persons or any civil society organizations, informal groups, or counseling groups. In only two cases, family members pointed out that they were contacted or noticed that they were followed by the police in the period before leaving or while their loved ones were in prison (Vanchoski, Shikova, Musliu, 2020, p. 42).





Among other things, employment as well as the need for a bigger or new home for their loved ones are listed as primary necessities for starting a new stage of life and practically turning over a new page and leaving the past behind.

The Islamic Religious Community (IRC) points out that it has the will to successfully implement the rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration of convicted persons. This, among other things, is highlighted by the convicted persons, where clergy would best contribute by organizing a series of lectures (Khutba) and training regarding the correct interpretation of religious rules and convictions, which would contribute to overcoming wrong indoctrinations, moral and religious dilemmas among these people. This is also the opinion of the representatives of IRC, in terms of providing proper religious education, psychological support to overcome traumas, and employment to fulfill their daily life with activities (Vanchoski, Shikova, Musliu, 2020, p. 43).

The Administration for Execution of Sanctions is the institution that implements, organizes, and supervises the execution of the prison sentence, for all citizens of the Republic of Macedonia who have been sentenced to prison sentence, including those convicted as foreign terrorist fighters or aides to people to go to foreign battlefields. In this regard, it is significant to point out those foreign terrorist fighters – returnees and helpers in penal institutions enter into a high-risk category of prisoners. On the other hand, field research indicates that they are housed in several closed or semi-open penitentiaries, where they are in contact with other convicted persons. This situation supports the thesis that to a large extent there is a further risk of increased radicalization, exchange of experiences, and attitudes, as well as the possibility of spreading the process of additional radicalization to a larger number of people in penitentiary institutions.

What is particularly striking is the fact that prisons and penitentiaries do not have specific experience in terms of rehabilitation and resocialization with returnees and helpers, i.e. with persons who participated in military operations.

What stands out as a “benefit”, no matter what kind of inmate we are talking about, is access to organized health care in correctional facilities. This obviously refers to the primary, and from field research, we conclude that here psychological help is available in institutions, that is, there are health workers who specialize in the field of psychiatry, but not in all institutions. Only in some institutions is psychological and psychiatric help available. Practically, the excuse for this degrading situation is that psychiatrists are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and are not permanently employed in penal institutions.

What creates additional drastic confusion is that apparently since 2018, the RN Macedonia, the activities that it undertakes on this plan are all meetings (coordinative), taking into account the fact that there is still no summary, detailed analysis at the level



of all institutions, from which it would be possible to see if the convicted returnees still advocate violent, that is, radical attitudes. A high risk of recidivism or recidivism among returning convicts and helpers was assessed by the largest number of prison officers who work directly with them during the research.

The following paragraph of the paper will be fully quoted and extracted from an analysis made within the framework of the project “Improving the understanding of the phenomenon of foreign terroristic fighters (FTF): Challenges for rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration of returnees and helpers in the RN Macedonia”, carried out by civil society organizations HEXUS Civil Concept and the Institute for Human Rights as co-executor. In the analysis, it is pointed out that:

“Preparations for the deradicalization of foreign terrorist fighters began in 2018, when, after previously performed analyses, the Strategy for Combating Terrorism and Violent Extremism with an integrated action plan was adopted. On the basis of this operational document, a tool for assessing the risk of foreign terrorist fighters and a draft methodology for an individual program for the treatment of radicalized and convicted persons (further in the text – Program) were developed. The texts are not available to the public. It is planned to refine them in the subsequent period. The program is being developed with the support of the Office of the Council of Europe in Skopje and with the mediation of international experts. It currently consists of four modules covering several sets of questions (the first is about developing relationships and connections; the second is dedicated to building narratives; the third is a learning module and the fourth is dedicated to values and beliefs). After the completion of the preparatory phase, at the end of 2020, the concrete application of the guidelines from these documents will depend on the interest and goodwill of the convicted persons to engage in the deradicalization process. Due to the lack of a specific methodology for dealing with this problem, other auxiliary activities are currently being undertaken, for example – a screening tool was created for convicted STBs, but also for persons convicted of other crimes that show signs of radicalization. The screening tool consists of a table of systematic needs, narratives, and networks and contains 20 indicators. The 45 indicators are divided into three categories (needs, narratives, and motives). In this context, a Manual for recognizing signs of radicalization in prisons has been developed (not publicly available). The purpose of the auxiliary tools is to first identify persons prone to radicalization and later to include them in the Deradicalization Program that should be completed by the end of 2020. In addition, to these measures based on an internal approach, multidisciplinary teams have been established in penitentiary institutions whose task is to monitor the behavior of the convict who is serving a prison sentence, i.e. his discipline, possible deviations/changes in behavior are continuously monitored, the way of communication with other convicts, whether he represents and



propagates a certain ideology, and so on. The composition of the multidisciplinary teams includes members of the prison police, the Department of Resocialization, and other sectors relevant to this problem, and their main goal is to detect possible radicalization in penal institutions, that is, to observe potential escalation among prisoners. The teams meet once a month (but more often if necessary), and prepare monthly reports based on the information about the situation in the prisons. But despite all these activities, there is still no summary, detailed analysis at the level of all institutions, from which it would be possible to see whether the convicted foreign terrorist fighters – returnees still advocate violence, i.e. radical attitudes” (Vanchoski, Shikova, Musliu, 2020, p. 44).

What is especially intriguing is the fact that in 2018, from an institutional point of view, there is a significant amount of confusion regarding who is responsible for developing the strategy/program. We do not have a precise definition of the obligation of which institution is responsible for the preparation of the above-mentioned documents of crucial importance for the suppression of this phenomenon. The general impression is that we are faced with the transfer of responsibility from one place to another and all significant stakeholders in this area have only a coordinating role.

Municipal authorities leave quite a strong impact regarding this issue because they do not have information about returnees from conflict areas and their helpers. Opinions on whether they pose a risk at all differ. For some of the respondents, foreign terrorist fighter’s returnees are not risky, while for others, the problem is serious. Obviously, the municipalities that consider terrorism to be quite serious have cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, educational institutions, the Center for Social Work, and the Center for Social Work, where preventive efforts are being made to raise awareness among citizens.

In 2018, in the RN Macedonia, there is no special treatment for potential returnees and no local targeted measures or local support networks for their families. There are no projects working to deter recidivism. Some municipalities offer assistance programs, such as active measures for employment, acquiring skills, and assistance in establishing cooperation with the business sector, but those measures are general and apply to all categories of persons. Therefore, there are no special programs and projects for the employment of persons from vulnerable categories who have served a prison sentence. There is cooperation with local companies, but there is fear and there is no will to employ them. Discrimination, public condemnation, but also the lack of adequate work skills among returnees and helpers are highlighted as the biggest obstacle. The municipalities do not have a communication strategy that would help with the eventual reintegration and return of foreign terrorist fighters’ returnees and helpers to the communities. They only have preparatory consultations and cooperation



with international organizations. Within the state, the municipalities cooperate with each other, but also with non-governmental organizations, in programs for creating strategies against terrorism, but in relation to this issue, they are not involved in the exchange of experiences and good practices with municipalities from other countries (Vanchoski, Shikova, Musliu, 2020).

Study of the initial state period 2018–2021, issued in January 2022, which means 4 years passed from the presented facts and information in the paper above, we observed the following data. Namely, the National Committee for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Combating Terrorism (NCPVECT) as a responsible institution in relation to this issue does not have its own website and all information is published on the Government's website. It has been noted that there is considerable misunderstanding regarding the transmission of certain information about this problem. From this we note that conveying only theoretical knowledge and ambiguities to the general public adds intensity to the already confused wider mass; therefore, the general public acquires information on the ground, directly from the families of the returnees, as well as the associations of citizens who work on this problem, and not through the National Committee as a state body (Popetreski, SKUP, Radio Free Europe, 2021).

Even after four years of research in the field, certain components are indicated that are crucial, at the very least, for understanding and ultimately for joint action in terms of suppressing this phenomenon. Namely, it is necessary for the National Committee to have greater transparency of the activities that are undertaken. On the other hand, the public still does not have access to the Plan for resocialization, reintegration, and rehabilitation of returning foreign fighters. The unavailability of the document practically ties the hands of the civil sector as well, because it is not clear what the government's priorities are for resocialization and returning to the community. On the other hand, this sector must be involved and vigilantly monitor every process as a partner in implementing activities and solving certain challenges.

When the full picture is taken in terms of steps to prevent and suppress radicalization that leads to terrorism, but also returning foreign fighters and helpers in these operations, we notice a huge vacuum in terms of insufficient understanding and the seriousness of the problem itself. It is necessary for the entire public, starting from the institutions, the public sector, the media, civil society, and finally the public, to understand the meaning and danger of this phenomenon. Cold relations, non-acceptance of responsibility by the institutions, insufficient transparency, and inadequate involvement of the civil sector, contribute to further security destabilization of the RN Macedonia. That is why the inclusion of all social actors is necessary in order to adequately deal with this phenomenon.



## Conclusion

In the spirit of the previously presented information, we note that according to official data since 2012, from the territory of the RN Macedonia, 143 citizens left for the conflict zones: of them, 69 returned, and 38 were killed. There are still five active fighters in the conflict zones, and four are in prison in Syria. None returned in 2020 and 2021. In July 2021, 23 people (four men, five women, and 14 children) were returned from Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, only in 2018 were the two key documents brought, namely the Strategy for Dealing with Violent Extremism and the Fight against Terrorism. However, we still do not officially have adequate access to other documents such as Action Plans and the Program for resocialization, reintegration, and rehabilitation of returning foreign fighters. This may be the answer to the question of why in Macedonia we have a divided society on this issue, that is, for one part this is a serious problem, while for others it is not an obstacle. Hence, the problem is really serious, but we realize that non-transparency necessarily leads to division and a frivolous approach to dealing with this issue. The National Committee, as the body responsible for dealing with these phenomena, must be put at the service of social needs for an adequate understanding and approach to these issues.

On the other hand, the reintegration of (former) extremists and terrorists into society will always be difficult and controversial. If the seriousness of the problem is not understood, we can rightly be condemned that this approach leads to “soft” on terrorism. Namely, it is not enough just to adopt certain strategies and acts, but real work on the ground is necessary. Considering official data regarding the expectation of an increase in the number of returning foreign fighters, as well as the fact that the homegrown radicalization of Islamist and right-wing groups continues to develop at a rapid pace, one simply cannot avoid the question of with what to do with extremists and terrorists released from prison or returning from conflict zones (RAN, 2016).

If the previously stated claims are added to the undeniable facts regarding small sanctions imposed for such crimes, unavailability of documents, insufficient transparency, inadequate communication, and involvement of the media, the civil sector, but also the academic public in the field of security for understanding and the expediency of the process itself, then how can we expect the full incorporation of these persons into society, or at least reduce the stigma they face. Namely, this is a fight against the whole society and it is necessary for the whole society to get involved and stand in the way.

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