

THE REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF RETURNING FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS AND THEIR FAMILIES IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: EARLY LESSONS LEARNED



The fate of Bosnian citizens who traveled to Syria and Iraq, 2012–2021

- Some 190+ men, 70+ women and 100+ children have traveled to Syria and Iraq
- More than 100 additional children were born
- 140+ men, women and children have been killed or died of natural causes
- Up to 60 individuals have returned.
- More than 200 remain in Syria (in prisons, camps and at large).

Figure 1: Departures from BiH to Syria and Iraq by registered residency

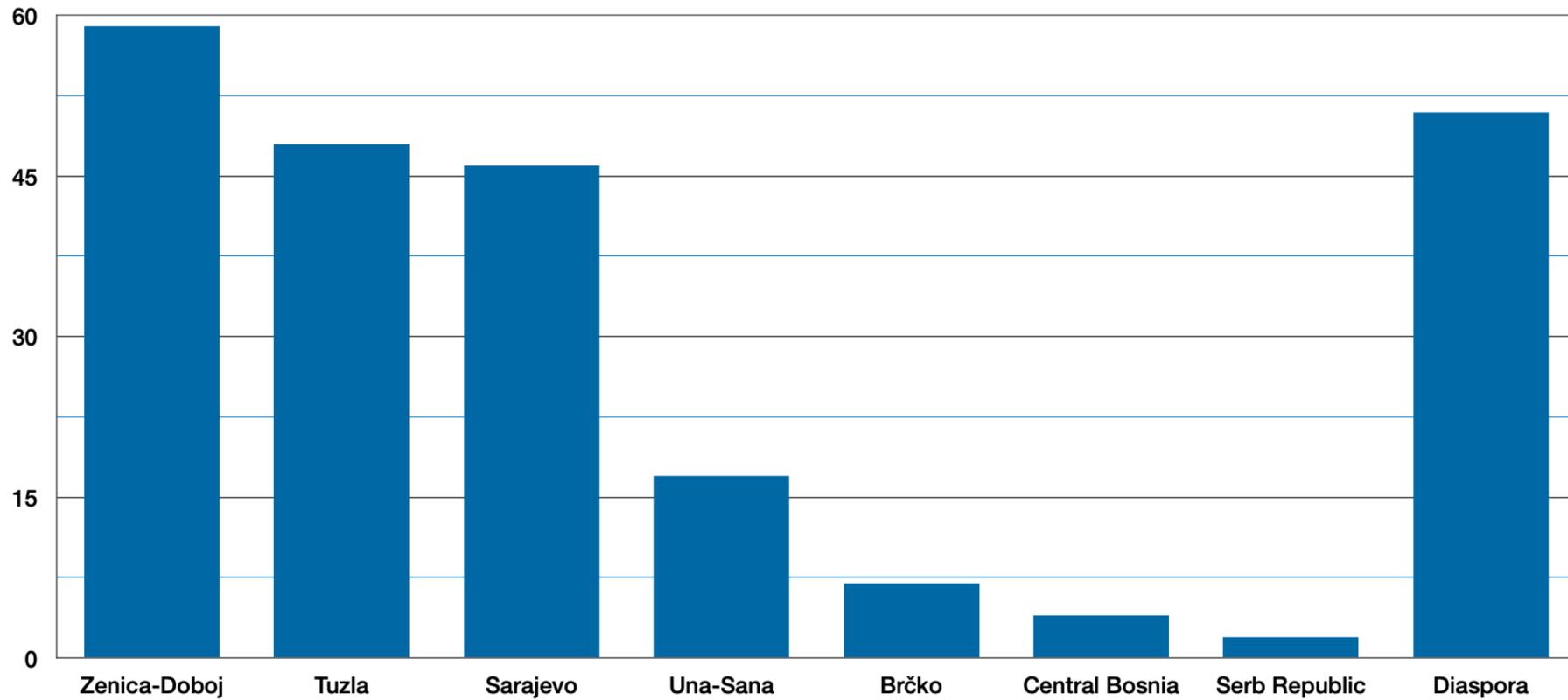


Figure 11: Departures from BiH to Syria/Iraq, by year (2012–2016)

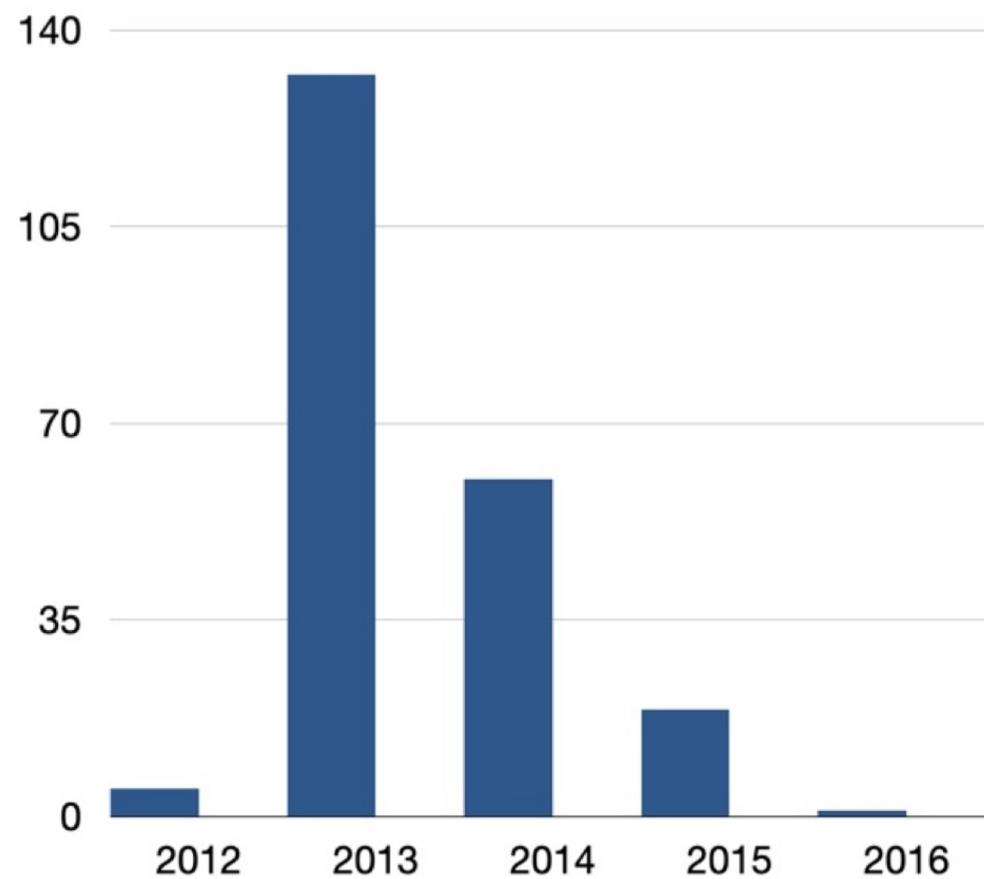
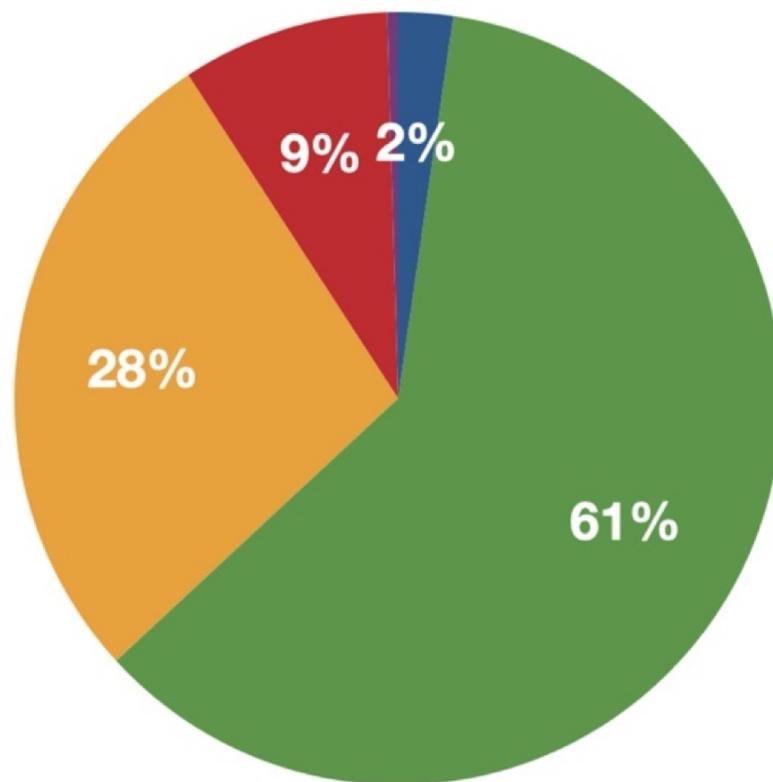


Figure 12: Departures from BiH to Syria/Iraq, by year, in percentages

● 2012 ● 2013 ● 2014 ● 2015 ● 2016



A number of recent interviews with detainees and returnees suggest that these motives include:

- A strong posttraumatic and “fictive kin” identifications with a global community of Sunni Muslims being under attack;
- Humanitarian concerns and altruistic motivations;
- Call for jihad and End Times apocalyptic thinking;
- Wish to build and live inside an Islamic “Caliphate” and under Shariah law;
- The desire for personal significance;
- Unemployment;
- Material benefits of joining,
- The desire and need to keep familial ties intact when one member of the family is convinced to go to Syria.*

* Anne Speckhard and Ardian Shajkovci, Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo: Women’s Roles in Supporting, Preventing & Fighting Violent Extremism, International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 2017

THE THREE CLUSTERS OF RETURNEES

The first cluster – returnees who arrived between 2012-2019. All discreetly absorbed and gradually reintegrated into their local micro-communities.

The second cluster - Individuals that returned to BiH from Syria and Iraq on 19 December 2019, with the assistance of the US military and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – 13 adults (7 men, 6 women, 12 children).

The third (prospective) cluster of those still in Syrian prisons and camps, waiting for the next deportation. Approximately 130 individuals – men, women and children.

EARLY LESSONS LEARNED

- Reintegration begins at the point of re-entry.
- Mental health issues dominate early rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.
- Continuity matters.
- The goal of intervention should be risk management rather than “de-radicalization”.
- The fate of the men, women, and children who remain in prisons and camps in Syria will continue to be a factor in the lives of many returnees.
- Concern for child returnees can provide an opening for stronger reintegration and trust-building with their mothers.
- The ownership of reintegration process should be local, with international assistance tailored to meet local needs, and embedded in already existing capacities.

POSSIBLE PARTNERSHIPS IN REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF THE RETURNING FTFs AND THEIR FAMILIES

- Local communities/capacities: local authorities, social services, centers for mental health, preschool and school boards....
- Families and friends
- Law enforcement in both traditional and non-traditional roles
- Civil society
- Media
- Religious leaders (?)
- International partners/assistance

Some commonalities observed in female returnees:

- Suffering from multiple traumas including PTSD.
- Committed to individual and group therapy, and prescribed medication to treat depression and anxiety.
- Having strong ties to, and dependency on husbands.
- Lived in polygamous relationships, have children with different men.
- Maintaining strong commitment to ISIL ideology.
- Still unwilling to take responsibility for the ordeal they have endured in Syria.
- Fear stigmatization from the out-group, and ostracism by the in-group.
- Returned to and reunited with their immediate families, where some of their personal problems had started.

POSSIBLE RISKS AND CHALLENGES IN REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION OF RETURNING FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND THEIR FAMILIES IN BIH

- Possible re-engagement in terrorist ideologies and behaviors
- Lack of structured sentence management and reintegration support for prisoners.
- The legal status of female returnees.
- “Invisible children.”
- Measures of success
- Additional group deportations.

Thanks for your attention

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