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Syria: Uzbekistan's Approach to IS Detainees

By Nodirbek Soliev

SYNOPSIS

Following IS' demise in Syria, the international community has grappled with several complex challenges, including how to deal with women and children who joined IS in the Iraq-Syria conflict zone and are seeking to return home.

COMMENTARY

ON 25 September 2019, Uzbekistan announced it would repatriate 235 IS-affiliated Uzbek nationals from Syria and Iraq in the near term. This is in addition to 156 individuals brought home by the state in a previous exercise. Among the initial batch of returnees were 48 women and one man. The remainder were children. To date, only a few countries have organised repatriation exercises from the conflict theatre on such a scale. Others include Kosovo, Turkey and Russia in Europe, and Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in Central Asia.

Uzbekistan's approach to IS returnees and their families broadly centres around pre-emptive security concerns and distinguishes between IS female and child detainees currently held in Syria and adult, mostly male, returnees considered to pose a higher security risk. While repatriations are an ongoing process, there could be challenges, including the risk of re-radicalisation and community resistance to these returnees.

Why Repatriate Women and Minors?

As a result of thousands of adult male IS fighters being killed in conflict, the proportion of women and minors present in the remaining IS population in Syria and Iraq is proportionally far higher and therefore must be reflected in all responses. Estimates indicate there are 12,000 foreign IS jihadists detained by the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Force (SDF), mostly comprising women and children.

However, the fate of many detainees, who come from over 40 countries, remains uncertain. Many states, particularly in Western Europe, have refused to take back adult detainees while allowing only the limited repatriation of children.

The Uzbek government frames its policy of repatriating such returnees as a humanitarian rescue operation, or “*Mehr*” (‘Kindness’). In its public messaging, the government has highlighted the plight of women and children left in limbo in overcrowded makeshift camps and detention facilities in Syria.

Since the beginning of the year, more than 300 children have died from untreated infectious diseases and rampant malnutrition in these areas. This has put mounting pressure on governments to enact repatriation and rehabilitation programmes. Yet such initiatives remain limited and ad-hoc.

Inter-generational Impact

The involvement of women and children in jihadist networks has an inter-generational impact. Women who adhere to IS ideology may seek to radicalise their children or others. Child recruits ensure a militant group’s long-term operational and ideological viability, given they are the potential fighters and leaders of tomorrow.

In Central Asia, such security considerations are timely, given suggestions that Al Qaeda-linked groups in Syria have recently expressed interest in taking over the guardianship of detainees held in Syria.

Recently, a Central Asian jihadist figure based in Syria has also claimed that Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Al Qaeda’s former Syrian affiliate, has sought to ‘liberate’ IS captives and have them transferred to Idlib, the last major stronghold of a coterie of Al Qaeda-linked jihadist factions fighting against the Syrian government.

Uzbekistan’s Approach to Women and Children

Countries have grappled with the issue of returning fighters in different ways. In some states, returnees face immediate arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment. Others are put through deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes or receive physical, economic, or psycho-social support to reintegrate them into society.

Uzbekistan’s rehabilitation efforts involving repatriated women and child returnees are largely modelled on initiatives developed since the early 2000s for former members of groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (HTI).

One of the unique characteristics of the *Mehr* programme is the state’s decision not to imprison the repatriated women and children. The government regards these individuals as “*adashganlar*”, or ‘the misled/misguided’. In interviews, several such women say their decision to join IS was not of their own volition. Often, they claim their husbands duped them into travelling to Syria under false pretexts. They also claimed to be primarily confined to domestic roles while there.

However, assumptions of their victimhood may be premature. Since its inception, IS has expanded both the potential and scope of roles for women. As such, women returnees will require varied responses. In Uzbekistan, court restrictions are placed on the freedom of movement of returnees for up to five years, depending on their roles and lengths of stay in Syria. In addition, they are continuously monitored by local law enforcement upon reintegration into the society.

Potential Challenges & Implications

The fate of the detained IS fighters and their families in Syria and Iraq will have far-reaching implications for the future trajectory of global counterterrorism efforts. Studies suggest that up to 90 percent of IS' Uzbek recruits were radicalised and recruited while living and working in Russia and Turkey.

To effectively mitigate the issue in the long run, Uzbekistan needs to develop holistic counter-radicalisation responses that address the drivers of radicalisation and recruitment among its diaspora communities abroad. This should include cross-border collaborations with countries hosting significant Uzbek diasporas. Effective counter-narratives against online extremist propaganda are also required.

For many governments, a major obstacle to the repatriation and reintegration of returnees is public opinion. In Europe, efforts to repatriate and reintegrate IS returnees are hindered by the current socio-political climate. For many repatriated Uzbek women, whose husbands have been killed or went into hiding in Syria after the fall of IS, the current state of separation from the sources of their radicalisation (their jihadist husbands) will likely serve as an added layer of protection against recidivism.

However, despite being monitored and restrictions imposed on their movements, some women may continue to support extremism and attempt to indoctrinate others, particularly in the online domain. They may also serve as conduits between their surviving husbands and new supporters.

Moreover, although public sentiment is welcoming of children, there is some reported scepticism towards women returnees. Despite government efforts to foster a conducive social environment, some repatriated women may be stigmatised and labelled as 'former terrorists'.

The danger is community resistance could leave them vulnerable to re-radicalisation. As such, the state needs to work closely with various local community and religious institutions to enhance reintegration efforts directed at women returnees.

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