

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Kazakhstan's Approach to the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Returnees from Syria and Iraq: Restoring the Rights to Life and Development

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Abstract: This article examines Kazakhstan's approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration of children repatriated from Syria and Iraq during the *Zhusan* humanitarian operation. The analysis is based on data gathered through participant observation, conversational interviews with the children themselves, and discussions with an interdisciplinary team of experts involved in the rehabilitation process. Key elements of the Kazakhstani approach include restoring the legal status of these children and their families, implementing strategies to minimise stigmatisation, and supporting their social rehabilitation as a means of reintegrating them into Kazakhstani society. The article highlights both the successes and the effective practices in this process, as well as the challenges faced by the practitioners working with these child returnees. The authors suggest that adding a component focused on building resilience to re-traumatisation, involvement in violent extremism, and criminal behaviour could further enhance the effectiveness of the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

Keywords: Right to development, social rehabilitation, risks of stigmatisation, resilience, integration.

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Introduction

Kazakhstan is among the 80 countries worldwide whose citizens, along with their families, have travelled to join ISIS.¹ This migration has led to a significant number of Kazakhstani children residing in territories controlled by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In October 2013, a video titled *A Family of 150 Kazakhs Came to Syria for Jihad*² appeared on the Internet, in which, along with Kazakh adults, children took part, chanting verses of the Quran and speaking Kazakh. In November 2014, another video was disseminated online, showcasing Kazakh children undergoing weapon training and gaining combat skills in an ISIS camp. Recently, this video has resurfaced on Kazakhstani social networks, reigniting discussions on the involvement of Kazakh children in ISIS and its implications for national security and policy.

From January 2019 to September 2019, Kazakhstan carried out the humanitarian operation *Zhusan* in five stages. According to official open sources, within the framework of this operation, 607 Kazakhstani citizens were returned from the al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria. Most were women (157) and children (413, including 34 orphans). Of these, 303 children were under seven years old, 105 children were from 7 to 14 years old, and five children were aged between 14 to 18. Additionally, in November 2019, as part of the humanitarian operation *Rusafa*, fourteen children aged between 1.5 to 13 years were returned, whose mothers were serving sentences in Iraqi prisons.³ Before operation *Zhusan*, Kazakhstan had prior experience in rehabilitating men convicted of religious extremism and serving sentences in prisons. However, the emphasis of this work was on the efforts of theologians in deradicalising individuals, which was defined as guiding them towards traditional Islam as interpreted through the *Hanafi madhhab* of *Akida Maturidi*. This approach is recognised for its positive contribution to Kazakh culture, as affirmed by the Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations.⁴ This approach mainly involved theologians, and the involvement of psychologists in this process was limited. Efforts with women committed to radical ideologies were minimal and still in the early stages.⁵

The situation regarding child returnees represented a new challenge for Kazakhstan and required the development of new approaches to working with this category of returnees. Prior to their return, there was limited understanding of the specific needs and backgrounds of these children. As researcher Joana Cook emphasises, it is essential to understand the distinguishing characteristics of these children, whom she refers to as “ISIS-affiliated children”, including their experiences in ISIS-controlled areas and the resulting impacts on their well-being.⁶ This information serves as the foundation for rehabilitation and reintegration, enabling practitioners to anticipate and address the challenges and difficulties that may arise during implementation.⁷

Noman Benotvan and Nikita Malik have studied the case of child soldiers in ISIS pointing out not only the psychological, social, and economic influence on them but also the ideological indoctrination of children, who were called “lion cubs of the caliphate” and were central to the future of the “Islamic State” project. Additionally, Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova et al., and Jacob Olidort have focused on the ideological influence exerted through ISIS’s educational materials for children, analysing how these resources were designed to shape young minds.⁸

Besides, researchers highlight significant gender differences in the experiences of boys and girls within ISIS due to the strict gender segregation in the so-called Islamic State and distinct life strategies imposed on children based on their gender.⁹

Reports and documents from UN agencies highlight that in territories controlled by terrorist organisations like ISIS, the rights of children as established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child — ratified by nearly all UN member states — are consistently violated.¹⁰ Consequently, the UN asserts that the rehabilitation and reintegration of these children should comply with

the standards outlined in the Convention and ensure the full realisation of children's rights.¹¹ It stipulates several fundamental principles that apply to all children, including those affected by the actions of Islamic State militants. The first principle is the right to non-discrimination. In regard to children affected by the actions of IS militants, this also means avoiding discrimination based on the participation of family members or the child in terrorist organisations. The second principle emphasises that the child's best interests must be the primary consideration. Thus, decisions regarding the rehabilitation and reintegration of children from conflict zones should prioritise the child's well-being above all else. The third principle is the child's inherent right to life, survival, and holistic development, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and social growth. The fourth principle mandates respect for the child's views and the opportunity for meaningful participation in decisions affecting their lives and their integration into society. The UN urges countries to repatriate children from the displacement camps, where they are at risk of re-traumatisation and re-radicalisation. This action is essential for upholding the principles above and ensuring the effective implementation of children's rights.¹²

Only a few states have undertaken humanitarian operations to return their citizens, or even just children from internal displacement camps, since the repatriation of children from the so-called Islamic State remains a cautious and security-focused approach. Among these, Kazakhstan, along with other Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as several European countries, including Finland, have undertaken such operations.¹³ These nations have developed their own approaches to the rehabilitation and reintegration of child returnees, guided by UN International Standards, taking into account the local context. Their experiences are documented in various expert reports and have spurred discussions and the development of models such as the 5Rs framework, which encompasses repatriation, resettlement, reintegration, rehabilitation, and resilience.¹⁴ The application of Bronfenbrenner's social ecology model to the rehabilitation and reintegration process is particularly noteworthy.¹⁵ To this day, there are ongoing discussions on best practices and models of rehabilitation and reintegration among experts and scholars.

This article focuses on Kazakhstan's approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration of children, underscoring the protection and promotion of children's rights.¹⁶ It particularly focuses on the integration of these children into Kazakhstani society through social rehabilitation. This approach is formalised in the legal act Rules and Terms of Social Rehabilitation of Children Affected by Terrorist Activity, which was developed based on the hands-on experience of practitioners involved in the Zhusan and Rusafa operations.¹⁷

Methodology of the Study

The study was conducted in a cross-disciplinary manner. Data was collected using qualitative research methods, including observation, conversational interviews, and semi-structured interviews. Conversational interviews were conducted with children who returned from humanitarian operations Zhusan-2 and Zhusan-3 (May-June 2019) at rehabilitation camp Flamingo near Aktau (West Kazakhstan) during the course of these operations. The interviews were conducted in a child-friendly form, accompanied by drawing and sometimes playing, and lasted about 30 minutes. A total of 24 children aged between 9 and 16 years participated in interviews. It is important to point out that the sample has potential limitations, as the authors could not choose children based on their sex or age but only spoke with the children selected by the rehabilitation and reintegration programme's management. The National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan had authority over the humanitarian operation Zhusan and measures for the rehabilitation and reintegration of children and their families, which resulted in restrictions being put on the study.

In October-November of 2020, a year after the end of the Zhusan operation, interviews were conducted with practitioners involved in the work on rehabilitation and reintegration of returnee children. In particular, they were held with the head of the non-government organisation Foundation *Pravo* (translated as Right), Olga Ryl, whose regional centres *Shans* (translated as Chance) offering socio-psychological and legal support for minors, served as a basis for work with children on rehabilitation and reintegration. Therefore, interviews were conducted with the directors of Shans Centres in the city of Astana, Almaty, and Karaganda, as well as lawyers, psychologists, social workers, and theologians of these centres. A total of seventeen interviews were conducted with the listed practitioners. Also, the previously published data gathered from the interviews with Kazakhstani women repatriated from the displacement camp al-Hol during the humanitarian operations Zhusan-2 and Zhusan-3 were used in the article.¹⁸

In addition, the authors of the article took part in several national and international round tables, seminars, and conferences that focused on the rehabilitation and reintegration of children whose materials were included in the study. Using thematic coding, we analysed the data and identified the consequences of children staying in territories under ISIS control, key areas for rehabilitation and reintegration of children, effective practices, difficulties, and challenges.

The article avoids specifying children's names based on research ethics and the need to preserve anonymity and minimise risks of recognition to avoid harming children. Instead, it uses capitalised letters that are not related to their actual names. The names of other respondents, in particular the names of practitioners, are given or not given in agreement with the respondents.

The Experience of the Stay of Kazakhstani Children in the Territory of ISIS through the Lens of Children's Narratives and their Consequences

Kazakhstani children returned during the operation Zhusan can be divided into two categories. The first category is children brought to Syria by their parents. Families who moved included families with both parents and single-parent families. In most cases, it was a woman who divorced her husband and moved with the children to the Islamic State. The second category of returnee children consists of children born in the Islamic State, at least one of whose parents was a citizen of Kazakhstan.

Upon their arrival in Kazakhstan, they were interviewed in the rehabilitation camp called Flamingo close to Aktau city in Western Kazakhstan to gain insight into their living conditions in the Islamic State, identify the consequences of staying there, and determine their needs. The interviews revealed the circumstances of their lives in the territory controlled by ISIS.

Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik pointed out that ISIS is not only a terrorist organisation but also an ambitious state, and it requires not only soldiers but also a society with institutions that socialise, promote ideology, and educate the next generation.¹⁹ According to the terminology of Urie Bronfenbrenner, it is necessary to consider the ecological environment in which the children grew up, including both their direct interactions with family members and their indirect connections to the caliphate's structures, ideologies, and behavioural patterns that shaped their lives.²⁰ For example, there were Kazakh katibs, Uzbek katibs, and Tajik katibs, as well as mixed ones. Further, many of the children's fathers died shortly after arriving in Syria, leaving children and their mothers to live in widows' hostels (*Arabic maqarr*) until they remarried. It was often a standard practice that they remarried men of different nationalities. During subsequent marriages, many children were born in the Islamic State territory.

The narratives of children during our conversations about life in the Islamic state were centred around several key themes. The initial theme revolves around comprehending Islam. Islamic concepts influenced the perception of children and the circumstances of their lives. However, the interpretation of Islam was purely one-sided, with emphasis placed on rewards and punishments, the predestination of Allah, death, the arrival of Judgment Day, and hell and paradise. The most frequently encountered sub-themes were hell, heaven, and death. In the statement of the girl M. concentrated on understanding Islam, which surrounded them in ISIS, “I believe in Allah, it is a *qadar*, what Allah decreed, will happen. I had to witness it all. After death, I shall see paradise”.²¹ Explaining the death of their fathers and brothers, they often called them the *shahids*, who would go to heaven—the death of a *shahid* they perceived as a blessed death. The children vividly visualised paradise in their stories. According to girl A, “Paradise is eternal life, milk rivers, honey flows, fruits whose taste is unique and does not occur here on earth”.²² The *shahids*, they say, fought in the name of Allah against the *kafirs*. *Kafirs* are viewed by children as not worshiping Allah, not performing *namaz*, and murdering Muslims. As researchers note, the image of the enemy that was imposed on children in ISIS contributed to strengthening the intra-group identity of the Islamic State. This was presented as a genuine Islamic identity in contrast to other identities that were subjected to dehumanisation by ISIS.²³

This understanding of Islam in children was formed during the course of education in the Islamic State. The children stated that they were educated in mosques or *maqarrs*. The children named the following disciplines: mathematics, Quran studies, Arabic, some also mentioned Russian and Kazakh. The girls also named sewing. On one day, the boys were at school, while on the other day, the girls were. Boys who were 12 years old were sent to military training camp called *muaskar*. According to the published story of a repatriated woman, Tolganai Mukasheva, cases of paedophilia were uncovered in one of the *muaskars* in Raqqa; this *muaskar* was soon closed, and the case was hushed up.²⁴

Due to a one-sided and non-systemic education system, children experienced significant gaps in knowledge compared to their peers in Kazakhstan. As the researchers note, based on the ISIS curriculum they discovered, secular subjects were also taught through the prism of ISIS ideology.²⁵ During our conversations, they could not name any secular book, but only the Quran and Hadith. None of the children could name a single fairytale.

Violence is often the second major theme in children’s narratives. They often witnessed or were victims of violence, such as bombs and the death of relatives, friends, and neighbours. Kazakhstan’s children were among those who were injured during the bombings. There were also children who witnessed their mothers being killed. The girl G. said, “I buried my mother on my own. When the rocket landed, my mother was blown to pieces. I dug the sand, then gathered her pieces and buried them”.²⁶ Another Kazakhstani girl G., witnessed her mother being killed by a sniper and personally handled the burial of her mother. This girl complained that she began experiencing symptoms indicative of cardiovascular issues after that.²⁷

The third theme of children’s narratives is the deprivations they have faced. They mentioned starving and even having to eat grass, especially in active war zones. Additionally, they spoke about the hardships and humiliations in the Kurdish camp. Girl G. recalled, “The Kurds called us terrorists and shouted that nobody likes us.”²⁸

The experience of girls in ISIS was different from that of boys, as ISIS provided different life projects for children based on gender.²⁹ The girls wore a niqab from an early age. Girl S. indicated that she has been wearing a niqab since she was three years old, and that since she was six years old she has been performing *namaz*.³⁰ Another girl, L, said she has worn a hijab

since she was 7 years old. The coating was black.³¹ In response to the question of why the girls were covered before puberty, the mothers stated that they were instructed to learn how to wear hijab beforehand.

It should also be noted from interviews with psychologists and social workers that there were cases of role reversal or parentification in the family when the child took care of the parents. In some cases, “cold motherhood” or maternal neglect was evident when mothers saw themselves in a detached way in relation to their children, and were inattentive to the needs of the children.

Furthermore, the Islamic State did not have structures to treat children. Interviews with women returnees revealed that young children were dying from diseases.

The ecological environment of Kazakhstani children in the territory under ISIS control was characterised by a lack of a safe environment that allowed them to live and develop fully, as discussed above. It was a life lived in survival mode, which hindered the full development of the individual. The violence and deprivation Kazakhstani children experienced were traumatic, resulting in negative physical, psychological, and social consequences. First, there were physical injuries, acquired chronic diseases, and health problems (risks of cardiovascular diseases, gastrointestinal tract diseases, and so forth). Some children suffered severe injuries that resulted in permanent disabilities. Second, it had a long-term negative impact on the psychological health and well-being of children. The psychological consequences included sleep disturbance, nightmares and crying during sleep, fear of loud sounds, anxiety, behaviour disorders, and others, which were correlated with data provided by Save the Children and the results of psychological studies. Third, the lack of access to formal education and a stimulating social environment led to developmental gaps in these children compared to their peers in Kazakhstan. Fourth, it led to the legitimisation and normalisation of violence in relationships with other people instead of respect and tolerance. Fifth, the development of an inverted value system, where life was devalued and death was glorified, increased the risks of suicidal behaviour. Sixth is a notable deculturation, which involves a detachment from ethnic and cultural heritage and one’s cultural roots. This included the deculturation of Islam as interpreted by ISIS.³² Seventh, the risks associated with developing a negative identity, which may lead to criminal behaviour, victimisation, intergenerational radicalisation, and the transmission of traumatic experiences across generations.

Legal Aspects of Creating a Safe, Non-Stigmatising Environment for the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Children

In Kazakhstan, the approach to rehabilitation and reintegration of repatriated children is being implemented based on restoration and safeguarding of the child’s rights to non-discrimination, life, and healthy development in accordance with national legislation and international law. The legal framework for this process is the foundation on which the entire system of comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration is built. Institutionally, the legal aspects of rehabilitation and reintegration were addressed in collaboration with state bodies and the non-governmental organisation Pravo through its Shans Centres of socio-psychological and legal assistance.³³

During the repatriation process, the Presidents of the Republic of Kazakhstan, first Nursultan Nazarbayev and then Kassym-Jomart Tokaev made clear in their statements how they treat the returned women and children as citizens of Kazakhstan who are in a difficult situation and need help.³⁴ The Presidents’ statements contributed to creating a safe, non-stigmatising environment for children’s rehabilitation and integration, which is an important condition for

successful rehabilitation and integration, according to psychologists.³⁵

Upon arrival in Kazakhstan, women and children were placed in a rehabilitation camp near Aktau (city in Western Kazakhstan), where they underwent adaptation and initial rehabilitation for one month. The first day of the week was spent in a rehabilitation camp. The main problem was the lack of documentation for women and children because in the Islamic State, it was common practice to burn documents of arriving *muhajirs*, symbolising a complete break with the past and the beginning of a new life in the so-called caliphate. Therefore, one of the main tasks of Pravo was to document children and their parents in the first year of rehabilitation. The documentation started in the rehabilitation camp and continued in the regions with the help of lawyers from the Shans Centre. This opened up access to health, educational, and social services that the state provides to its citizens.

Deputy Minister of Justice Akerke Akhmetova referred to the process of documenting children as “the right of the child to a name,” emphasising its importance as a fundamental right, which was realised through the issuance of birth certificates.³⁶ Lost birth certificates were restored to children born in Kazakhstan. The issue of birth certificates to children born in Syria was a more complex procedure, which was regulated by national legislation, in particular the Code of Laws On Marriage and Family of the Republic of Kazakhstan (art. 47) and other legal acts.³⁷

Due to the absence of birth certificates in Syria, the court established the fact of birth based on genome analysis. Of the 406 children returned during the humanitarian operation Zhusan, only nine children have Syria indicated on their birth certificates, since at the end of 2020 an amendment was adopted to article 188, paragraph 3 of the Code of Laws. According to this, the place of birth of a child outside the Republic of Kazakhstan indicates the place of factual birth of the child. Most children were registered as born in Kazakhstan, which protects them from potential questioning from others, as the place of birth is recorded on identification documents at age 16 and remains with the individual throughout their life. The director of the Shans Centre in Astana shared a case where, before the school year began, returning children were taken to visit the school in advance. When the teacher asked where they had come from, one of the girls became hysterical.³⁸

The documentation of children not only restored their “the right to a name” but also provided access to medical, educational, and social services that every citizen of Kazakhstan has the right to use. However, during the documentation process, some difficulties exposed problem areas in the legislation, as revealed in an interview by the Director of the Shans Centres and lawyers. Women and children returned from al-Hol camp not only lacked identification documents but also death certificates for relatives, which led to problems in receiving social benefits.

In particular, the head of the Shans Centre in Karaganda noted that issues related to recognising the fathers and mothers of returned children as dead or missing remain unresolved.³⁹ If there is no evidence of the parent’s death or missing status, the state authorities cannot grant a survivor’s benefit. The Law of the Kazakhstan Republic stipulates that anyone who is on the international wanted list for extremism cannot be declared dead or missing. Consequently, the family would not be granted a survivor’s benefit. In the event that it was impossible to prove that the husband and father of the children had died, lawyers from the Shans Centre helped the woman with a divorce so that she could receive help as a single mother. Moreover, the guardians of returned orphans, typically their close relatives, were not eligible for child benefits unless their parents’ death was proven or they were declared missing.

Mothers with many children in Kazakhstan cannot receive a corresponding allowance unless

they have a birth certificate or a death certificate in case of a child's death in Syria. The courts initially handed down a death sentence, but the prosecutor's office later prohibited it. If a mother with many children does not have documents for all her children, then she cannot get on the waiting list to receive housing from the state.

All of the listed problems in the legislation were discovered during the first year of rehabilitation and reintegration of children, and lawyers from the Pravo developed recommendations for overcoming them. The documentation process included cases of international guardianship by citizens of other countries in accordance with the guardianship organisation's rules.⁴⁰ The Director of Pravo, Olga Ryl, shared a successful case of formalising such guardianship. Four children from the same family were among those returned as part of the Rusafa humanitarian operation. Their father, who was a citizen of Kyrgyzstan, passed away. The mother, who is a Kazakhstan citizen, is currently serving a 25-year sentence at Rusafa prison in Iraq. The eldest girl confirmed the fact of her father's death in court. The grandparents of these children, on the deceased father's side, decided to take them to Kyrgyzstan. A genomic examination was carried out to establish family relationships, and then guardianship of the children was formalised. They are currently being raised by their grandparents. The custody in this case did not pose any significant problems.⁴¹

The documentation process for women and children was completed within a year of the start of the Zhusan humanitarian operation, instilling a sense of security, safety, and gratitude among the returning women. Tolganai Mukysh, one of the repatriated women whose case was publicly documented, highlighted the crucial legal assistance provided by the lawyers at the Shans Centre, "I had to prove that the children's fathers had died, but there was no way to obtain death certificates. A very good lawyer helped me... I went through a divorce trial. I needed to get a divorce so that I could receive assistance as a single mother, and she helped me sort it all out".⁴² It is important to acknowledge that the documentation adhered to the priority principle for the child's interests. The Director of the Shans Centre in Almaty noted in an interview that in the courts, judges tried to find norms in legal acts that would allow them to decide in favour of the child's interests to facilitate further development as an individual and citizen of Kazakhstan.⁴³ In the case above of Tolganai Mukysh, where it was impossible to prove the death of her husband and the father of her children, the lawyers found a solution by facilitating her divorce. This allowed her to qualify as a single mother and receive social benefits, which was in the best interests of her children. Tolganay returned with three children, and one child died in Syria during bombings.

Thus, documenting the repatriates was a complex process that involved not only issuing birth certificates to children but also navigating court proceedings to declare deceased children and fathers in Syria legally dead or missing, as well as facilitating divorces to ensure that women and their children could access social benefits. During the documentation process, challenges arose in officially recognising the fathers of the children as deceased or missing due to the fact that from the moment they travelled to the territory controlled by the Islamic State, they were listed as wanted individuals for extremism. Through the documentation process conducted in the child's best interest, legal conditions were established to ensure non-discrimination and non-stigmatisation of the repatriated children. This facilitated their access to various services in accordance with the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan, thereby assisting their integration into society.

Social Rehabilitation as a Way to Reintegrate Children into Kazakhstani Society

The Director of Pravo Olga Ryl pointed out that the goal of working with repatriated children was to integrate them into Kazakhstani society and show other behavioural and life strategies, unlike those they saw in ISIS.⁴⁴

The Pravo and its Shans Centre is a socially oriented non-governmental organisation that has previously worked with minors who found themselves in difficult life situations and with children in contact with the law. There are seventeen Shans Centres in Kazakhstan, which house children's hotels for temporary accommodation and a multidisciplinary team of specialists, including lawyers, psychologists, social workers, and teachers. After a month-long stay at the Flamingo rehabilitation oper, women and their children returned to their home regions, where their rehabilitation and reintegration process continued for a year and a half at the local Shans Centre. The Shans Centre collaborated with various government agencies in its work with the children, including the Committee for the Protection of Children's Rights under the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The chief expert of the Committee for the Protection of Children's Rights, during a speech at a practical seminar, emphasised that following the adaptation period in the Flamingo rehabilitation camp, the primary responsibility of practitioners in the regions is to establish a comfortable environment for children returning from zones of terrorist activity.⁴⁵

It is important to note that the returned women and children were equated to people in difficult life situations and need of special social services by the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan On Special Social Services (December 29, 2008) and the Standard for the Provision of Special Social Services to Children and Families in Difficult Life Situations (June 25, 2019).⁴⁶ Special social services, according to the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan, are a set of services aimed at providing a person (family) in a difficult life situation with conditions for overcoming social problems and creating opportunities to participate in the life of society along with other citizens.⁴⁷ Thus, the experience of working with people in difficult situations was taken as a basis which determined the emphasis on social rehabilitation.⁴⁸

Considering the aforementioned risks, reintegration into Kazakhstani society was addressed in the following areas. Firstly, efforts focused on the psychological rehabilitation of women and the restoration of their social skills for living in Kazakhstani society. Since children in Kazakhstan remained under the care of their mothers, the psychological well-being and successful rehabilitation and reintegration of the mothers had a profound impact on the rehabilitation and reintegration of the children. In terms of psychological rehabilitation, psychologists provided support not only by offering psychological assistance to the women but also by improving their interactions with their own children. A psychologist from the Shans Centre in Astana said in an interview, "[w]e taught women to interact with their own children".⁴⁹ In order to restore social skills and opportunities for reintegration for these women, in addition to social benefits, monthly food baskets and professional courses were provided for their further employment. Secondly, efforts were focused on the social rehabilitation of children to ensure their successful reintegration into a new social environment. From the moment of their arrival at the Flamingo rehabilitation camp, the process of socialisation for the children began. They were first introduced to the routines of a typical Kazakhstani family, which included activities such as waking up, brushing teeth, exercising, having breakfast, and engaging in either study or structured leisure activities.

In the rehabilitation camp Flamingo, there was a Psychological-Medical-Pedagogical Commission (PMPC) to determine the knowledge, social skills, and psychological development of children, including educational needs. According to the PMPC, many children are falling behind in education when compared to their peers. Therefore, educational sessions were organized in subjects including Arabic, English, Mathematics, Russian, Kazakh, and basic Geography. As Olga Ryl said in the interview, the Flamingo rehabilitation camp tried to cover the primary school programme up to and including the 4th grade. After the children arrived in the region, in August 2019 a Summer School was organised at the Shans Centres to fill in the gaps in knowledge. All these educational activities were aimed at getting children closer to their age in the classroom. This has reduced the threat of stigmatisation in the school environment. In addition, the practitioners managed to motivate children to study well and attend additional classes with tutors at the Shans Centres in order to quickly move into the appropriate class for their age. As a result, many children do well in school today. In November 2021, two years after the completion of the humanitarian operations Zhusan and Rusafa, the Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Republic of Kazakhstan, Aruzhan Sain, reported that half of the returned school-age children (252) were excellent and good students, seven became participants and prize winners of various Olympiads, 60 were participants and prize winners of various creative competitions.⁵⁰ As the practitioners of the Shans centre noted, children are diligent students with sharp minds. They understood that to survive and find their place in Kazakhstani society, they needed to excel academically.

The training provided in school was not solely focused on bridging knowledge gaps but also on becoming familiar with the rules of schooling in Kazakhstan.

In particular, having become accustomed to gender segregation in ISIS, children had to be prepared for girls and boys to be educated together. The children received instructions and a tour of the school. The girls we talked to at the rehabilitation camp allowed for co-education, with the condition of sitting with the boys behind different desks. In Kazakhstani schools, it is customary to wear a school uniform without a hijab. The school-age girls who returned mostly wore the hijab and were allowed to wear a headband when attending school. Also, children had limitations in drawing people, but concessions were made, and they could choose not to draw people or animals. During physical education, the girls wore sports uniforms, but they were looser and non-strapping. The preliminary work on comprehensive school preparation has helped children to reintegrate into their new school environment more smoothly and successfully.

In addition to mandatory classes, children attended various clubs and sports sections, which promote personal development and the formation of new social ties and, accordingly, deeper integration into Kazakhstani society. As part of the socialisation, children of pre-school age were placed in kindergartens, like all Kazakhstani children.

The third area, children's interaction with the wider community, was also addressed. The returned children did not know the history, traditions, mentality, and values of Kazakhstani society. To help them become familiar with their own country of residence, visits to museums, exhibitions, excursions, cultural events, and children's entertainment centres were organised. In the Shans Centre, both national holidays, such as Nauryz, and universal holidays, such as the secular New Year's, were held with the participation of children.

During practical work with women and children returnees, practitioners noted the difference in this category of children who found themselves in a difficult life situation. These children

are religious and have been performing *namaz* since they were seven. Therefore, at the Shans Centre, theologians were also involved in working with them to, as theologian Layla Rysakova put it, “increase resistance to religious extremism”.⁵¹ This theologian did not limit herself to classes on Islam but applied a broader humanistic approach, trying to introduce children to the achievements of spiritual culture, instil respect for different religions, and promote the development of thinking in children. Unlike with women, in working with children, special emphasis was not placed solely on theology. Instead, psychologists, teachers, and social workers took the lead in their rehabilitation. At the same time, it is essential to consider the children’s religiosity, as noted by these professionals, when working with this group.

Due to the differences in this category of children who find themselves in a difficult life situation, the interdepartmental working group developed a special algorithm for working with them, as specified in the Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan Rules and Terms for Social Rehabilitation of Children Affected by Terrorist Activity (09/04/2020).⁵² This Order specifically designates children affected by terrorist activity as a distinct category. Monitoring of social rehabilitation is carried out by the body for the protection of children’s rights. The overwhelming majority of practical work with children is assigned to educational organisations - schools. The term of social rehabilitation, according to the Order, is a calendar year with the possibility of extension.

Thus, in work with Kazakhstani returnee children, the focus was on their reintegration into a safe social environment with measures to mitigate threats and risks of stigmatisation from the social environment at the levels of family, school, and society. Initially, acting within the existing legal framework for the provision of special social services to people in difficult life situations, a specific document on social rehabilitation was developed based on the experience of working with returnee children. This document identified them as “children affected by terrorist activities.”

Challenges of Rehabilitation Work with Returnee Children at the Present Stage

Psychologists point out that rehabilitation work with children who have experienced traumatic events in childhood should be long-term.⁵³ Otherwise, unresolved childhood trauma can have a negative impact on personal development and lead to problems with identity formation and, as a consequence, to deviant behaviour, such as criminal acts, drug use, and suicidal tendencies. In addition, according to VERA indicators, the experience of violence in childhood and the involvement of family members in violent extremism are risk factors for the child’s involvement in violent extremism as they grow older.⁵⁴ In Kazakhstan, after a year of working on the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees, local experts involved in the process began discussing whether special attention should be given to the continued rehabilitation of children. Risks that experts and practitioners see for the further development of returnee children were identified during participant observation and interviews. These are the dangers of glorifying a *shahid* father, mental constructs of ISIS that remain in children’s memory, and the (in)effectiveness of deradicalisation of their mothers. On the other hand, opponents of further special work for these children argued that increased focus might trigger memories of Syria, potentially leading to re-traumatisation and stigmatisation. Consequently, they reasoned that the existing support provided by school psychologists would be adequate for addressing the children’s needs.

At the moment, returnee children study in schools and are under the supervision of school psychologists. As noted above, children affected by terrorist activities represent a special

category of children among children in difficult life situations; hence, their psychological support requires additional competencies. The problem of increasing the competencies of school psychologists is a serious challenge for the long-term process of rehabilitation and reintegration.

The training of school psychologists, as well as psychologists of non-governmental organisations involved in rehabilitation work, is the focus of joint international projects of the government of Kazakhstan. In 2021, as part of a joint project of the Government of Kazakhstan and the US State Department, Dr Stephen Wayne, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, and his colleagues conducted seminars, webinars, and round tables to train school psychologists and NGO psychologists in methods of working with this category of children.⁵⁵ In 2022, the circle of people involved in the seminars on psychological support for returnee children expanded. Namely, several female returnees were included, who, along with everyone else, learned the skills of providing psychological assistance to themselves and their children. An important aspect of the participation of women returnees in the seminars was that they had the opportunity to talk about their problems and the problems of their children and receive recommendations. A separate block of seminars was devoted to the topic of psychological trauma and trauma-informed care in working with returnee children and their

In 2022-2023, UNICEF experts, in collaboration with the Department of Psychology at LN Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Kazakhstan), undertook a joint project titled *Creation and Support of a National Center for Resource Groups on Education, Psychosocial Support, and Mental Health of Children and Their Families*.

As part of this initiative, an online course was conducted for school psychologists across all regions, focusing on *Providing Social and Psychological Assistance to Families and Children Returning from Conflict Zones*. Additionally, a supervision seminar and a workshop on *Application of Gender-Sensitive Indicators in Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs for Families Returning from Conflict Zones* were held. The project also produced several key teaching and methodological materials, including the *Practical Guide to Working with Children and Families Returned from Conflict Zones* and the *Guide to the Application of Gender-Sensitive Indicators for the Implementation of Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs for Families Returned from Conflict Zones*. The National Center for Resource Groups on Education, Psychosocial Support, and Mental Health of Children and Their Families was established within the Department of Psychology as a result of this international project.

The seminars showed that work with returnee children at the present stage should be more targeted with each specific case, based on the child's interaction with the different social environments where he or she is involved. Although the Kazakhstani experience of social rehabilitation and reintegration of children has shown good results, there are cases of outbursts of aggression in children, memory problems, and difficulties in interacting with school teachers because of their stay in conflict zones. Therefore, work with children should continue since the consequences of staying in the conflict zone are long-term.

The next serious challenge is the prospective return of fathers to their families. Some children's fathers did not die in ISIS but returned as part of the Zhusan Operation, were convicted, and are serving a prison term under extremism articles (37 people). At the moment, as Olga Ryl, the Director of Pravo said in an interview, the men serving their sentences are trying to apply for parole and probation control due to the fact that they have minor children.⁵⁶ The return of fathers to the family and their influence on children is also an important topic of work with returnee children, which requires serious attention and work not only with children but also

with their families. In addition, as they grow older, children begin to be interested in family history, and in the case of the death of the father, the circumstances of his death also become a challenge for the child's relatives and for psychologists.

Based on the above, the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnee children should be supplemented by the formation of resilience to the risks of involvement in violent extremism and re-traumatisation. The resilience component involves maintaining an integrated life, intentions for personal growth, and a positive life project in the long term, despite possible triggers that refer to the traumatic experience of being in a conflict zone.⁵⁷ The need to develop resilience in returnee children is also a serious challenge and requires further improvement of the Kazakhstani approach.

Conclusion

Restoring the right to life, safety, and healthy development of returnee children is the main goal of the Kazakhstani approach to rehabilitation and reintegration. The attitude towards returnee children was devoid of securitisation, and from the beginning of the rehabilitation and reintegration process, they were considered victims of terrorist activities. This perspective was expressed in speeches by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and other government officials and formalised in a particular document — *The Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan*. It was essential to restore the legal status of both children and their mothers to implement children's rights. In addressing the documentation of children and mothers, the approach prioritised the best interests of the child. It focused on creating a safe, stigma-free social environment for the child's development. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of children have Kazakhstan as their birthplace. However, there were a number of hardships in documenting women, primarily due to the difficulty in proving the deaths of their husbands and children in Syria, which consequently impacted their ability to receive the necessary social benefits related to the loss of a breadwinner or support for large families.

In the Kazakhstani approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration of children after their return to the region, the emphasis was placed on social rehabilitation, aiming to facilitate their reintegration into Kazakhstani society and to create a supportive environment for their full development. Within the framework of social rehabilitation, the emphasis was placed on three key areas: first, on the psychological and social rehabilitation of the mothers with whom the children live; second, on preparing the children for school to reduce the educational gap with their peers and minimise the risks of stigmatisation in the school environment; and third, on their integration into the broader community by helping them assimilate its traditions, values, mental characteristics, and behavioural models.

As returnee children grow up, they face new challenges that require the development of resilience against factors leading to involvement in violent extremism, criminal behaviour, and social marginalisation. It necessitates the development of new approaches and methods and the exchange of experience between practitioners from different countries. Currently, efforts are underway to establish a network of practitioners from Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, who have conducted humanitarian operations to return their citizens. The goal of this network is to facilitate mutual learning and the exchange of experience in the rehabilitation and integration of children and their families, helping to identify effective methods and practices.

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