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# Repatriation and reintegration of children affected by conflict in Syria and Iraq to Central Asia

A Compendium of Promising Practices from  
Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan



## Acknowledgements

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# FOREWORD

*Geneva, Switzerland, April 2023*

Since 2019, more than 1,100 children have been repatriated to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan from camps and places of detention in Syria and Iraq. In facilitating their return and reintegration, political leaders in these countries have demonstrated a remarkable commitment to children's rights—one that serves as an example to the international community. These children who have been repatriated are victims of armed conflict and were either born abroad or traveled there with a caregiver. While living in camps and detention facilities they were deprived of liberty, vulnerable to preventable illness, at risk of exploitation and violence, and lacked access to education and other basic services. Recognizing the risk of inaction, the four countries profiled in this paper made the choice to repatriate and reintegrate these children. While it was a challenging decision, it was the only way to uphold these children's fundamental rights and restore their futures.

To support Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with gender responsive and human rights-based repatriation and reintegration of their nationals returning primarily from Syria and Iraq, the European Commission Service for Foreign Policy Instruments initiated a joint EU-UN program. Under this program, and in partnership between UNICEF and UN Women, these Central Asian countries have worked towards ensuring family-based care, education, mental health and psychosocial support, and other services that foster children's recovery and development. The reintegration of returning children and families under this program has contributed to the empowerment of vulnerable individuals and populations, elevating their potential for wider socio-economic integration and, in turn, reducing poverty and social exclusion. I would like to thank the European Union for providing this support for further enabling reintegration—including this documentation of good practices.

This programme has contributed to creating an opportunity to accompany these governments in their work to reintegrate children. This has been a rich partnership and has led to an exchange of knowledge and good practices profiled in this report. This compendium could not have been possible without the proactive collaboration of the authorities in these countries, the returning families and the children themselves.

We hope that this document will not only shed light on the strong examples presented by countries in Central Asia, but also serve as an inspiration for countries who still think repatriation is too complex, or reintegration too challenging. Having engaged with social workers across the region to support children from camps and detention facilities to return to their communities of origin, UNICEF has witnessed that reintegration is possible. With the right support, these children are recovering from their experiences, making remarkable academic progress, and charting a future for themselves that would have been unimaginable only a few years ago.

With thousands of children from dozens of other countries still languishing in camps and detention facilities in Syria, we know that there is much work ahead. All of these children need political leadership and practical reintegration support in order that their childhoods can be restored and their future safeguarded. We are grateful for countries that have charted an exemplary path and hope it can serve as a guide for others in the weeks and years to come. UNICEF remains committed to accompanying countries on this journey to put children's best interests at the forefront of decision-making.



**Afshan Khan**

UNICEF Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia

# ACRONYMS

<b>CCRP</b>	Committee on children’s rights protection, Ministry of Education (Kazakhstan)
<b>CRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>CRC Committee</b>	United Nations Committee on the Rights of the child
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>ISIL</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
<b>KIIs</b>	Key informant interviews
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental Organization
<b>NRC</b>	Resource Centre for Education, Psychosocial Support and Mental Health for Children and Families, Eurasian National University (Kazakhstan)
<b>MoLSWM</b>	Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration (Kyrgyzstan)
<b>MoSPM</b>	Ministry of Social Protection and Migration
<b>OHCHR</b>	United Nations Office of The High Commissioner of Human Rights
<b>RCSK</b>	Red Crescent Society Kyrgyzstan
<b>RSCAC</b>	Republican Centre for Social Adaptation of Children (Uzbekistan)
<b>TASHKHIS</b>	Republican Centre for professional orientation and psychological and pedagogical diagnosis (Uzbekistan)
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children’s Fund

# ABOUT THIS REPORT

In May 2021, the European Commission Foreign Policy Instrument funded the initiation of a joint EU-UN program to support the Central Asian States of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in providing child, gender responsive, human rights-based, and age sensitive support for their nationals returning primarily from Syria and Iraq. Under this programme, UNICEF and UN Women have been working with government and local implementing partners to strengthen the knowledge, skills and capacity of professionals and practitioners who work with children and families in the provision of rights-based, age and gender-sensitive services, as well as to document and share experiences between countries. A description of the activities undertaken in the EU-UN programme can be found in Annex 1.

It is against this background, as the 18-month programme draws to a close, that the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office commissioned this regional report. What follows is a summary of approaches taken by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the form of 'country snapshots' and a compilation of promising practices identified in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as being beneficial in protecting the rights of children, as guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights instruments, and enabling their successful reintegration into their communities of origin.

The report is informed by a series of in-depth interviews, meetings and consultations with key experts and stakeholders involved in the repatriation and reintegration of children from Iraq and Syria to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, which took place between October 2022 and January 2023, as well as interviews with parents who returned to Kazakhstan with their children. Due to the challenges in obtaining the relevant permissions to carry out consultations with stakeholders in Tajikistan during the timeframe of the assignment, it was not possible to reflect the promising practices of Tajikistan in the compendium. The country snapshot for Tajikistan

was developed on the basis of desk review material retrieved from online sources and provided by UNICEF. An overview of the methodology and stakeholders interviewed can be found in Annex 2.

This report is not a critical assessment of the repatriation and reintegration procedures in the countries in question and should not be relied upon as such. Instead, the report reflects on the lessons learned and presents the positive practices as told by those involved in the repatriation and reintegration process, including their recommendations for other States that may be considering the repatriation of children. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, only a select group of stakeholders were identified for in-depth interviews; it is well recognised that the nature of this methodology may well have limitations. Due to ethical and access-related considerations, no returnee children were directly consulted on their experiences of the repatriation and reintegration process. Children's views and experiences were however incorporated indirectly by asking stakeholders to recount what children have told them. Whilst a lack of direct child participation was important from a child protection perspective, this also presents a limitation in the nature of information collected.

In Kazakhstan, parents of returnee children were consulted, and their views and perspectives incorporated in the compendium, thereby further indirectly reflecting the experiences of children. There were challenges in obtaining the relevant permissions to carry out consultations with stakeholders in Tajikistan during the timeframe of the assignment, such that it was not possible to reflect the experiences of Tajikistan in the compendium. The country snapshot for Tajikistan was developed based on desk review material retrieved from online sources and provided by UNICEF.

# INTRODUCTION

When the so-called “Islamic State” (ISIL) established a self-declared “caliphate” in 2014, over 40,000 foreign nationals reportedly travelled to Iraq and Syria either of their own initiative or based on an extensive recruitment effort to garner international support. While estimates vary, and reliable data remains unavailable, it is understood that some children travelled to Syria and Iraq at this time – almost always accompanied by an adult caregiver.<sup>1</sup> Many more were born in areas controlled by ISIL in the years between 2014-2019. When the group lost its last territorial hold in Syria in 2019, evacuation corridors were established and women and children exiting these areas were transferred to camps and detention facilities in Northern Syria and Iraq. As of December 2022, more than 37,400 foreign nationals were being held in al-Hol and Roj camps in Syria.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 27,300 of this foreign population are from neighbouring Iraq, while more than 10,000 are from around 60 other countries.<sup>3</sup> Nearly two-thirds of foreign camp detainees are children, most under the age of 12.<sup>4</sup>

The conditions in the camps are well-documented and it is undisputed that the consequences for children are dire: a number of children’s rights are at risk, not least including the right to life, to education, to water and sanitation, to health, to adequate housing and to be free from hunger and from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment.<sup>5</sup> Far too many children in these facilities have died of preventable causes<sup>6</sup> and all are deprived of liberty and have been punished for the perceived affiliation of their adult caregivers. This is despite the well-recognised principle of international human rights law that children whose parents are allegedly affiliated with ISIL are survivors of egregious violations of their rights and as such, should be considered victims first and foremost.<sup>7</sup>

In recognition of these facts, UNICEF has repeatedly urged governments to facilitate the return, rehabilitation and reintegration of their children affected by conflict in Iraq and Syria, with the best interests of the child as a primary consideration at all times.<sup>8</sup> This call for action has been endorsed

by the Committee on the Rights of the Child<sup>9</sup> and several others.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the return and repatriation of children and their families who are detained in inhumane conditions in overcrowded camps and detention facilities in Syria and Iraq is considered to be the only international law-compliant response to the increasingly complex and perilous human rights, humanitarian and security situation faced by those children and families.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, there has been a persistent reluctance by States to repatriate their nationals, including children. For those who are willing, a considerable number of operational and consular challenges have often impeded or slowed-down the process of return. This has left children stuck in protracted detention situations without access to basic services such as education, health and protection.

In stark contrast to the inaction of a number of States, is the response of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, who represent a small handful of countries to have undertaken large-scale repatriation and reintegration efforts. The governments of these countries have been commended for their ambitious operations and the commitment they have demonstrated to the fulfilment of children’s rights.<sup>12</sup> The political, financial, social and logistical resolve required to respond to the protection needs of women, children and their families, was significant. The four Central Asian States were faced with populations in Iraq and Syria which lacked documentation and children which, given their experiences, were left with medical conditions and complex mental health and psychosocial needs. As of March 2023, a total of 1,181 children have been returned to Kazakhstan (526), Kyrgyzstan (120), Uzbekistan (333) and Tajikistan (248), with government counterparts and supporting local and international organisations, striving to provide child and human rights-based, age and gender-sensitive support to families of the returnees.



This compendium shares the Central Asian experience in repatriating their nationals, reviewing both what worked and what was learned during the process. To a large extent, these Central Asian countries are exemplary in their efforts and can pave the way for other countries pursuing the repatriation of their nationals to do so in line with international human rights and child protection standards.



**“I would wish everyone, all countries [...] if your children are there: return them. Children are not responsible for their parents’ actions, and they have rights that are enshrined in legislation all over the world and they must be protected.”<sup>13</sup>**

## CONDITION OF CHILDREN UPON ARRIVAL

While living within territory controlled by ISIL, and during their subsequent displacement, transfer, and detention-like circumstances, many children directly experienced or witnessed violence. Most have lived for years under constant duress, often moving dozens of times in an attempt to find safety. During this time, access to food and services was scarce and medical services non-existent. Reflecting these extremely difficult experiences are the reports of professionals across all Central Asian countries which identify a range of medical, mental health and psychosocial needs of children arriving from Syria and Iraq.



**“The first time they came there was very strong fear and if there was even a slight noise, they were very afraid. We did our best to fight against this fear by explaining them: there is no need to be afraid or mistrustful. Later they developed this trust and belief.”<sup>14</sup>**

These medical needs ranged from easily treatable skin irritations to urgent medical treatments for children with significant injuries or disorders requiring surgery. Multiple stakeholders commented on the smaller physical stature and height of returnee children and almost all children were reported to have arrived with major learning gaps, having been deprived of years of formal schooling.

Stakeholders reported that most children across the returnee populations exhibited signs of distress and anxiety upon arrival. Older adolescents and unaccompanied and separated children were found to be particularly anxious, with many showing physical signs of anxiety and distress. Mental health and psychosocial distress is a natural reaction among some returning children who have had extremely difficult experiences. Family separation, repeated transitions in care arrangements, and language and cultural adaption are often aggravating factors in the sources of stress facing many children upon return. Some children exhibited tendencies towards violent play or aggression towards peers.

# COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS



# TAJIKISTAN



“At five years old, Firuza enjoys attending kindergarten and early learning sessions. She has a bright future ahead of her, thanks to the tireless efforts of those who have been supporting her. Firuza’s story is a testament to the power of determination and the importance of supporting vulnerable children in their time of need.”<sup>15</sup>

## Profile of returnee children

A total of 248 children have returned to Tajikistan from Iraq and Syria.<sup>16</sup> This includes 84 children (39 girls and 45 boys) who were repatriated from detention facilities in Iraq in 2019; 102 children (54 girls and 48 boys) who were returned with their caregivers from Syria in a formal repatriation operation in July 2022; and 62 (35 girls and 27 boys) children who returned to Tajikistan outside of the formal government operations and are now living with their biological families in the community.<sup>17</sup> There is a slightly larger proportion of girls (52 per cent) than boys out of the cohort of returning children (including those who returned outside of a government repatriation operation). Six of the returnee children have a disability.<sup>18</sup>

## Process and procedure

The children who returned in 2019 from Iraq were being held alongside their mothers in Iraqi prison; their mothers remain detained in Iraq. The government of Tajikistan worked with the government of Iraq and UNICEF to obtain consent from mothers, arrange for the transfer of guardianship and restore the children’s documents.<sup>19</sup> Upon arrival in Tajikistan, it is reported that the children were placed in a sanatorium in

## Key facts and figures



248

Children returned in total



102

Children returned from Syria under government operation



84

Unaccompanied children from Iraq



62

Self returnees



52%

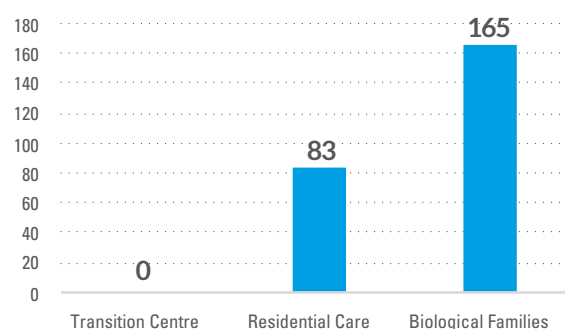
Girls



48%

Boys

## Where children are residing now





Kharangon in Varzob, where they received medical care and individualized support from psychologists.<sup>20</sup> After two and a half months, the children were taken to residential care institutions<sup>21</sup> where all but one remain to date – one child was returned to his relatives in October 2022.<sup>22</sup> Apart from siblings, who were kept together to prevent family separation, the children were split up across 17 institutions across the country.<sup>23</sup> It has been reported that 15 families have expressed their desire to receive custody of the returnee children living in institutions but that there is an apprehension amongst other extended relatives to receive them, including concerns about perceived potential contact with law enforcement that may ensue.<sup>24</sup> The 102 children who arrived from Syria in August 2022 were residing in a transition center with their caregivers<sup>25</sup> until March 2023, when they were released into community-based care with their caregivers.

An interagency working group made up of 12 agencies/Ministries was established under the Executive Office of the President in order to guide and implement these repatriation operations,<sup>26</sup> with the Strategy on Countering Extremism and Terrorism in the Republic of Tajikistan 2021–2025 providing the framework to “to provide [child repatriates] with material, psychological assistance and to adapt to normal life.”<sup>27</sup> The Ministry of Health and Social Protection has recently initiated the process of developing a National Programme of social rehabilitation of repatriated children and their caregivers, but this document is, at the time of writing, yet to be reviewed and approved by the Government.<sup>28</sup>



## Firuzā's story of resilience

Firuzā's story began with a difficult start to life. Born in a country affected by conflict, she and her four siblings returned to Tajikistan when she was only three months old. Unfortunately, her mother's conviction and imprisonment caused the family to be separated: Firuzā's siblings went to live with their paternal grandmother and Firuzā was returned to her maternal grandmother's care.

But that wasn't the end of Firuzā's challenges. Unlike her siblings, Firuzā had no birth certificate. This made her "invisible" to the state's social protection systems, leaving her future, including her education, uncertain.

Despite the challenges Firuzā faced, the Consulate of Tajikistan and a professional

lawyer stepped in to help. They submitted Firuzā's case to the Court with an appeal to issue a birth certificate for the baby girl. It was a long and challenging process, but eventually, after significant efforts from all parties involved, Firuzā was granted citizenship.

At five years old, Firuzā enjoys attending kindergarten and early learning sessions. She has a bright future ahead of her, thanks to the tireless efforts of those who have been supporting her. Firuzā's story is a testament to the power of determination and the importance of supporting vulnerable children in their time of need.

*\*names have been changed for protection purposes*

# KAZAKHSTAN



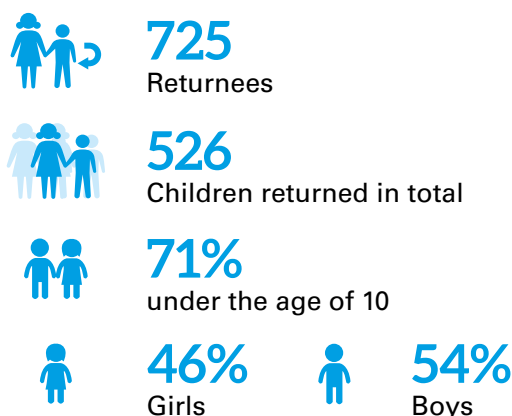
My child ...was born in Syria. A very calm, shy boy. He is doing well in school. He goes swimming, I signed him up for wrestling. He attends ART-sport. He attends all clubs for free. As a mother of many children, I have benefits, for example, public transportation and clubs are free for children. Gradually, the child is becoming self-confident. There is no discrimination and xenophobia towards the child. He communicates with other children. He has friends”<sup>29</sup>

## Profile of returnee children

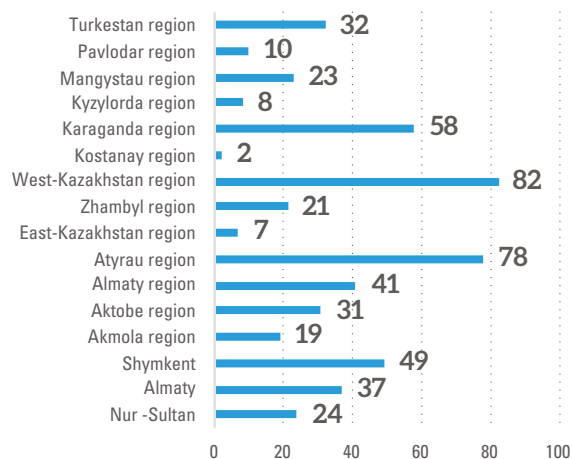
Kazakhstan’s two humanitarian operations, ‘Zhusan’ and ‘Rusafa’, saw a total of 526 children, returned from Syria (from Al-Hol and Roj camps) and Iraq, a majority of whom (71 per cent) were younger than 10 years old, and 50 of whom returned without parental care.<sup>30</sup> Rusafa was a small operation in comparison to the multi-stage Zhusan operation, and involved the return of 14 children from Iraq, where they were being held in prison with their mothers.<sup>31</sup> The mothers of the Rusafa children did not return with them as they are serving life sentences in Iraqi prisons. There was a slightly larger proportion of boys (54 per cent) than girls (46 per cent) amongst the total cohort of children returned. An unverified number of teenage girls returned with children of their own.<sup>32</sup>

In the vast majority of cases, children were either born in Iraq or Syria or taken there by their parents, though stakeholders recounted two cases where children travelled to Syria without their parents. One case involved a girl who married a citizen of another country at 14 years old and departed with her husband;<sup>33</sup> another involved a 15-year-old girl who ran

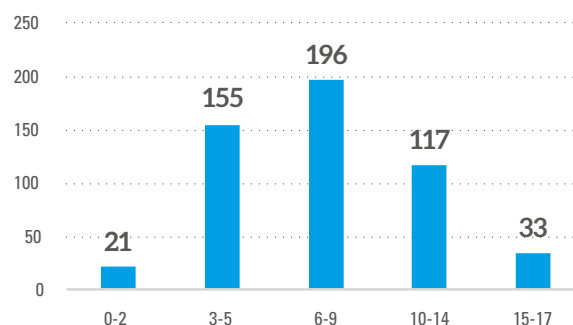
## Key facts and figures



### Regions children returned to



### Age distribution of returnee children



away from her family, with whom she had a fractured relationship, before travelling to Syria alone.<sup>34</sup> Child and at times, forced, marriage remains a factor that has contributed to girls' and women's vulnerability to online recruitment as well as to their movement to Syria. A number of stakeholders reflected on gender dynamics and dysfunctional family relationships as factors that contributed to women's travel to Syria. One professional reported that in approximately 40 per cent of the cases he worked on, the husband had departed with the children without the mother's

knowledge or permission, only notifying her of their whereabouts upon arrival in Syria and requesting that she follow.<sup>35</sup>

While disaggregated data relating to disability amongst returnee children is not available, stakeholders mentioned observing a range of physical and developmental disabilities among the children they worked with, including autism, developmental delays, epilepsy and hearing and/or vision impediments.

## Process and procedure

Kazakhstan's repatriation programmes were first initiated and further sanctioned by way of Presidential orders.<sup>36</sup> An Operational Working Group was subsequently formed to carry out the Zhusan and Rusafa operations, the membership of which included a range of relevant government ministries to ensure the operation was approached in an interagency and interdisciplinary manner.<sup>37</sup>

Whilst information about the identification phase under the Zhusan operation is limited, it is understood that representatives of the Operational Working Group travelled to Syria and worked with camp representatives to ascertain the whereabouts of Kazakh citizens and their children, provide them with consular services and carry out the voluntary evacuation.<sup>38</sup> Under the Rusafa operation, which involved the return of unaccompanied children who had been in prison with their mothers in Iraq, UNICEF Kazakhstan and UNICEF Iraq maintained communication with partners on the ground to support the identification, provision of legal aid and repatriation processes.<sup>39</sup> As the children were unaccompanied, a team of specialists<sup>40</sup> were present on the charter flight home to attend to the children's needs. UNICEF provided training for the professionals who were on the flight on identifying early childhood illnesses; communicating and establishing rapport with children; and identifying and understanding their needs.<sup>41</sup> Whilst an interagency approach was taken, it is understood that the National Security Committee of Kazakhstan held overall responsibility for coordination during the identification and repatriation phase.<sup>42</sup> Return was voluntary and in cases where prison sentences or other complex circumstances prevented mothers from returning with their children, they provided written consent.

During the early reception phase, women and children from Zhusan operations were placed in the 'Centre for Rehabilitation and Adaption' (referred from here as the 'Aktau Centre'). Children who arrived under the Rusafa programme did not go to the Aktau Centre upon return to Kazakhstan; one participant reported that they were taken straight to the capital city, Astana, where they lived in family-type accommodation and were provided with time to recover and adapt.<sup>43</sup>

As all of the men who were returned under the Zhusan operations were taken from the airport and straight into custody, only women and children were resident in the Aktau Centre, where they were stayed in large dormitory style rooms housing four women and their children in each; the women were given the choice of who they wanted to share with.<sup>44</sup> The only time children were separated from their mothers was when a mother was hospitalised for treatment; in these cases, children were taken into the care of their mother's friends and specialists in the centre.<sup>45</sup> Unaccompanied children were allocated a caregiver or nurse to look after them specifically but were also often cared for by familiar women who had known their mothers whilst living in Syria;<sup>46</sup> they shared a room with those women and their biological children. Given the range of medical and psychosocial needs the children arrived with, the immediate priority in the Aktau Centre was the provision of emergency medical treatment and mental health and psychosocial support.<sup>47</sup> Attention was given to providing a safe environment for the children to learn coping mechanisms to manage reactions to distressing experiences and memories through creative activities, exercise, games and psychotherapy.<sup>48</sup> Each child underwent a psychological and pedagogical



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assessment to ascertain their needs and access whether any demonstrated tendencies towards violence or aggression.<sup>49</sup> An individual plan was subsequently drafted to support their reintegration, tailored to their age and level of development.<sup>50</sup> The government provided clothes and toys (including a puppet theatre) for the children and the psychologists arranged activities such as contests with prizes and drawing classes.

Another key task at the Aktau Centre was issuing identity documentation to children born in Syria and Iraq and restoring the documents of those who were born in Kazakhstan. As all identification documents and passports had been lost or destroyed, this was a necessary act of consular assistance.<sup>51</sup> Birth certificates of those born in Kazakhstan were restored by way of coordination with maternity hospitals, records of public service centres and border services.<sup>52</sup> As a national requirement, DNA testing was carried out by the genomic commission, the results of which were filed with the court in order to obtain Kazakh citizenship for the children and to facilitate family identification

and reunification processes.<sup>53</sup> Although a form of identity documentation was provided to the children immediately upon arrival in the Aktau Centre, the process of issuing citizenship documents took longer (four months on average).<sup>54</sup> This work was continued by the NGO Chance Social and Legal Support Centre when the children returned to their regions of origin.

After one month in the Aktau Center, women and children were supported to return to their places of origin. Some went to live with their relatives, while others moved into rented accommodation or were placed in one of the rehabilitation centres functioning across the country under the mandate of Chance / Pravo Public Fund (referred to hereinafter as 'Chance centers').<sup>55</sup> The individual development programmes that were compiled for children in the Aktau Centre were sent to the local Chance Centre and used to monitor their continued reintegration.<sup>56</sup>





We taught to them to express their emotions: what they felt then, what they feel now, and develop emotional intelligence, not only so they learn what to feel, but that they can ... explain what they feel so that they can be easily understood. We didn't have much time to work individually with them, this was a general task with them."<sup>57</sup>

The women and children who went to the Chance centers were those who did not have an immediate place to go and remained there for between one week and 6 months.<sup>58</sup> Unaccompanied children were first placed in the Chance centres, and then, in some instances, moved to the Centre of Adaptations of Minors, until guardianship with extended relatives could be established.<sup>59</sup> Children without parental care whose options of being reunited with a relative or in any other family-based alternative care arrangement had been exhausted, were placed in either a Centre for the Support of Children (falling under the Department of Education) or, for children younger than 3 years old, an infant home (falling under the Department of Health) until such family-based alternatives could be identified.<sup>60</sup> The Child Rights Protection Committee explained that the Commission on Issues of Minors in the regions, which are chaired by the Deputy Akim, coordinated the decision-making process regarding family placements, under the overall supervision of the Ministry of Education.<sup>61</sup>

To aid in longer term reintegration, NGOs such as the *Akniet Fund* work in partnership with provincial religious affairs departments and under the overall coordination of the Ministry of Education<sup>62</sup> to provide support to returnee mothers. This includes the provision of training and skills development courses which strive to increase employability and, in turn, their independence and ability to care for children. In 2020, the Committee of Religious Affairs offered small cash grants to returnee mothers, of approximately 1500 dollars, which they could, with a successful application, use to establish a small business.<sup>63</sup> Social, legal and mental health and psychosocial support services were initially outsourced to the NGO, *Chance*, based on a state social order, though the government later took over case management by direct implementation.<sup>64</sup>

While all returnee children were enrolled in school upon return, this was done based on an individual assessment that took into consideration the learning gaps acquired as a result of their time without formal schooling whilst living in Syria and/or Iraq.<sup>65</sup> Local education authorities, school psychologists and teachers worked to provide extra learning support to the children who experience developmental and learning delays on account of the schooling they have missed, with many of them now having progressed to being in the correct school year for their age.<sup>66</sup> In 2021 ICRC, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Information and Development, launched a pilot training programme with approximately 51 school psychologists and school social workers across four regions<sup>67</sup> involved in the rehabilitation and reintegration of families.<sup>68</sup>

# KYRGYZSTAN



“[The children] were so hungry for knowledge and education and so quickly caught up with classmates – all in correct year for age [I think]. In addition, they got subscribed for different clubs, culture, showing good results in every area”.<sup>69</sup>

## Profile of returnee children

In March 2021, 79 unaccompanied children were returned from Iraq under the “Meerim” operation (which translates to tender and love), whilst their mothers remained incarcerated in Iraqi prisons and were not allowed to return. Two children were not repatriated owing to lack of consent from their mothers, which was a mandatory prerequisite to return established by the government of Iraq. Of the children returned, 45 per cent were boys and 55 per cent were girls.<sup>70</sup> The majority of children were under 10 years of age. Nearly half were born abroad (in Turkey, Russia, Syria or Iraq), while the remainder were born in Kyrgyzstan and transported to Iraq by their parents.<sup>71</sup> One of the children was diagnosed with autism, one with cerebral palsy and one with a hearing impairment.<sup>72</sup>

According to stakeholders who had contact with the children returned under the Meerim operation, many of them had been living in Russia where their parents were working as labour migrants. The parents were approached with offers of better employment in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, which is how they came to be living there. These children were subsequently imprisoned in Iraq with their mothers who had been convicted of crimes and were serving long-term or life sentences. The repatriation of children without their mothers is likely to have a range of detrimental effects on their wellbeing and mental health, with family

## Key facts and figures



**120**  
children returned



**79**  
children placed in family-based kinship care

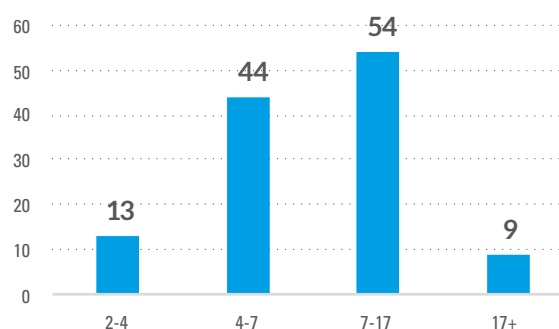


**50%**  
Girls



**50%**  
Boys

### Age distribution of returnee children



separation being known to present some of the most intense forms of stress on children.

At the time that consultations were carried out to inform the development of this report, plans were underway to return an additional caseload of Kyrgyz citizens from Syria and in February 2023, 41 children and 18 women were repatriated. Given the time of writing, the information in this report relates only to the 79 children returned under operation Meerim, and not this new caseload.<sup>73</sup>

## Process and procedure

The decision to return the children was initiated in mid-2019, with an operational working group of key stakeholders<sup>74</sup> subsequently formed to guide the process. The identification procedure began when the mothers in detention identified themselves as Kyrgyz citizens to the Iraqi authorities and this information was passed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>75</sup> UNICEF Iraq had been providing case management and legal supporting the children through partners in Iraq. DNA testing (a legal requirement in Iraq) was carried out to confirm the relationship between mother and child; this was a requirement stipulated by the authorities.<sup>76</sup> Age assessments were not carried out for the children as reliance was placed on the age reported by the mothers.<sup>77</sup>

With the support of UNICEF Kyrgyzstan, the government agreed on a set of non-negotiable child rights principles that would be respected throughout the process of returning the children. This included deciding that the best interests of the child would be the guiding principle in decision making. It was also agreed that there was no evidence available to suggest children's involvement in criminal activity and that there would be no prosecution of children upon return. In keeping with good practice, the Kyrgyz government also expressed intentions to prioritize swift family reunification, taking measures to uphold privacy and confidentiality, avoid stigma and discrimination and support social reintegration.<sup>78</sup>

Positively, a critical aspect of preparing for return involved the Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration (MoLSWM)<sup>79</sup> undertaking assessments of extended family members' abilities to provide appropriate care arrangements in the best interests of the child. The families provided a written application setting out their intention and willingness to be appointed as caretakers, which were later presented along with the results of MoLSWM assessments to the court who made the final decision on family placement and transfer of guardianship, with the best interests of the child as a primary consideration. This court process did not occur, however, until after the children had arrived at the initial reception centre.<sup>80</sup> The Red Crescent Society Kyrgyzstan (RCSK) and ICRC Kyrgyzstan conducting further assessments to continue to monitor extended families' suitability

and readiness to receive the children. This work was implemented under the leadership of government social workers who led the process of conducting case management. Simultaneously, UNICEF Kyrgyzstan carried out further activities prior to the children's arrival, including equipping the reception centre and carrying out trainings on child-friendly return procedures for members of the interagency group, as well as sessions with journalists on ethical reporting, to ensure neutral coverage of the children's return in a way that protected their confidentiality.

In January 2021 the first delegation of Kyrgyz representatives travelled to Iraq to initiate the process of repatriation, which involved preparing a case file for each child, obtaining written consent from the mothers and presenting each case to the High Court in Iraq to transfer custody of the children to the Kyrgyz Republic.<sup>81</sup> UNICEF Iraq country office and its legal partner supported this process throughout<sup>82</sup> and ICRC in Iraq were involved in visiting the mothers and children prior to repatriation.<sup>83</sup> The Kyrgyz Government issued a temporary travel document / repatriation certificate to the children to enable them to return.<sup>84</sup> In March 2021 a second delegation of officials,<sup>85</sup> travelled on a charter flight to Baghdad to receive the children and bring them back home.<sup>86</sup> UNICEF provided the charter flight as well as clothes, toys, diapers and other items for the children on the flight, and balloons, cookies and sweets and water and juices in the airport.<sup>87</sup> To respect the previously agreed child-friendly principles, all officials (with the exception of border force) that came into contact with the children during the flight and in the airport were in plain-clothes.<sup>88</sup> Professionals from the local social protection departments accompanied the children on the flight and Border Officials had been trained in child-friendly processes.



**“So we did everything to protect the children, their faces were not shown anywhere, their names were not disclosed, even when sent to families, or schools, no-one in the neighbourhood would know where they came from.”**

Upon arrival in Bishkek, the children were taken straight to the initial reception centre staffed by educators, nannies, and psychologists.<sup>89</sup> It was initially planned for children to remain in the initial reception center for two months, to enable sufficient time for their documents to be issued and for court procedures to appoint a member of the child’s extended family as guardian but delays in finalising these processes meant that the children remained in the centre for approximately four and a half months.<sup>90</sup> While guardianship procedures were in process, the center did not allow visitors and children were not allowed to leave. The children’s extended relatives did not know the location of the reception centre, although telephone communication was facilitated to enable them to speak to children.<sup>91</sup> Only specifically mandated state bodies, RCSK, ICRC, UNICEF and the reception centre staff, who were required to undergo a security vetting procedure as a prerequisite to their employment in the centre, were permitted to enter the site.<sup>92</sup> The reception centre area was guarded from the outside, passes were required for entry and all those permitted entry had to sign confidentiality agreements.<sup>93</sup>

At the reception centre, children received a full medical check-up by specialists from the Ministry of Health, including neuropathologists, and received vaccinations and treatment for conditions as required.<sup>94</sup> The initial medical examinations and treatment took two days, though a mobile clinic staffed by doctors from the Ministry of Health remained on site during the period of the children’s stay.<sup>95</sup> The children underwent an educational assessment to determine their level of learning and development and psychologists worked with children in groups to assess their mental health and psychosocial needs, resulting in a plan prepared for each child, including long and short-term goals. This

plan was provided to both the caregivers receiving the children and the local social protection department in their regions of return.<sup>96</sup> ICRC Kyrgyzstan also provided training for educators and technical staff at the reception centre.<sup>97</sup>

A theologian from the State Commission for Religious Affairs observed and worked with the children to assess their religious views and beliefs to ascertain whether any held views that ISIL might have taught them. The theologian prayed with them and spoke to them about general topics, gradually explaining the principles of peaceful Islam that is practiced in Kyrgyzstan. It is understood that the police carried out some form of observation of the older adolescent children related to determining the possibility of influence by ISIL ideology,<sup>98</sup> though there is little information available about this part of the procedure, and other professionals were of the opinion that the police had no involvement with the children in the centre, other than to provide security around the perimeter.

The social workers from the territorial division of social protection in which the reception centre was located worked in coordination with the State Registration Service to obtain birth certificates (for children born abroad) and restore identity documentation (for children born in Kyrgyzstan), and to prepare their cases to be presented in court in order to finalise the legal transfer of guardianship.<sup>99</sup> In line with child rights standards to take the child’s views into consideration, children were consulted at the transit centre about the next steps, and asked their views about the extended family members who had been suggested as guardians. Whilst pre-unification visitation was not allowed, ICRC supported local social workers to facilitate video calls between the children and their extended relatives prior to return which helped support children in their transition into care-arrangements with extended family members.<sup>100</sup> As soon as the court procedure was finalised, extended family members came to pick up the children and bring them home.<sup>101</sup> Importantly, and commendably, all of the children under the Meerim operation were placed in kinship care arrangements: none were placed in long-term institutional care.



**“The older children knew the relatives, but those born in Iraq didn’t know anything about the relatives: they were like strangers. The great part was when they were talking with their relatives [on the phone]: families were showing them their rooms and all the toys for them, giving them the sense that we are waiting for you, we are missing you, you do have a home. This part was really lovely, it really helped to strengthen the bonding between them.”<sup>102</sup>**

Once returned to their communities of origin, all but one child of school age were enrolled in local schools, with some joining the respective year for their age, but others requiring catch-up supplementary classes before this was possible. The approach taken with the over 18-year-old adolescents differed; while one enrolled in school, another 19-year-old girl who had previously been married in Iraq, did not feel psychologically ready to return to education.<sup>103</sup> In that case, the girl was enrolled in a three month skill-building course in sewing, with the support of RCSK.<sup>104</sup> While the teachers knew about the child’s background, they were instructed to inform the rest of the class that the children came from Russia, though one headteacher noted that the children themselves ended up informing their peers about their past.<sup>105</sup>

Social workers at local social protection departments provide support to the children and families in their communities, including assisting with obtaining social assistance for those families who were eligible according to national criteria.<sup>106</sup> While initially they carried out monthly assessments and monitoring of their needs in accordance with each family’s plan, including support with documentation, medical assistance and school enrolment, as time has passed this has reduced in frequency and support is now provided on a needs-basis.<sup>107</sup> ICRC worked in parallel with the social protection departments providing support to the families, including some initial financial support, mental health and psychosocial support, and continues to visit the families to date.<sup>108</sup>



**“At the beginning he couldn’t concentrate during the 45-minute lesson because it was very long for him to be in one class- he had concentration problems, gave him some time to go out, walk a little bit and go out. Now he has no problems. Now he has got adapted, he has friends together with them, he behaves as other children. What he eats is the same of the other children.”<sup>109</sup>**



## A new home, a new beginning

Adina Mahidilova\* recalls the day her two nephews arrived in Jalal-Abad, in the southern region of Kyrgyzstan: “My nephews were very frightened. They didn’t hug me or take my hand like my children did. And I was very worried about their condition, as the eldest one was not speaking.”

Her worries were combined with financial problems. When the children arrived, Adina didn’t even have a home. She rented an apartment where she lived with her two children, and it was difficult for her to now look after her two nephews.

To smooth the reintegration process of the children, UNICEF supported the family: “UNICEF helped us. They allocated money to us to buy necessary things such as clothing, shoes and

stationery for school”, – says the guardian of children, Adina.

The two boys had to adapt to the school curriculum and to life in a new place. “I made the decision to bring the two boys to the school,” recalls the head teacher of the elementary school, Zulfiya Kiyalbekova\*. It wasn’t even a question, I just could not leave the children without education. Yes, it was concerning but UNICEF came with the support needed. They conducted training sessions and seminars for teachers and explained what problems we could face and how we could solve them.”

And there were many problems. Apart from the language barrier, there were also mental health difficulties. The older boy had seen his father

and brother killed by a bomb. After what he saw, he stopped talking and smiling.

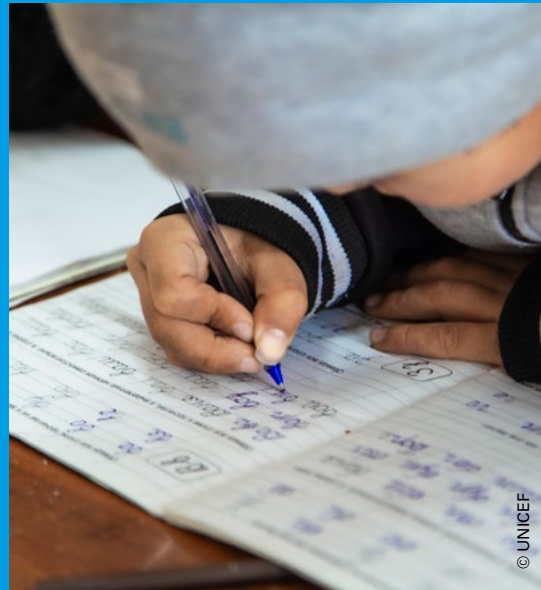
Aman\* didn't know how to read and write but now knows five letters and five numbers. And one more thing –

“

At first, he was quiet and didn't want to eat. UNICEF specialists arrived on time with educational lessons, gave him books and I started to work. Now he comes up and tells me what he liked about the food he ate, what he dreamed about, and what he had at home, which is a great achievement.

But there is still work to do. He needs extra time to complete the learning tasks we set. "Often, I stay with him individually for lessons, we learn words and practice speaking Kyrgyz,"- said teacher Feruza Abdulayeva\*

The teacher of the eldest boy, who had been teaching at the school for only two years, echoed her words and was at first baffled by the fact that there was a non-communicative boy in her class. "At the institute we were told that there are such children, but no one explained how to help them in the classroom or how to help them to start playing with their classmates. Specialists from UNICEF taught us from scratch. They walked this path of integration with us. You see, it is difficult to introduce a child with a disability into a classroom, even more difficult when he does not understand the language, was born and raised in a different – very dangerous – place. But we managed," – said Zukhra Yusupova\* the class teacher.



She noted that such experience was also useful for children because they learned tolerance, and they acquired skills to communicate with their classmates who were different from them.

“

“Now, if a child with a disability or from a different language background is brought to another class, I can help their teacher. I have been taught and I can now support others.” Zukhra concluded.

*\*Names have been changed for protection purposes*

# UZBEKISTAN

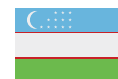


“The children [have] interest in acquiring new skills – moms have progressed in attending some public celebrations and feasts... one of our boys is doing IT classes and he was provided with a laptop on a free basis and he wants to be an IT specialist. Another girl is interested in culinary classes and she is attending the private school. Women are employed in sewing”<sup>110</sup>

## Profile of returnee children

A total of 333 children returned to Uzbekistan under the “Mehr” operations, which translates to “kindness.” This includes 19 children who self-returned with their mothers from Afghanistan. Mehr 1 took place in May 2019 and repatriated women and children from Al Hol camp in Northeast Syria (108 children); Mehr 2 took place in October 2019 and involved the repatriation of 64 children from Iraq. As the mothers of these children were imprisoned at the time of the operation, the children returned were not accompanied by their parents, though many returned with siblings.<sup>111</sup> Mehr 3 and 5 operations repatriated 142 children from Northeast Syria. A significant proportion of the children (70 per cent) were under the age of 10 at the time of return. Some girls returned with children of their own, having been married as children whilst abroad. One 15-year-old girl who was married at age 13 returned with a new-born baby. Her mother, who returned with her, also had a baby.<sup>112</sup> Amongst the cohort of unaccompanied children who returned under Mehr 2, some were very young children, including four babies around 4-5 months old.<sup>113</sup>

## Key facts and figures



333

Children returned under MEHR

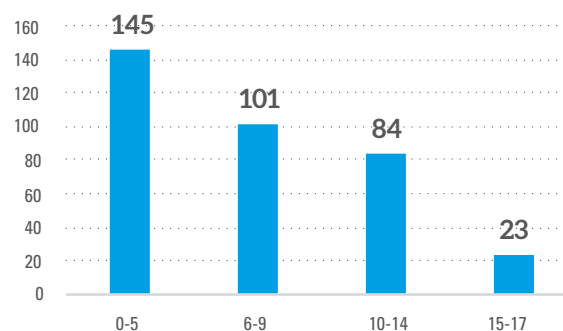


50%  
Girls

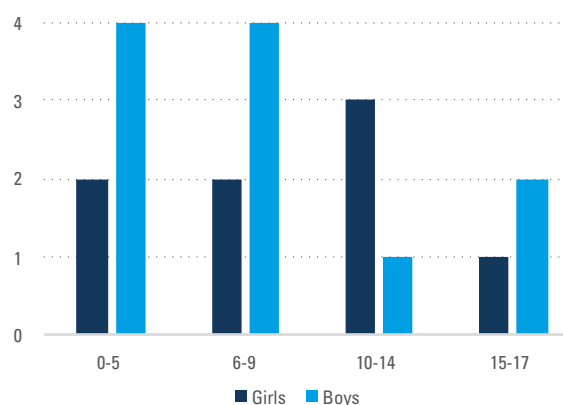


50%  
Boys

### Age distribution of returnee children



### Children in foster care, SOS children’s villages, family group homes and orphanages (19 total)



There are no official statistics on disability prevalence amongst returnees, though specific cases were mentioned by stakeholders, including a girl with cerebral palsy.<sup>114</sup>



## Process and procedure

The Uzbek operation was introduced by way of a Presidential Order and guided by the Inter-Ministerial Action plan which set out the division of role and responsibilities between government and non-government partners to support returnees and ensure access to services to meet their needs.<sup>115</sup> The Cabinet of Ministers recently approved the Plan of Action for the return of children and families from areas of armed conflict to society for adaptation and rehabilitation 2022-2025, an updated inter-agency document outlining the responsibility of all involved state agencies, local NGOs and UNICEF. While there are no laws or regulations specifically regulating the support for repatriated families, the families fall under existing legislation and, as such, have access to various privileges and support schemes that are available for other vulnerable groups.<sup>116</sup>

It is understood that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and security services were responsible for identifying Uzbek citizens and making arrangements for their release and repatriation in close coordination with the local authorities. In the case the unaccompanied children repatriated from Iraq under Mehr 2, medical personnel, pre-school specialists, schoolteachers and teachers from children's homes accompanied the children on the charter flight, which was equipped with toys provided by UNICEF. Reflecting good practice, UNICEF Uzbekistan provided technical support to the government in implementing a best interest assessment procedure and supporting with family tracing procedures.<sup>117</sup>

Returnees under the Mehr operations were taken straight from the airport to the Buston Sanitorium, which served as an initial reception centre.<sup>118</sup> Upon arrival, returnees underwent a full medical and sanitary check, which involved examination and, where required, treatment, from paediatricians, gynaecologists, infectious disease specialists, dermatologists, dentists and more. Those with medical conditions that could not be treated on site were taken to republican health clinics for treatment. Prior to arrival, the sanitorium staff arranged a meeting with the institute of paediatrics to develop an appropriate meal plan, taking into account the type of foods they were used to eating whilst living in Iraq and Syria. The children were provided with 5

meals a day and all were given vitamin supplements to address anaemia and nutritional deficiencies. They were also provided with physiotherapy, therapeutic massage and oxygen supplementation on site where necessary.<sup>119</sup> In keeping with good practice, mothers were placed in rooms with their children to prevent family separation.



**“We used the most usual methods like art therapy – it was one of the most efficient measures – using colours and games and communication. We did our best to prove to the children that we are on their side. We were staying there whilst they were living there, we were waking them up in the morning, taking them to bed in the evening, teacher trainers staying the night as well. In morning, we were asking about their mood and how they feel.”<sup>120</sup>**

While mothers underwent interviews with security services,<sup>121</sup> only psychologists were permitted to interview and work with the children.<sup>122</sup> While children and mothers were not allowed to leave the sanitorium, their extended relatives were permitted to visit and live at the centre towards the end of their stay, and trips were arranged to take them on tours of the city and to the park. Sanitorium staff arranged evening entertainment including viewings of movies and cartoons and a visit to a circus. Teachers and psychologists from the Republican Centre for professional orientation and psychological and pedagogical diagnosis (TASHKHIS) provided psychological support. Once children had time to settle and process their new environment, classrooms were established on site and children were provided with educational services to prepare them for returning to school.<sup>123</sup>

The returnees were provided with identity documents: those who were born in Russia or Uzbekistan had their documents restored through searching national

archives, and birth certificates were issued for those who were born abroad. Only after documentation procedures were finalised could they move out of the initial reception center and home with their extended families – this waiting period ranged from one to one and a half months. While specialists from Guardianship and Trusteeship bodies visited the homes of extended families to assess whether such arrangements were in the best interest of the child, final decision-making on care arrangements was made by the Ministry of Public Education. Family-based care was prioritised for unaccompanied and separated children, with those only being placed in institutional care as a matter of last resort and for the shortest time possible. While 38 children of the 333 returned were initially placed in state run institutions, only three remain in these institutions as of March 2023, with the remaining 35 being placed in family group homes (16 children) or with extended families (19 children).

Upon return to their communities, families were provided with reintegration support provided by psychologists and social workers from Barqaror Hayot,<sup>124</sup> the Republican Centre for Social Adaptation of Children (RSCAC),<sup>125</sup> regional healthcare administrations, and departments of public and preschool education, under the oversight of the State Committee on Family and Women's Affairs.<sup>126</sup> Social workers from RSCAC explained that they first visited the families with activists from the Mahalla administration, before carrying out an

in-depth assessment of the situation and needs of the household. Barqaror Hayot and RSCAC reported that the frequency of visits made by social workers to each family reduced as time passed and families adapted. Such visits are now made on a needs basis, depending on the complexity of each individual case and taking into account availability of financial resources.

Children were enrolled in local schools at the grade that suited their ability and level of development, with priority given, as far as possible, to placing children in the school year to match their age; teaching was provided during the summer holidays to help the children catch up with the knowledge and development of their peers. Families continue to receive social assistance from the Government, with mothers particularly benefiting from these support systems which contribute to their independence and, in turn, their ability to care for children. The Ministry of Interior reported that 41 women received a flat or house upon return; 11 women's place of residence was renovated; and 16 women were provided with assistance to start employment activity.<sup>127</sup> The State Committee on Family and Women's Affairs included 125 women in the 'Iron book' for women in difficult life situations, which entitles them to financial and other support; 58 have undergone vocational training, 21 were provided with loans, and 12 were provided with *decolon plots*, which they can use for cultivation of agriculture.



## Coming back home... A personal account of the repatriation journey by Alisher

Growing up in Uzbekistan, I had a very loving family. I had a mother, father, sister, and a brother – family and siblings with whom I played a lot. You see these memories of playing together are very dear to me since our lives changed. It is not the same anymore. Things started changing when we moved to Egypt to study religion, then to Syria, and then ended up in Iraq. We lost our father there and our mother did not come back.

Iraq stole our parents and in return gave us two more brothers. It was not nice in Iraq. We would only sit at home and carry buckets of water. Bad people used to beat us there. They were hitting us with an iron stick. They would let us go out once a week to play with other children and three soccer balls in a room with grids instead of walls. They would lock us there. Some children would want to escape from there, but they were being caught and punished immediately. Every night we would make holes with an iron stick to open the door and go out. Sometimes we would run when they would open the door to bring food. We would run fast and hide in places that look like a labyrinth. Because once you get caught, you will be beaten up...

One day I woke up and mom told us that we should immediately move to Uzbekistan to live in safety. My siblings and I made it to the place from where we departed.

“

I was very excited about a new life without violence. One year has passed since then. We have been living with our grandparents. I love living with them. They always help with homework, look after us and never punish us even if we make them mad. We sleep tight here.

We have all the opportunities to study and play again but not as before. My parents are not here anymore.”

# COMPENDIUM OF GOOD PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED



## Preparatory measures and cross-cutting principles

### Decision to return

It would be remiss to discuss positive practice without commending the very decision, made at the highest political level in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, to take responsibility for returning their national children to their homeland. The decisive action of these Central Asian countries to repatriate large groups of its nationals and act in the best interests of the child, despite the logistical, social and financial challenges involved, has been widely applauded by the international community and demonstrates their commitment to the fulfilment of the human rights of children and mothers based on the principles enshrined in the CRC.<sup>128</sup> These Central Asian States form a part of the small handful of countries to have taken such action worldwide.

“We have a lot to be proud of and show to other countries. Kazakhstan is one of the first countries to express the desire to return the children when the parents couldn't do this [...]. The state guaranteed the rights to return these children to their motherland.”<sup>129</sup>

“People have different attitudes, the majority have positive opinions. There were some people that were criticising, but due to the efforts of our Leader, and the policy implemented by the State Leader, a common understanding was formulated in this regard. We openly show this to our population and our people, all actions are shown in media and we report to the public what we are doing, everyone helps to formulate [this understanding].”<sup>130</sup>

The governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan publicly framed repatriation operations in humanitarian terms, emphasising that children involved are victims, not terrorists, and to whom the government owes a moral obligation to return to their motherland.<sup>131</sup> Stakeholders considered that high-level political will and support for repatriation has been key for garnering the support from both the wider government and the public, in some cases changing the opinions of those who were previously firmly opposed to the idea.

### Promising practices identified in undertaking decisions in the best interest of the child

- ▶ In taking decisive action to repatriate large groups of children, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have shown operational resolve and put children's best interests and rights above public opposition to repatriation and reintegration efforts.
- ▶ Prioritising the swift repatriation and a reintegration of children who remain in protracted detention situations in Syria and Iraq in ways that restores children's rights and childhood in their communities of origin as quickly as possible.
- ▶ Leading with a tone of reconciliation and acceptance and a framing of humanitarian and human-rights concerns, can help garner public support for the repatriation and reintegration of children.

## Protecting the confidentiality of returnees

Consistent with good practice, stakeholders emphasised that respecting and maintaining repatriated children's rights to privacy, including the protection of personal data,<sup>132</sup> was an important aspect of shielding children from stigma and discrimination and facilitating their integration into schools and wider communities.

A particularly positive approach to safeguarding children's right to privacy was taken in Kyrgyzstan, with confidentiality being one of the key agreed-upon principles by the Kyrgyz government during the preparatory phase. Before the children were returned, UNICEF held trainings with journalists to ensure the press coverage of the Meerim operation was conducted in a way that did not publicise the identities of the children. There was clear evidence that the confidentiality principle was communicated across all levels of State and non-State actors: professionals were informed about the children's backgrounds on a strictly need-to-know basis, with teachers in the schools in which the children were placed signing confidentiality agreements and instructed to inform the other students that the children were children of labour migrants who had been living in Russia.<sup>133</sup> Efforts were made to ensure the wider community in the area in which the initial reception centre was located were not aware of the presence of the children living there.<sup>134</sup> However, it was reported that the children themselves told their peers about their time in Iraq,<sup>135</sup> meaning that, in some areas, the children's backgrounds became common knowledge. Despite this, there were no reports of children coming into harm or receiving discriminatory treatment as a result.<sup>136</sup>

It was noted that press coverage of one of the Mehr operations in Uzbekistan included images of the returnee women and children. As a repercussion one instance was reported of a girl refusing to attend school because she was aware that her identity was known and was worried about what her peers might think of her.<sup>137</sup> In subsequent operations, instructions were made not to reveal or disclose information about the children's pasts to the community. In Kazakhstan, practitioners working with children confirmed they signed non-disclosure agreements pertaining to the identity and background of the children they were working with. For instance, one school psychologist working with a child reported that only herself, the

school principal, the class teacher and the social educator were aware of the child's background.<sup>138</sup>

At the same time as protecting their right to privacy, stakeholders emphasised the importance of ensuring children are treated, to the extent possible, in the same manner as their peers in the community, further ensuring their protection from stigma and their right to non-discrimination.<sup>139</sup>

**“We should take the same attitude to these children and treat them as equal members: the children should not feel separated from the society. [...] We should not say: you are brought back from that place. We should respect the confidentiality of their past. Treatment should be equal with the rest of the children that we always see in school. They are the same as rest.”<sup>140</sup>**

### Promising practices identified in protecting the confidentiality of returnees

- ▶ Recognizing that children and families returning from Syria and Iraq are vulnerable to discrimination and stigmatisation if their right to privacy is not respected, with negative repercussions on their chances of successful integration.
- ▶ Treating the backgrounds of returnees as strictly confidential and ensuring information is shared on a need-to-know basis where necessary to support their integration, enabling children to tell their stories on their own terms.
- ▶ Taking steps to ensure images or personal details of returnees, and particularly of children, are not publicised in the media, through media briefings on ethical reporting and children's rights.
- ▶ Establishing non-negotiable principles prior to the return of children and families, including on the importance of confidentiality.

## Recognizing children's status as victims

As has been highlighted, the three countries acted in alignment with international standards to recognize the status of children as victims of armed conflict and survivors of violations of their rights. No children have been confirmed to have been prosecuted among the returning caseload,<sup>141</sup> with no evidence that the returned children were involved in any criminal acts being made aware and the majority falling under the minimum age of criminal responsibility.<sup>142</sup>

Consistent with child-friendly procedures and considerations in the best interests of the child, efforts were taken to prevent unnecessary contact between children and security forces or law enforcement agencies. That said, stakeholders highlighted that they may not have had the 'full picture' when it came to the exact involvement of security forces in interviewing or monitoring children.

One incident in Kyrgyzstan was reported where children accompanied a mother of five when she was taken into police custody for questioning in her region of origin.<sup>143</sup> The local child protection department reported the incident, which was raised as an urgent matter by UNICEF and other UN bodies to the Cabinet of Ministers. Swift and decisive action was taken in this case, including an investigation into the circumstances, dismissals in the local police station and briefings with local-level police on permitted engagements with the families and the importance of preventing stigmatisation.<sup>144</sup> The decisive action in this case reflects the strong political will to avoid contact of children with law enforcement agencies.

In Uzbekistan, adult women who were charged with offences related to their stay in Syria exclusively received non-custodial probationary sentences, which meant they could continue to live in the community under certain conditions.<sup>145</sup> Aside from the positive impact this has had on women's lives, it allowed children to continue to grow up in care of their mothers, offering them the best chance of reintegration and preventing further distress that would be likely if there was family separation. The children whose mothers remain detained in Iraq are able to communicate with their mothers via phone, respecting their right to maintain direct contact with a parent to whom they are separated, where such contact would be in their best interests.<sup>146</sup>

## Promising practices identified in recognizing children's status as victims

- ▶ Recognising and respecting that children affected by armed conflict should be treated as victims and survivors of violations of their rights and should not be detained or prosecuted solely for their association or membership with armed groups.
- ▶ Applying and respecting child-friendly procedures if children do come into contact with law enforcement agencies.
- ▶ Ensuring the right of children who have been separated from their parent(s) to maintain regular contact with their parent(s), except in instances where this would be contrary to their best interests.

## Interagency and international cooperation and coordination

The stakeholders consulted reflected that the success of return and reintegration operations relied heavily on an inter-disciplinary approach and robust inter-agency coordination, given the multiplicity of needs of the returnees. In Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, this interagency approach was guided by the action plans introduced in each country establishing interagency working groups and setting out clear division of roles and responsibilities for each authority based on their mandate and competencies.

Stakeholders commented on the importance of clear division of roles and responsibilities, to avoid unnecessary duplication of work or, the opposite, overburdening one authority, leading to gaps in support and services provided to returnees. Stakeholders across all three countries commended the way agencies worked together to achieve results for children and highlighted the considerable amount of training undertaken to sensitise professionals coming into contact with children in child-friendly procedures and processes. It was also understood amongst the three countries that while an interdisciplinary approach is important, case management should be carried out by qualified and

trained social workers to streamline coordination and ensure continuity of care for each child.



**“What I would say is that within the Mehr programme the team united and worked altogether, it was not: “this is your work, this is our work,” rather we came together. The attitude to [the returnees] was as if they are our own children.”<sup>147</sup>**

Effective cross-border cooperation was also highlighted as being important to the success of repatriation operations and case resolutions. Returning unaccompanied children from detention in Iraq necessitated close collaboration with the Iraqi authorities and local partners, including a reliance on the significant role UNICEF Iraq and ICRC played in identifying, supporting and preparing children, mothers and professionals involved in repatriation operations. There were some cross-border cases necessitating an intergovernmental response including one application which was submitted to the Ombudsperson of Children’s Rights of Uzbekistan by a Russian citizen, claiming to be the biological mother of one of the unaccompanied children who had returned from Iraq. After close liaison between the Uzbek and Russian Ombudspersons and the Ministry of Public Education and the Guardianship and Tutorship authorities, the relationship was confirmed, and the decision was made to facilitate the reunification of the child and mother.<sup>148</sup>

Central Asian states have also been exemplary in regional-level sharing of experiences and best practices, with delegations from other countries also having shown interest in learning from the Central Asian approach to returning their nationals. For instance, Uzbekistan recently hosted delegations of representatives from the governments of the Maldives and Kyrgyzstan<sup>149</sup> and representatives from Kazakhstan travelled to France at the end of last year to share their experience of reintegration and rehabilitation of returnees.<sup>150</sup> There have also been a number of regional conferences and roundtables to enable sharing of good practices and lessons learned.<sup>151</sup>

While stakeholders were generally positive about the interagency approach, some lessons learned were identified. A few stakeholders emphasised the importance of clearly dividing roles and actions, highlighting that there were potentially duplicated responsibilities and sometimes a sense amongst agencies and authorities that they took on a significant burden of work. Responding to a more systemic challenge of human resource gaps in the social service workforce, some stakeholders commented on the high turnover of staff resulting in beneficiaries being interviewed multiple times about the same issues, with undesirable impact on the families.

### Promising practices identified in supporting an interagency and international cooperative approach

- ▶ Assembling interagency working groups comprised of relevant government and non-government actors.
- ▶ Ensuring that professional, trained social workers play a leading role in case management of children to streamline coordination and ensure continuity of care for each child.
- ▶ Developing, implementing and regularly reviewing comprehensive interagency action plans to guide the actions of the interagency group to ensure repatriation and reintegration is carried out in a timely and child-sensitive manner and can be adjusted as needed based on lessons learned.
- ▶ Holding interagency / working group meetings at regular intervals to discuss and address challenges, to ensure the efficient use of resources, and avoid duplication of work, paying particular attention to avoidance of unnecessary repetition of interviews and assessments of returnee families.



## Arrival and initial care arrangements

### Child-friendly repatriation procedures

It is important that repatriation procedures are child-friendly and minimise additional distress or harmful effects on children. In Kyrgyzstan, an instruction was given for security and police personnel who came into contact with children to wear civilian clothing as opposed to official uniform, wherever possible, to obviate fear and distress. During the process of repatriation, all officials (with the exception of border force) who encountered children during the flight and in the airport were in plain-clothes.<sup>152</sup> Border officials had been trained in child-friendly processes.



**“So generally, our government had given us very good instructions: to be polite with these people, with their parents. Even if the police need to visit their homes to monitor or interview the family, they should not wear uniforms. Every person involved in this work, had to be gentle with these families.”**

In all three countries, employees with experience in working with children were present on the flights with unaccompanied children on board; in Uzbekistan, under Mehr 2, it was teachers and psychologists from TASHKHIS, representatives from UNICEF Iraq and the Uzbekistan ambassador to Kuwait; in Kazakhstan, social workers, lawyers, psychologists and teachers from an NGO were onboard, with each individual assigned a child; in Kyrgyzstan, professionals from the local social protection departments in the children's regions of origins travelled to Iraq to pick up the children. UNICEF provided training to the staff prior to departure. Further positive practice observed across all countries was avoiding the separation of siblings throughout the repatriation process, as well as upon arrival. One stakeholder who was present on the flight returning children under Mehr 2 to Uzbekistan recalled children refusing to take a seat on the plane before their siblings were on board,<sup>153</sup> reflecting their strong family bonds. It was noted by stakeholders across different jurisdictions that elder siblings were protective of their younger ones, particularly when they were returning without a parent, affirming the importance of keeping siblings together.

### Promising practices identified to support child-friendly repatriation

- ▶ Ensuring that children are kept informed prior to and throughout the repatriation process about the next steps and what will happen both *en route* and upon arrival in the destination country – this information should be tailored to their age and level of development and delivered in a child-friendly manner.
- ▶ Allowing children who are capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views in relation to repatriation and give these views due weight in accordance with the child's age and level of maturity.
- ▶ Providing food throughout<sup>184</sup> the journey that is familiar to the children as well as toys and activities to occupy them during the flight and allowing children to bring treasured objects that will remind them of their time abroad, where possible.
- ▶ Ensuring that professionals with training and experience of working with children are on-board the flight when returning unaccompanied and separated children.
- ▶ Minimising contact of security, police or military personnel with children during the repatriation process, and where contact with such actors is necessary, ensuring they avoid intimidating uniforms or weapons.
- ▶ Carrying out training on child-friendly procedures with all actors who will encounter children or accompany them during the flight.

## Initial stay in reception accommodation

As noted in the country snapshots, returnees in each country were housed in a form of initial reception centre upon arrival, where they received a range of psychosocial services to meet their immediate needs. Despite initially displaying a natural response of anxiety and distress to being placed to an unfamiliar environment, children showcased incredible resilience as they adapted and became more comfortable throughout their stay in the reception centres. Many stakeholders considered the initial stay in the reception centres as a necessary prerequisite to proper integration of the returnees, and a period of time to get support that the returnees were grateful for.

Despite stakeholders commenting on the positive changes that were witnessed amongst children during their stay in the reception centres and commending the quality provision of care they received, there were some who recounted that children became increasingly eager to return to their extended families. The period of time spent in the reception centre ranged from 1 month in Kazakhstan; 1-1.5 months in Uzbekistan; and around 4 months in Kyrgyzstan.



**“Psychologists were working with them, but they didn’t speak with us at the beginning. At the end they became very open, at the beginning they were scared, they didn’t know how to play with toys, they were just breaking them: they had never seen TV.”<sup>154</sup>**

The impetus for keeping children in an initial reception centre for these periods appeared to differ between the countries. Whereas some stakeholders referred to the need for returnees to complete a period of medical quarantine, others indicated that documentation had to be issued before the children could leave. In Kyrgyzstan for instance, it was confirmed that children could not leave until they had been issued with all relevant documentation, received vaccination cards and guardianship had formally been assigned to the extended families. A continuous lesson learned put forward by stakeholders was to avoid housing children in reception centres for

any longer than was strictly necessary, prioritising the reunification of the child with his or her family members as soon as possible.



**“They came from a difficult context, [the reception centre] is nice, quite green, with good facilities and doctors. They could relax and forget the life issues. Women and children were very grateful. We brought psychologists and worked together with pedagogues to help them in their early adaptation.”<sup>155</sup>**

Another lesson learned concerned the importance of recruiting staff who not only had the necessary qualifications and experience in working with the children with complex needs, but who could also speak the requisite language. In Kyrgyzstan, a significant majority of the children who returned under Meerim were of Uzbek ethnicity and mainly spoke Uzbek, which caused a barrier in communication for the Russian and Kyrgyz speaking staff. These and other challenges, including the intensity and stress of the working environment, which caused burnout amongst staff, resulted in a significant proportion of the psychologists leaving.

## Promising practices identified in providing initial reception accommodation

- ▶ Ensuring children have immediate access to a safe, welcoming and stable environment with the establishment of an everyday routine to create predictability and sense of security.
- ▶ Ensuring children have access to a range of medical specialists upon return to meet any immediate health needs.
- ▶ As soon as possible upon return, providing children with mental health and psychosocial support tailored to their age, gender, background and needs, and provided by qualified service providers with expertise working in cross-cultural settings and with families.
- ▶ Ensuring that professionals carry out a comprehensive assessment to ascertain the child's needs and to make a plan for the child's reintegration, taking account of the best interests of the child as a primary consideration.
- ▶ Ensuring professionals working with children have access to frequent supervision and time off to prevent overworking and emotional burnout.
- ▶ Prioritising returning children to their communities of origin and into family-based care as soon as possible and allowing family members to visit children soon after arrival and at least in the lead up to unification consistent with the child's best interests.
- ▶ Pre-empting and addressing delays to returning children to their relatives and communities of origin, such as through issuing documents or formalising custody arrangements where possible prior to children's return.
- ▶ Ensuring children are kept informed about their care arrangements and providing an environment conducive to children feeling comfortable to ask questions.



The image depicts a group painting produced by children returned from Iraq to Uzbekistan under the humanitarian operation "Mehr 2", displayed in the office of the Republican Centre for professional orientation and psychological and pedagogical diagnosis, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

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## Zarina's journey of reintegration and resilience in Tajikistan

Zarina was just six years old when she experienced the worst day of her life. She lost both of her parents in a bombing in Iraq that tore through the city. She was also injured in the attack. From that day on, Zarina was left with a traumatic past that haunted her every day.

After coming back to Tajikistan, she was taken in by her grandfather. However, the transition was not easy. Zarina has never been to school and needed to improve her Tajik language skills. She struggled to communicate with her peers, was often found crying in the corner of the schoolyard, and avoided talking to her peers. Fortunately, Zarina had a supportive family and teachers who provided her with the resources to cope with her traumatic memories. With the help of a professional psychologist, Zarina began to express interest in her classes and

communicate with her peers. She became more active and was soon elected as her class lead and was an exemplary student.

Zarina's story is a testament to the strength and resilience of the human spirit. It shows that even in the face of tragedy and trauma, one can still have the courage to keep going and make the most of what they have.

Her story is a reminder that every child deserves the opportunity to succeed and thrive, regardless of gender, race and past experiences. The project to support the reintegration of repatriated children in Tajikistan is a testament to the power of collaboration and the importance of providing children with access to the resources they need to succeed.

*\*names have been changed for protection purposes*

## Longer term reintegration

### Family and social reintegration

The family and community network exercises an enormous influence on children's social lives, experiences and support upon return, with supportive families and communities often acting as critical protective factors that can mitigate the effects of harmful experiences and support children's recovery.

Most adults (or adolescents) who were recruited, or travelled on their own to Syria and Iraq, did so at least in part because of vulnerabilities or dysfunction in their own personal, family, or social environments. A number of stakeholders highlighted specific gender dynamics and dysfunctional family relationships as factors that contributed to women's travel to Syria. Child and at times forced marriage upheld by gender norms rooted in some parts of Central Asian societies were a factor that gave rise to girls' uninformed, or at times forced movements to Syria and remain a threat to girls' and women's successful reintegration. Their return, or the return of their children, is likely to be marked by a re-entry into some of those dynamics, magnified by a complex set of social and familial reactions related to their decision to go to Syria. Children who were born there, may be viewed through the prism of their parents' choices, and can – through no fault of their own – conjure up familial and social reactions related to this.

Communities welcoming back returned children and women may grapple with the notion that these children and women have been exposed to dangerous and violent ideologies. Whether or not this is true on an individual level, the stigma around this population contributes to challenges around social reintegration. Some stakeholders expressed concern that the ideas that children were exposed to while in Syria or Iraq may leave them vulnerable to future recruitment. Stakeholders mentioned some instances of children exhibiting behavioural challenges when they first returned – which from a mental health perspective could represent a number of different coping behaviours. Some children reportedly displayed resistance to cultural or religious norms prevalent in Central Asia – for example an instance of boys refusing to work with female service providers or refusing vaccinations

on the basis that it was Ramadan. Some teachers and parents vocalised concern that returnee children may negatively influence other children. However, while stakeholders may express concern that such behaviours signify adoption of extremist ideologies, it is also plausible that they are simply examples of resistance to the differing norms of a new context (a common behaviour among refugee and immigrant children) and/or to the experience of being subjected to unfamiliar services. These complex community dynamics contribute to the need for trust-building activities during reception and care of children and mothers.

Conversations with stakeholders revealed the general approach taken in the three countries is to prioritise the social reintegration of children through education and psychosocial support. Indeed, in Kyrgyzstan, one of the key principles established prior to the children's return was to avoid de-radicalization programs, unless it was assessed to be the right approach for the particular individual child. In Kazakhstan, while theological rehabilitation and deradicalization programming is provided, this is targeted at adults, rather than children. In Uzbekistan, one stakeholder explained that an Imam was invited to the reception centre for returnees during one of the first Mehr campaigns, but was not invited back for subsequent operations, as it was not considered to be particularly helpful in facilitating children's reintegration.

In relation to social assistance, instances were reported of resentment amongst community members in relation to the returnee populations, particularly when the latter were receiving cash assistance. Some community members voiced resistance to this support, questioning why they were given such privileges. These sentiments reiterate the importance of treating families in a similar manner to the rest of the population, though inevitably this is a difficult balance to strike where families are in need of specialised assistance. Stakeholders expressed differing views on the provision of cash-grants, some arguing they should be avoided and replaced by inclusion in the state system, and others recognizing the need for one-off support to highly vulnerable families. Stakeholders in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan pointed to difficulties in meeting the

evidentiary requirements to obtain survivor benefits, as widows do not possess formal death certificates to prove that their husbands have died in Syria or Iraq. In Uzbekistan this barrier can be overcome with the testimony of a witness who was present at the time of the husband's death.<sup>156</sup> In Kazakhstan, it was explained that families facing such challenges can

access targeted social assistance from the state,<sup>157</sup> including allowances for having a large family/many children,<sup>158</sup> benefits under the 'missing persons programme',<sup>159</sup> benefits for families on low income and school-related financial assistance under the Universal Education (Vseobuch) programme.<sup>160</sup>

## Promising practices to support family and social reintegration

- ▶ Community reintegration support should address the trust-deficit between returnees and their families and communities, through educational, economic, and psychosocial support that is responsive to these complexities.
- ▶ Consider community dynamics in the design and delivery of economic assistance to returning families, balancing immediate needs of families with the need to swiftly integrate new arrivals into the formal social protection schemes.
- ▶ Review social protection schemes for opportunities that will benefit returning single mothers, and provide bureaucratic pathways for their inclusion where needed.
- ▶ Ideologically focused support or interventions should be initiated only on an individual basis if it is found to be in the best interest for a particular child.
- ▶ Girls' vulnerability to child marriage, and their specific needs as young mothers and potential survivors of sexual violence need to be specifically considered and supported on an individual basis.

## Prioritizing family-based care

Across the three countries, priority was given to reuniting returnees with their families and communities of origin and placing unaccompanied children in family-based kinship care arrangements, with residential care treated as a last resort when suitable family-based care arrangements were not available. Prioritizing family-based care is consistent with the position of the family as the natural environment for the growth, well-being and protection of children,<sup>161</sup> and the obligation placed on States to provide special protection and assistance to children temporarily or permanently deprived of their family environment.<sup>162</sup> Prolonged institutional care has been demonstrated to have detrimental effects on children's wellbeing and development.<sup>163</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, all of the unaccompanied children who returned under Meerim were placed in kinship care arrangements with their extended relatives. In Uzbekistan, 38 children of the 333 returned were initially placed in state run institutions. As of March 2023, only 3 remain in in

state run institutions, 16 children have been placed in family group homes and 19 have been placed with extended families. In Kazakhstan, 12 were placed in Centres for the Support of Children (falling under the Department of Education) or, for children younger than 3 years old, an infant home (falling under the Department of Health).



**“The [child's] family homes cannot be replaced by anything – we know and accept that.”<sup>164</sup>**

In some cases, children who were born in Syria may be getting to know their extended family members for the first time. Because the child was born abroad, family members may not know the child's other parent (usually father), or their knowledge may be minimal. Approaches that support children to prepare for this transition into family-based care with extended

family members can be key for a positive return and reintegration of children, and to preventing family separation, and repeated changes in the children's care arrangements. In Kyrgyzstan, this included facilitating video calls between children and their extended family members prior to being placed in their care.



**“The older children knew the relatives, but those born in Iraq didn't know anything about the relatives: they were like strangers. The great part was when they were talking with their relatives [on the phone]: families were showing them their rooms and all the toys for them, giving them the sense that we are waiting for you, we are missing you, you do have a home.”<sup>165</sup>**

Family placement decisions should be underpinned by a best interests assessment that takes into account the view of the child and any specific characteristics relevant to their situation. Positively, many respondents reported comprehensive assessments were carried out to ascertain the suitability of extended family members in receiving children prior to their transfer. This included an assessment of the living conditions and financial stability of the family, criminal record checks, the family's views and wishes and that of the child. In Kyrgyzstan, children were consulted at the transit centre about the next steps and asked their views about the extended family members who had been suggested as guardians, respecting their right to be heard.<sup>166</sup> Two of the 79 children who were old enough to be capable of expressing their views rejected the proposed placement and, in these cases, alternative relatives were located with whom the child agreed to live.<sup>167</sup>

It was noted by those involved in decision-making on family placements that in many cases, too many extended relatives came forward wishing to take custody of the child. In a few cases there were family members willing to take the children, but it was decided that the placement was not suitable. One such case involved an elderly grandmother who wished to take custody of four children (1.5-16 years old), but due to her age and the small size of her living conditions, it was deemed not to be a suitable placement.<sup>168</sup> There were also instances where the initial placement broke down and the child had to be moved. One such case involving a child returned to her father and his second wife, who requested to live with her aunt instead.<sup>169</sup>

It is important to recognise that it can be overwhelming for extended family members to care for returned children. Approaches that support grandparents and extended family members in this transition can be key to a positive reintegration experienced for children and preventing additional changes in their care arrangements. Recognising grandparents' limitations and challenges and providing targeted support can maintain and restore this critical relationship over the medium-term.

While efforts were made to keep siblings together wherever possible, there were a few instances reported where half-siblings were placed in different families. For instance, in one case, two unaccompanied children returned who shared the same mother but had different fathers; they were each placed with a different grandmother.<sup>170</sup>

## Promising practices identified to support family based care

- ▶ Reunify and place children in the care of family members whenever possible – even if supplementary support is required to make the placement successful.
- ▶ Supporting children to prepare for their transition into family-based care arrangements by establishing contact with extended family members prior to moving into their care.
- ▶ Being guided by children’s best interests in deciding where children should be placed, including an in-depth social assessment of potential carers’ suitability to receive the child.
- ▶ Consult the child on the proposed placement and provide him/her the space and means to express his or her views, ensuring these views are given due weight in the best interests assessment procedure.
- ▶ In cases where family reunification is not possible, prioritise placing unaccompanied children in family-based kinship care arrangements, with residential care treated as a last resort only where a suitable kinship care or other family- or community-based alternative care arrangement cannot be identified.
- ▶ Keep siblings together wherever possible, unless judged not to be in the child’s best interest.
- ▶ Recognise that some placements are likely to encounter difficulties, putting in place mechanisms for monitoring and supporting carers, and identifying suitable alternatives in case this is unsuccessful.

## Education

Across the three countries, children’s education integration showcased that learning gaps can be closed with individualized attention, and children displayed a hunger for learning that in a number of cases propelled them to academic excellence when given the opportunity. Given the significant gaps in their education due to time spent abroad, returnee children may require additional support in (re) integrating into the education system in a way which enables them to catch up with their peers.

In all of the countries, stakeholders mentioned that individual pedagogical assessments were carried out either prior or upon enrolment of each child in school, enabling the child’s level of knowledge and development to be understood and any developmental or learning disabilities identified, to give them the best chance possible of returning to (or entering) the school environment. In Kyrgyzstan, while initially all children received catch up classes, 24 children identified as having a significant gap in their foundational learning skills received supplementary teaching on a continuing basis.<sup>171</sup> A special education assistant was hired to support one child with special

educational needs.<sup>172</sup> Local education authorities, school psychologists and teachers in Kazakhstan provided extra learning support to the children who experienced significant learning delays on account of the schooling they have missed<sup>173</sup> and in Uzbekistan, returnee children had catch-up classes for between 2-3 months before the academic year started.<sup>174</sup>

Kyrgyz stakeholders mentioned individual cases in which reintegration into the education system has been a particular success, including children who had become “leaders in their class”<sup>175</sup> and others who have graduated from school and entered higher education.<sup>176</sup> According to the Director of one NGO in Kazakhstan, 65 per cent of the children are now ‘straight A or B students.’<sup>177</sup> The majority (81.7 per cent) of children returned to Uzbekistan now study in classes corresponding to their age. School psychologists continue to support children in adapting to the school environment, as well as supporting children to express their emotions.<sup>178</sup>





“He didn’t know how to read and write but now knows five letters and five numbers. And one more thing – at first, he was quiet and didn’t want to eat. Specialists arrived on time with educational lessons, gave him books and I started to work. Now he comes up and tells me what he liked about the food he ate, what he dreamed about, and what he had at home, which is a great achievement.”<sup>179</sup>

In addition to providing supplementary support to children returnees, stakeholders also commented significant support provided to school practitioners. In Kyrgyzstan, Future of Country, a local NGO, and UNICEF provided remote training for teachers on innovative teaching methods; interactive methods in teaching; and emotional relaxation exercises, in addition to two training courses: the first for social pedagogues (of which there is at least one in all Kyrgyz schools) and the second for caregivers receiving the children. In Uzbekistan, school psychologists received training on the mental health and psychosocial support needs of returnee children, with the support of UNICEF Uzbekistan.

There were a few lessons learned, including the recognition that educational assessments informing individual learning plans sometimes took place only once the child had returned to the region of origin, while it would have been beneficial for it to have been carried out earlier in the reception phase. A further lesson learned was for special attention to be paid to increasing the availability of, and access to, skill-building vocational courses, especially for adolescent returnee girls, who have a heightened vulnerability and risk factor related to child marriage.

### Promising practices identified to support education integration

- ▶ Carrying out individual learning assessment as soon as possible (and appropriate) after the child’s return to ascertain his/her educational needs and level of development.
- ▶ Expecting that returning children may learn differently and providing time and flexibility as they adapt to the structure of a school environment.
- ▶ Providing individualised tutoring to support children to catch up to the same level as their peers.
- ▶ Providing individualised learning and professional development plans for adolescent returnees, particularly adolescent girls who may be vulnerable to child marriage, and school-aged girls who have children of their own.
- ▶ Providing alternative education approaches for children, through tutoring, online education, or schools set up to support a variety of learning needs can provide a helpful bridge and allow greater flexibility to diverse learning needs.
- ▶ For older returning children and young mothers who may not be able or willing to integrate into a traditional school setting, developing vocational and professional development opportunities that meet their individual needs and ambitions.

## Mental health and psychosocial support

A key lesson learned concerns the high likelihood of sustained mental health and psychosocial support needs among repatriated children and the need for ongoing, multi-leveled support. Children have been exposed to extreme stressors and a myriad of losses over an extended period, including both while in Syria or Iraq and following repatriation. Many have directly experienced or witnessed violence. Some have survived the death of caregivers or other loved ones or have been separated from loved ones without knowing what has happened to them and have therefore lacked appropriate opportunities to mourn. Many have experienced severe violations of their basic human rights and ongoing deprivation, including lack of access to education, a stable social support system, and to adequate food, water, and shelter.

Despite such hardships, it is common for children to have complicated reactions to repatriation. For some children, repatriation makes their first time in their country of origin or meeting relatives who will care for them. Departure from a camp in Syria or Iraq may entail significant losses, including leaving behind friends, loved ones, and a familiar social context where one “fits in”. Upon repatriation, children may struggle with language, unfamiliar social norms, educational difficulties, pressure to adopt new personal narratives and social identities, and exposure to stigma and discrimination – challenges that have potential to persist for many years. Assisting in acknowledging and mourning such losses (including through co-development of memorializing rituals), while helping to strengthen coping skills needed to navigate reintegration challenges, are key tasks for mental health and psychosocial support service providers in these contexts. Losses and challenges can be re-experienced in different ways as children grow and mature, and therefore, access to continued support from service providers is critical.

Repatriated youth can benefit from a variety of mental health and psychosocial support approaches. Some children will be relatively resilient and require only minimal supports (e.g., opportunities for education, social support, recreation) to function well in their new context – although even children who are initially resilient may face difficulties and benefit from additional supports in years to follow. Others may benefit from more focused activities that include

opportunities for exchange of peer support, learning and practicing coping skills, and tailored reintegration guidance, as well as opportunities to acknowledge and mourn losses. Youth with persistent mental health difficulties that significantly impede their ability to function (e.g., attend school, engage with friends and family) may benefit from referral to specialized mental health care provided by a trained professional. A primary contributor to youth wellbeing is the wellbeing of their caregivers. Caregivers should have access to mental health and psychosocial support services designed to promote development of coping skills to manage their own their own mental health reactions and to strengthen parenting skills, including through peer-support activities in the community and specialized mental health and psychosocial support care when needed.

Over the past four years, children and families have received a range of psychosocial and other support services that are funded through specific projects that are drawing to a close. Respondents persistently stressed the need for support to be extended for the longer-term to ensure sustainable results for returnees. While the range of trainings that have been carried out under the EU-UN programme (see Annex 1) and by other organisations outside of the programme (including by ICRC)<sup>180</sup> were spoken of highly by stakeholders, there remains an ongoing need to build the capacity of professionals. Human resource challenges in the social service workforce and a lack of qualified, trained psychologists and other MHPSS service providers with direct experience in provision of mental health and psychosocial support to children were frequently mentioned barriers.

## Promising practices to support mental health and psychosocial support of returnees

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- ▶ Increasing the recruitment of professional, trained social workers with experience of social work case management and counselling support.
- ▶ Carrying out in-service training for social workers on non-discrimination and avoiding stigmatisation of returnee populations.
- ▶ Ensuring sufficient availability of qualified and trained MHPSS service providers with experience in supporting children who have experienced unique stressors and losses associated with the repatriation experience, as well as their caregivers.
- ▶ Ensuring availability of multi-layered and long-term supports for youth and caregivers to address varied and ongoing mental health and psychosocial reactions.



Saule with her children Jamil, Amir and Aisha. Kazakhstan.

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## Living for the sake of my children's future. How a young Kazakh mother with two children made her way back from Syria and started a new life

The majority of children repatriated to Kazakhstan were under the age of six, including Jamil and his younger brother Amir, who were born in the Syria and caught their first glimpse of the sea in Kazakhstan. Their mother Saule thinks that the sea has left a lasting impression and inspired the brothers' dreams of future travel. "We will pursue these dreams as soon as we have a chance," adds Saule confidently.

Saule, along with her husband and one-year-old son, traveled to Syria in 2014. She was pregnant with her second child at the time. Saule's husband was quickly separated from them and in 2018, he passed away. For the

next two years, she deeply grieved for his loss. Today, her grown sons are also beginning to miss their father: "They often recall their dad showing up and giving them chocolates. That's the only thing they had seen."

Curiously enough, Saule also recalls only the good moments from that time. When she speaks about her five years in Syria, she says, "I was so patient, just waiting there, staying at home, and watching all of this..." Saule and her children spent most of their time confined within the walls of their home, completely oblivious to the events occurring outside.



Jamil, Amir and Aisha. Kazakhstan.

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Saule and her children were able to seize the opportunity to return to Kazakhstan during their stay with the Kurds. Saule fondly remembers the support she received from theologians and psychologists upon her return. “When we came back, we were beginning to see clearly, and the people were very kind. There was no conflict or aggression towards us. Instead, everything was for our benefit,” she states. Saule and her sons moved in with her relatives, where her mother and brother were waiting for them in the village. The transition took another month: “They worked with us every day to prepare us for reintegration into society. We were still scared,” the woman confesses.

In the summer, a few months after her return, Saule felt that the painful period of getting used to the new reality was over for her, and she felt comfortable and at ease surrounded by her relatives. The children, she says, were fine, too: “They don’t remember the bombings, for example. They don’t remember the fires, or the planes, because they were little.” The boys were much more impressed with the amusement rides, parks, and trampolines here in Kazakhstan, she said. “They loved it all, there was nothing of the kind over there, and they literally rushed at everything. Just to see something, to play,” she notes.

The only preschool options available to the family in Syria were those run by women, the so called “learning circles,” which helped prevent the boys from facing language difficulties upon their return home.

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Today, they attend school, are successful students, have friends among their classmates, play soccer and study English after school hours. “My kids are very active and curious. The older son wants to become a dentist, and the younger one wants to be a businessman. He already has grand boyish plans, like buying his own car,” Saule shares with a smile.

*\*Names have been changed for protection purposes*

# ANNEX 1: ACTIVITIES UNDER THE EU-UN PROGRAMME

In all of the countries, UNICEF and UN Women have been working with the government and local implementing partners to strengthen the knowledge, skills and capacity of professionals and practitioners who work with children and families in the provision of rights-based, age and gender-sensitive services, as well as to document and share experiences between countries. In Kazakhstan, for instance, amongst a range of activities undertaken under the programme, UNICEF has supported the establishment of a National Resource Centre on education, psychosocial support and mental health of children and families (NRC) at the Eurasian National University. The NRC has conducted online advanced training sessions for psychologists and guardianship authorities on identification and response to mental health reactions, gender mainstreaming, counselling for children, catch up tutoring, and ethical principles. In addition, UNICEF has designed, developed and piloted a “story-telling between generations” programme in schools which focuses on meaningful citizenship, wellbeing and identity, teaching children how to relate themselves and tell stories about their experiences. So as not to single out returnee children, this programme was delivered to all students in the pilot location. Other activities carried out, or in the process of being carried out, by UNICEF Kazakhstan include the establishment of a task-force comprising government and UN entities implementing protection and education activities with returnees; carrying out country-level documentation of Kazakhstan’s experiences in repatriation and reintegration, in partnership with the NRC; conducting a review of the national child’s rights laws relevant to returnee children; and developing monitoring and quality assurance framework in education and child protection systems for community-led integration programmes.<sup>181</sup>

In Uzbekistan, under the EU-UN programme UNICEF has been building on its pre-existing work in strengthening the capacity of social workers

and psychologists working with returnee children and monitoring the quality of services provided. More specifically, UNICEF hired an expert to carry out a training for 30 members of the social service workforce to be trainers of trainees on social interventions in working with vulnerable children and families including those returned from Iraq/Syria. In addition, UNICEF worked with RCSAC to train members of the community social service workforce on case management for children living in families as well as residential care institutions. Further training activities under the programme included training on mental health and psychosocial support services and life skills education in schools. At the same time, UNICEF has been working in partnership with RCSAC and Barqaror Hayot to supervise the community-based social service workforce in order to ensure quality of case management is being provided.<sup>182</sup>

UNICEF’s Kyrgyzstan’s activities under the programme have included training psychologists, school psychologists and social pedagogues on provision of mental health and psychosocial support to children and, in collaboration with a local partner, to develop and monitor individual learning assessments for children in schools and to train teachers from receiving schools in interpreting them (as discussed above). Further activities include working in partnership with government and NGOs to ensure the provision of a range of quality services to returnee children and families based on their needs assessment and developing a documentation report setting out Kyrgyzstan’s experience of repatriation and reintegration and lessons learned throughout the process. At the same time as UNICEF activities, UN Women has been engaged in carrying out a gender assessment in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to better identify gender specific challenges and protection needs of returnees and develop gender sensitive practical solutions.<sup>183</sup>

# ANNEX 2: METHODOLOGY

The overall objective of the assignment was to support UNICEF ECARO and the four UNICEF Country Offices in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in documenting good practices and lessons learned in ensuring the rights and results for children returned from in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, culminating in transferable lessons learned which can be shared with other jurisdictions to inform their repatriation and reintegration efforts.




The following questions were developed to meet the assignment objectives:

1. What was the process and procedure for repatriating, reintegrating and rehabilitating children from Iraq/Syria/Afghanistan to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan?
2. What was the contribution of the EU supported action to these processes and procedures?
3. To what extent did these processes protect the rights of returnee children, according to international child rights standards, particularly the CRC?
4. What elements of the operations were most successful in ensuring the rights for children from Iraq/Syria/Afghanistan?
5. What were the main challenges, barriers and / or bottlenecks throughout the process?
6. Drawing on the lessons learned from the

experiences of these countries, what are the promising practices when returning children from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan?

The compendium was informed by a series of in-depth interviews, meetings and consultations with key experts and stakeholders involved in the repatriation and reintegration of children from Iraq/Syria/Afghanistan to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, which took place between October 2022 and January 2023, as well as interviews with parents who returned to Kazakhstan from Iraq/Syria with their children. The interviews in Kazakhstan were carried out by experts from the Resource Centre for Education, Psychosocial Support and Mental Health for Children and Families of the Eurasian National University and Awaz Raof from Coram International.

Figure 5. List of stakeholders consulted

Country	Stakeholders consulted
<b>Kazakhstan</b> 	Children’s Rights Protection Committee, Ministry of Education, Kazakhstan; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ombudsperson for child rights; Ombudsperson for Human Rights; UNICEF Kazakhstan; Various NGO working with returnees, including Akniet, Chance and Pravo PF; Akimat of Mangystau Province; Psychologists who were recruited to work with children in Aktau Centre. In each subnational research location (Zheszkazan, Uralsk, and Shymkent), the following interviews were undertaken: Department of Education, Department of Religious Affairs, NGO service providers, practitioners working with children (psychologists, special education teachers, social educators etc.), and parents of returnee children.
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b> 	Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration; State Commission on Religious Affairs; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Education; UNICEF Kyrgyzstan, child protection and education departments; Family Child Support Departments in two territorial divisions of MoLSWM with children who had returned from Iraq; Former Deputy Representative of UNICEF Kyrgyzstan; Former head of the reception centre; Former Head of staff at the reception centre; Psychologist who worked in the reception centre; Former Red Crescent Society Kyrgyzstan employee; International Committee on the Red Cross, Kyrgyzstan; Head teacher of a school with reintegrated children enrolled, Kyrgyzstan; Methodist for primary education in one of the regions children were returned.
<b>Uzbekistan</b> 	State Committee for Family and Women’s Affairs; Ombudsperson for Children’s Rights; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Education; Management and social workers from the Republican Centre for Social Adaptation of Children (RSCAC) (Tashkent and one other location where children returned); Management, social workers, psychologists and lawyers from NGO “Barqaror Hayot” (Tashkent and one other location where children returned); Ministry of Interior; Head of the sanatorium (initial reception centre); Staff of the sanatorium; Republican Centre for professional orientation and the psychological and pedagogical diagnosis (TASHKHIS) under the Ministry of Public Education; Group interview with school psychologists from schools with returnee children under Ministry of Public Education.



# ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cook, J. and Vale, G. From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State, International Centre for the Study of Radicalism, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> HRW, 'Syria: Repatriations Lag for Foreigners with alleged ISIS ties', December 1, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/15/syria-repatriations-lag-foreigners-alleged-isis-ties>. This data has not been independently verified.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Position of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on the human rights of adolescents/juveniles being detained in North-East Syria, May 2021
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example: UNICEF, Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore, 'Eight Children die in Al Hol camp, northeastern Syria in less than a week', 16 August 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/eight-children-die-al-hol-camp-northeastern-syria-less-week>.
- <sup>7</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, Protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Fortieth Session, 10 January 2019, A/HRC/40/28, para 2; Position of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on the human rights of adolescents/juveniles being detained in North-East Syria, Fionnuala Ni Aolain, May 2021. Retrieved from: [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2056266/UNSRCT\\_Position\\_human-rights-of-boys-adolescents-2021\\_final.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2056266/UNSRCT_Position_human-rights-of-boys-adolescents-2021_final.pdf).
- <sup>8</sup> United Nations, Press Release: 'UNICEF urges governments to repatriate thousands of foreign children stranded in northeast Syria', 4 November 2019. Retrieved from: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/11/1050561>.
- <sup>9</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Views adopted by the Committee under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure, concerning communications Nos. 77/2019, 79/2019 and 109/2019, February 23, 2022, CRC/C/85/D/79/2019–CRC/C/85/D/109/2019; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Belgium, 28 February 2019, Doc CRC/C/BEL/CO/5-6, para 50(b).
- <sup>10</sup> Position of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on the human rights of adolescents/juveniles being detained in North-East Syria, Fionnuala Ni Aolain, May 2021.
- <sup>11</sup> UN Special Procedures, 'Legal Analysis. Extra-territorial jurisdiction of States over children and their guardians in camps, prisons, or elsewhere in the northern Syrian Arab Republic (2020).
- <sup>12</sup> See, for example: United Nations Human Rights Council, Forty-ninth session, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism, Fionnuala Ni Aolain, A/HRC/49/45/Add, 25 February 2022; United Nations Office of The High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), 'Preliminary Findings of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on her visit to Kazakhstan', Press Release, 22 May 2019.
- <sup>13</sup> [Interview details withheld] stakeholder from one of the Central Asian States.
- <sup>14</sup> Republican Centre for professional orientation and the psychological and pedagogical diagnosis (TASHKHHIS), 15 December 2022.
- <sup>15</sup> "Firuza's Story of Resilience," UNICEF Tajikistan, 2023.
- <sup>16</sup> Note: It was not possible to obtain relevant permissions to carry out data collection in Tajikistan without the timeframe of this assignment, such that this country snapshot is informed solely by desk based materials retrieved online and data provided by UNICEF Tajikistan. Due to limited data, the experience of Tajikistan is not reflected in the broader compendium (below).
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- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Farrell, w. 'Processes of Reintegrating Central Asian Returnees from Syria and Iraq', Special Report No 498, United States Institute of Peace, July 2021, p.13;
- <sup>20</sup> Farrell, w. 'Processes of Reintegrating Central Asian Returnees from Syria and Iraq', Special Report No 498, United States Institute of Peace, July 2021, p.13; Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, 'The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children from Syria and Iraq: The experiences of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan', June 2021, p 34.
- <sup>21</sup> Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, 'The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children from Syria and Iraq: The experiences of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan', June 2021, p 34.
- <sup>22</sup> Written communication from UNICEF Tajikistan country office.
- <sup>23</sup> Farrell, w. 'Processes of Reintegrating Central Asian Returnees from Syria and Iraq', Special Report No 498, United States Institute of Peace, July 2021, p.14.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Data provided by UNICEF Tajikistan country office.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

- <sup>27</sup> Strategy on Countering Extremism and Terrorism in the Republic of Tajikistan for the period of 2021–2025, Decree of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, dated on 1 June 2021, No 187, (Tajik, Russian and English combined version), p.126;
- <sup>28</sup> E-mail communication with UNICEF staff member, 9 November 2022.
- <sup>29</sup> In-depth interview, Parent of returnee child, Kazakhstan.
- <sup>30</sup> Data provided by the Child Rights Protection Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science on the Republic of Kazakhstan.
- <sup>31</sup> Shapavol, Y. 'Kazakhstan's Approach and Experience in Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Repatriates', Search for Common Ground, European Union. Nur Sultan, 2021, p. 17.
- <sup>32</sup> Committee on the Protection of Children's Rights, Ministry of Education of Kazakhstan, 13 September 2022.
- <sup>33</sup> Former employee of religious research centre who worked in Aktau Centre Kazakhstan, 13 January 2023.
- <sup>34</sup> Psychologist who worked in Aktau Centre, Kazakhstan, 13 January 2023.
- <sup>35</sup> Former employee of religious research centre who worked in Aktau Centre Kazakhstan, 13 January 2023.
- <sup>36</sup> Kazakhstan's repatriation programmes were first issued by the First President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Subsequent phases of the operation have since been sanctioned by his successor, President Tokayev. Al Jazeera, 'Kazakh efforts to Repatriate ISIL fighters should be replicated', Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/7/7/kazakh-efforts-to-repatriate-isil-fighters-should-be-replicated>.
- <sup>37</sup> The Child Rights Protection Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science took overall responsibility for child returnees. The Committee on Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Information and Public Development was responsible for the adult returnees. Support and assistance was provided by international partners including the governments of Syria, Kuwait and the United States, UNICEF, and Save the Children. Speech by the Ombudsperson of Children's Rights of Kazakhstan, "Children do not choose the path of war or terrorism" 22 September 2022. Retrieved from: <https://bala-ombudsman.kz/deti-ne-vybirayut-put-vojni-i-terrorizma-iz-vystupleniya-aruzhan-sain-v-obse/>.
- <sup>38</sup> Children's Rights Protection Committee, Ministry of Education, Kazakhstan, 13 September 2022; Farrell, w. 'Processes of Reintegrating Central Asian Returnees from Syria and Iraq', Special Report No 498, United States Institute of Peace, July 2021.
- <sup>39</sup> Communication with UNICEF Kazakhstan.
- <sup>40</sup> This included the Ombudsperson of Children's Rights, social workers, medical specialists and psychologists. Key informant interview, UNICEF Kazakhstan, 6 February 2023.
- <sup>41</sup> Key informant interview, UNICEF Kazakhstan, 6 February 2023.
- <sup>42</sup> Multiple stakeholders consulted in Kazakhstan.
- <sup>43</sup> Key informant interview, UNICEF Kazakhstan, 6 February 2023.
- <sup>44</sup> NGO worker working with returnees, Kazakhstan, 5 October 2022.
- <sup>45</sup> NGO working with returnees, Kazakhstan, 27 December 2022..
- <sup>46</sup> Key informant interview, School psychologist who worked in Aktau, Kazakhstan, 20 February 2023.
- <sup>47</sup> The running of the Aktau Centre was coordinated by the Akimat of Mangystau region with the assistance of the Interagency Working Group and was staffed by doctors, psychologists, social workers, translators, teachers, employees of the National Security Committee, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Akniet NGO. Abdirasulova, A. 'Working with returnees from Syria and Iraq: Kazakhstan's experience' Centre for Human Rights Protection "Kylm Shamy", September 2019.
- <sup>48</sup> Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, 'The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children from Syria and Iraq: The experiences of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan', June 2021, p. 22; Key informant interview with Ministry of Education, 13 September 2022.
- <sup>49</sup> Anonymous NGO 1; Communication from Child Rights Protection Committee of the Ministry of Education, Kazakhstan.
- <sup>50</sup> Key informant interview with Ministry of Education, Kazakhstan, 13 September 2022.
- <sup>51</sup> Key informant interview with Ministry of Education, Kazakhstan, 13 September 2022.
- <sup>52</sup> Head of NGO working with returnees, 20 December 2022.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup> Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, 'The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children from Syria and Iraq: The experiences of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan', June 2021, p. 27.
- <sup>55</sup> an NGO providing socio-legal and psychological support and assistance to children and adults in need, including Zhusan/Rusafa returnees and repatriates.
- <sup>56</sup> NGO working with returnees, 27 December 2022.
- <sup>57</sup> Psychologist who worked in Aktau, Kazakhstan, 13 January 2023.
- <sup>58</sup> Department of Education of West Kazakhstan region, 9 January 2023.
- <sup>59</sup> Centre for the research of religions of Department of Religious Affairs.
- <sup>60</sup> Key informant interview with Ministry of Education, 13.09.2022.
- <sup>61</sup> Key informant interview, Child Rights Protection Committee, Ministry of Education and Science, 13 September 2022.
- <sup>62</sup> Responsibility for longer term reintegration of returnees into their local communities and societies largely rests with the local executive authorities, although the Ministry of Information and Public Development and Child Rights Protection Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science retain coordination over the process. Multiple stakeholders interviewed from Kazakhstan; Farrell, w. 'Processes of Reintegrating Central Asian Returnees from Syria and Iraq', Special Report No 498, United States Institute of Peace, July 2021. p 8.
- <sup>63</sup> Interview with NGO working with returnees, 5 October 2022.

- <sup>64</sup> Communication from the Child Rights Protection Committee of the Ministry of Education of Kazakhstan.
- <sup>65</sup> NGO working with returnees, Kazakhstan, 27 December 2022.
- <sup>66</sup> Department of Education, Shymkent, 10 January 2023; Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, 'The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children from Syria and Iraq: The experiences of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan', June 2021.
- <sup>67</sup> Zhezkazan; Taraz; Almaty; and Shymkent.
- <sup>68</sup> This training programme continued in 2022 and included training on psycho-therapy interventions; communications skills; and methods for establishing an intervention in a professional way. Key informant interview, ICRC Kazakhstan, 19 January 2023.
- <sup>69</sup> Ministry of education, 7 December 2022, Kyrgyzstan.
- <sup>70</sup> Data obtained from UNICEF, Report on the Repatriation and Reintegration of children from Iraq: Kyrgyzstan, undated, unpublished.
- <sup>71</sup> Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration, Kyrgyzstan, 7 December 2022.
- <sup>72</sup> UNICEF, Education Officer, Kyrgyzstan, 5 December 2022.
- <sup>73</sup> At the time of writing, in February 2023, only 3 had been returned (2 women and 1 child).
- <sup>74</sup> Stakeholders included the Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration (MoLSWM) (the coordinating public body for the process), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Committee for National Security, the Ministry of the Interior, the State Agency for Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Health, and representatives from ICRC, the Red Crescent Society Kyrgyzstan, and UNICEF.
- <sup>75</sup> Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration, Kyrgyzstan, 7 December 2022.
- <sup>76</sup> Social Protection Department in one region the children were returned, 9 December 2022.
- <sup>77</sup> Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration, Kyrgyzstan, 7 December 2022.
- <sup>78</sup> UNICEF child protection officer, 5 December 2022; Former Deputy Representative of UNICEF Kyrgyzstan, 20 January 2023; UNICEF, Report on the Repatriation and Reintegration of children from Iraq: Kyrgyzstan, undated, unpublished.
- <sup>79</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the list of returnees to Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration who embarked on identifying the relatives of the children with support of the local social protection authorities in the children's regions of origin. Social Protection Department in one region the children were returned, 9 December 2022.
- <sup>80</sup> Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration, Kyrgyzstan, 7 December 2022.
- <sup>81</sup> Multiple stakeholders involved in the repatriation process.
- <sup>82</sup> UNICEF child protection officer, 5 December 2022; Former Deputy Representative of UNICEF Kyrgyzstan, 20 January 2023.
- <sup>83</sup> International Committee on the Red Cross, Kyrgyzstan, 5 December 2022.
- <sup>84</sup> Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration, Kyrgyzstan, 7 December 2022; Social Protection Department in one region the children were returned, 9 December 2022.
- <sup>85</sup> This delegation included representatives from MoLSWM and its territorial divisions, the Ministry of Interior and medical specialists (including intensive care, traumatologist and infectious disease specialists)
- <sup>86</sup> Social Protection Department in one region the children were returned, 9 December 2022; Ministry of Health, 6 December 2022.
- <sup>87</sup> UNICEF child protection department, Kyrgyzstan, 5 December 2022.
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>89</sup> Multiple stakeholders involved in reception phase.
- <sup>90</sup> Psychologist who worked in the reception centre, 24 January 2023.
- <sup>91</sup> Former head of the reception centre, 7 December 2022; UNICEF child protection department, Kyrgyzstan, 5 December 2022.
- <sup>92</sup> Former Red Crescent Society Kyrgyzstan employee, 6 December 2022.
- <sup>93</sup> Former head of the reception centre, 7 December 2022.
- <sup>94</sup> Ministry of Health, Kyrgyzstan, 6 December 2022.
- <sup>95</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>96</sup> Psychologist who worked in the reception centre, 24 January 2023.
- <sup>97</sup> International Committee on the Red Cross, Kyrgyzstan, 5 December 2022.
- <sup>98</sup> Interviewee details withheld.
- <sup>99</sup> Multiple stakeholders involved in this process.
- <sup>100</sup> International Committee on the Red Cross, Kyrgyzstan, 5 December 2022.
- <sup>101</sup> RCSK provided logistical assistance to support travel arrangements in this regard. Former Red Crescent Society Kyrgyzstan employee, 6 December 2022.
- <sup>102</sup> Psychologist who worked in the reception centre, 24 January 2023.
- <sup>103</sup> UNICEF education department, Kyrgyzstan, 5 December 2022.
- <sup>104</sup> Methodist for primary education in one of the regions children were returned, 8 December 2022.
- <sup>105</sup> Head teacher in one region in which children were returned, Kyrgyzstan, 8 December 2022.
- <sup>106</sup> Social Protection Department in one region the children were returned, 9 December 2022.
- <sup>107</sup> Social Protection Department in one region the children were returned, 9 December 2022.
- <sup>108</sup> International Committee on the Red Cross, Kyrgyzstan, 5 December 2022.
- <sup>109</sup> Head teacher of a school with reintegrated children enrolled, Kyrgyzstan, 8 December 2022.
- <sup>110</sup> Namangan branch of the Barqaror Hayot (BH), 14.12.22, Uzbekista

- <sup>111</sup> Knutzen, A. Repatriation and Reintegration of Children from Uzbekistan Affected by Armed Conflict in Syria and Iraq, 2019.
- <sup>112</sup> Head of the sanatorium (initial reception centre), Uzbekistan, 16 December 2022.
- <sup>113</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>114</sup> Ibid,
- <sup>115</sup> Inter-Ministerial Action plan (No. 2157 of 2019). This action plan was updated in 2021.
- <sup>116</sup> E-mail communication with UNICEF staff, 1 November 2022.
- <sup>117</sup> EU-UN Support to the States in Central Asia for their citizens returned from conflict zones, primarily Syria and Iraq, Description for action.
- <sup>118</sup> Transport to and security at the sanatorium was facilitated by the Ministry of Interior. Ministry of Interior, Uzbekistan, 17 December 2022.
- <sup>119</sup> Head of the sanatorium (initial reception centre), 16 December 2022.
- <sup>120</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>121</sup> Multiple stakeholders involved in the process in Uzbekistan.
- <sup>122</sup> Ministry of Interior, Uzbekistan, 17 December 2022.
- <sup>123</sup> Republican Centre for professional orientation and the psychological and pedagogical diagnosis (TASHKHIS), 15 December 2022.
- <sup>124</sup> Barqaror Hayot operates in Tashkent, Surkhandarya, Namangan, Kashkadarya regions, and provides legal, psychosocial support and vocational training for the mothers to support their return to work, after an in-depth assessment of the individual needs of the family.
- <sup>125</sup> RSCAC operates in Fergana, Andijan, Khorezm, Bukhara, Samarkand, Syrdarya, Tashkent regions and Tashkent city, and similarly provides legal, psychosocial, and educational support and support with accessing state social assistance.
- <sup>126</sup> As per recent administrative reform (end of 2022), the Committee of Family and Women's Affairs falls under the Ministry of Poverty Reduction and Employment.
- <sup>127</sup> Ministry of Interior, Uzbekistan, 17 December 2022.
- <sup>128</sup> See for instance: Aljazeera, UN urges countries to repatriate 27,000 children from Syria camp, 30 Jan 2021; Position of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism on the human rights of adolescents/juveniles being detained in North-East Syria, Fionnuala Ni Aolain, May 2021.
- <sup>129</sup> Child Rights Protection Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science, Kazakhstan, 13 September 2022.
- <sup>130</sup> Ministry of Health of Uzbekistan, 12 January 2023.
- <sup>131</sup> For example, in January 2019, then president Nursultan Nazarbayev noted that the citizens being returned were victims who had been "fraudulently taken to this crisis-stricken country, where they were held hostage by terrorists." Quoted in Farrell, w. 'Processes of Reintegrating Central Asian Returnees from Syria and Iraq', Special Report No 498, United States Institute of Peace, July 2021.
- <sup>132</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 16(1); United Nations General Assembly, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2017, Protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, 30 January 2018, A/RES/72/180, Article 5(i).
- <sup>133</sup> Ministry of Education, Kyrgyzstan, 7 December 2022.
- <sup>134</sup> Former Director of transit centre, 7 December 2022.
- <sup>135</sup> Head teacher in one region in which children were returned, Kyrgyzstan, 8 December 2022.
- <sup>136</sup> Social protection department in a region children returned, Kyrgyzstan.
- <sup>137</sup> Social worker working with children in Uzbekistan.
- <sup>138</sup> Practitioner working with children in Kazakhstan, 11 January 2023.
- <sup>139</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 2(2).
- <sup>140</sup> School psychologist, Uzbekistan, 15 December 2022.
- <sup>141</sup> There was only one incidence in one of the countries in which it was reported that an under 18-year-old had been charged, prosecuted and detained. However, this was disputed by the testimonies of other stakeholders in the same country, and as a result, this information must be regarded as unverified for the purposes of this report.
- <sup>142</sup> The minimum age of criminal responsibility in all three countries is 16 years old, or 14 years old in the case of more serious crimes as set out in each country's respective Criminal Code. Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated July 16, 1997 No. 167, Article 15(3); Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated September 22, 1994 No. 2012-XII, Article 17; Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic of October 28, 2021 No. 127, (as amended on 09-08-2022), Article 28. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan terrorism is listed as one of the offences for which 14 year olds can be held criminally liable.
- <sup>143</sup> Multiple stakeholders from Kyrgyzstan.
- <sup>144</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>145</sup> Multiple stakeholders from Uzbekistan.
- <sup>146</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 9(3).
- <sup>147</sup> Ministry of Interior, Uzbekistan, 17 December 2022.
- <sup>148</sup> Ombudsperson of children's rights, Uzbekistan, 15 December 2022.
- <sup>149</sup> Ministry of Interior, Uzbekistan, 17 December 2022.
- <sup>150</sup> Ngo working with returnee children, Kazakhstan.
- <sup>151</sup> Ombudsperson of children's rights, Uzbekistan, 15 December 2022.
- <sup>152</sup> UNICEF Kyrgyzstan, child protection department, 5 December 2022.
- <sup>153</sup> Republican Centre for professional orientation and the psychological and pedagogical diagnosis (TASHKHIS), 15 December 2022.
- <sup>154</sup> Head of the sanatorium (initial reception centre), 16 December 2022.
- <sup>155</sup> [Interviewee details withheld], Uzbekistan.
- <sup>156</sup> Social workers from an NGO working with returnee children in Uzbekistan, 13 December 2022.
- <sup>157</sup> Key informant Interview, NGO working with families in Kazakhstan, 27 December 2023.
- <sup>158</sup> Key informant Interview, Theologist at NGO Zhaiyk-Amanat, 10 January 2023.

- <sup>159</sup> Department of Education in one region children were returned, Kazakhstan, 9 January 2023.
- <sup>160</sup> Key informant Interview, Methodist-Specialist at the Department of Education, Uralsk, 9 January 2023.
- <sup>161</sup> Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, UN General Assembly Resolution 64/142, 24 February 2010 (UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children).
- <sup>162</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 20(1).
- <sup>163</sup> See for example van IJzendoorn, M. H., et al, Institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of children: 1. A systematic and integrative review of evidence regarding effects on development, *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 7(8), 703–720, 2020.
- <sup>164</sup> Child Rights Protection Committee of the Ministry of Education and Science, Kazakhstan, 13 September 2022.
- <sup>165</sup> Psychologist who worked in the reception centre, 24 January 2023.
- <sup>166</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12.
- <sup>167</sup> UNICEF, Report on the Repatriation and Reintegration of children from Iraq: Kyrgyzstan, undated, unpublished.
- <sup>168</sup> Social workers from an NGO working with returnee children in Uzbekistan, 13 December 2022.
- <sup>169</sup> Key informant interview, UNICEF Child Protection Officer, 5 December 2022, Kyrgyzstan.
- <sup>170</sup> Key informant interview with NGO working with children in Kazakhstan, 7 Feb 2023.
- <sup>171</sup> UNICEF Education department, Kyrgyzstan, 5 December 2022.
- <sup>172</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>173</sup> Department of Education, Shymkent, 10 January 2023; Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, ‘The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children from Syria and Iraq: The experiences of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan’, June 2021.
- <sup>174</sup> NGO working with returnee children in Uzbekistan 14 January 2023.
- <sup>175</sup> Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration, Kyrgyzstan, 7 December 2022; State commission of Religion, December 6 2023.
- <sup>176</sup> Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration, Kyrgyzstan, 7 December 2022.
- <sup>177</sup> Director of an NGO working with returnees, 20 December 2022.
- <sup>178</sup> Group interview with school psychologists, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 15 December 2022.
- <sup>179</sup> “A New home, a new beginning,” UNICEF Kyrgyzstan, 2023.
- <sup>180</sup> In Kazakhstan, ICRC is training teachers, school psychologists and social workers who work with returnee children and families, International Committee of the Red Cross.
- <sup>181</sup> Consultation with UNICEF Kazakhstan.
- <sup>182</sup> Conversations with stakeholders; EU-UN Support to the States in Central Asia for their citizens returned from conflict zones, primarily Syria and Iraq, Description for action.
- <sup>183</sup> EU-UN Support to the States in Central Asia for their citizens returned from conflict zones, primarily Syria and Iraq, Description for action.
- <sup>184</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12.

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