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## Work with returnees from Syria and Iraq: Kazakhstani experience

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# Work with returnees from Syria and Iraq: Kazakhstanee experience

## 1. Report data collection and authorization Description

This research has been carried out to study the experience of Kazakhstan on the work done to return to the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan of people held in the zone of terrorist activity (hereinafter - ZTA) - camps in the north-eastern part of Syria and prisons in Iraq. Some of the people returned on their own initiative with the assistance of the Republic of Kazakhstan diplomatic corps (in this report they are referred to as "self-returnees").

There are citizens of more than 80 countries of the world, including people from the Kyrgyz Republic, held in camps and prisons. Thus, Kazakhstani experience is actual due to the discussion of the possibility to return Kyrgyz Republic women and children. To obtain necessary information and provide access to the relevant institutions involved into the returnees' rehabilitation and adaptation process, the Center of Human Rights Protection "Kylym Shamy" appealed to the Republic of Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the help of the Kazakhstan mission in Bishkek. The researchers group with Aziza Abdirasulova and Dmitry Kabak dates of the visit to the city of Nur -Sultan were agreed for the period of 17- 20 September, 2019. The Republic of Kazakhstan officials assisted in providing access to Nur-Sultan institutions, where the returnees' reintegration and adaptation process is carried out. Custodial institutions with held accountable persons were not monitored. Access to the secret documents was agreed with the competent authorities. According to officials, at the time of the researchers group trip there were no returnees in the Aktau Center, due to their necessary procedures completion and voluntarily allocation to the regions of residence, so there was no need to make a trip to Aktau, which was a part of the initial work plans.

## 2. Information consolidation tools and methodology

Prior visiting Nur-Sultan, a team of researchers developed questionnaires for interviews (for returnees staying in a rehabilitation center; for rehabilitation centers staff including psychologists, psychotherapists, medical workers, social workers, lawyers) and an observation chart for rehabilitation center examining. These documents were sent to the Republic of Kazakhstan officials at the stage of visit approval. Upon arrival in Nur-Sultan during the meetings, the goals and objectives of collecting data, holding meetings were adapted to the current situation. The first center for returnees was set up in Aktau, further work was carried out at the place of residence on the basis of rehabilitation and adaptation centers with the assistance of psychologists, psychotherapists, medical workers, social workers, lawyers and religious scholars (during the interview they were called "theologians"), as well as highly specialized experts in child and female psychology.

## 3. Meetings on the data collection preparation and processing

Meetings with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Security Committee, the Commissioner for Human Rights in the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as representatives of public organizations - the Public Foundation "Pravo" and the Public Foundation "Center of Analysis and Forecasting " The Open World " were held in Nur-Sultan. Interviews with employees (social workers, psychologists, lawyers) and the rehabilitation and adaptation program ("returnees") participants were conducted on the basis of the socio-psychological, legal assistance center "Chance" (Public Foundation "Pravo").

## 4. Returnees General data (quantity, camps, gender, return)

For the period from January up to June 2019, Kazakhstan conducted in four stages the "Zhusan" operation to return Kazakhstanee citizens from Syria who, for various reasons, appeared in the zone of terrorist activity. The citizens return operation was named "Zhusan", which is translated from the Kazakh language as "wormwood", which is associated with the smell of the homeland among nomads. The decision to carry out the "Zhusan" operation was made at the top political level, on the initiative of the head of state - the first

President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev. Thus visits to Syria and Iraq camps and prisons were organized to search and identify women and children from Kazakhstan (including children born outside the Republic of Kazakhstan). The salvation of the Syrian war victims was of humanitarian nature, primarily in terms of returning children who were held hostage by circumstances beyond their control to normal life. During the four stages of the “Zhusan” operation, conducted in January, May and June 2019, 595 people were evacuated from Syria, including 33 men, 156 women and 406 children (31 of them were orphans). Upon arrival to Kazakhstan, 45 people (33 men and 12 women) were held accountable in accordance with the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Another 4 women were recognized not to leave the place. Women and children who arrived in the Republic of Kazakhstan were accommodated for 1 month at the rehabilitation and adaptation Center in Aktau, located on the shore of the Caspian Sea, which is structurally a suburban health and recreation center. (From information provided by the Republic of Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs.)<sup>1</sup>

## 5. Setting objectives on returning persons locating in ZTA

### 5.1. Taking a political decision. The humanitarian nature of the operation focusing on children and women, salvation from living in life-threatening conditions

The return of children and women from Syria and Iraq was considered in the Republic of Kazakhstan as a humanitarian operation, aimed at fulfilling the obligations of the state with respect to its citizens who found themselves in a zone of terrorist activity for various reasons. The first stage included the information collection on the number of the Republic of Kazakhstan citizens located in Syria and Iraq (in camps and prisons), trips to the camps to identify citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan (women and children, including born outside the territory of Kazakhstan, as well as men). In addition, there are women with children staying in Iraqi prisons, whose return is currently under consideration. According to officials, representatives of other states turned to Kazakhstan to obtain information about the work being done. Among them are Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, France, Belgium, Kosovo. On the citizens return issue: Uzbekistan returned 156 women and children from the camps of Syria, Tajikistan returned 84 children whose mothers are serving sentences in Iraqi prisons, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan are considering the return of their citizens.

### 5.2. Camps detention conditions (diseases, unsanitary conditions, the nature of different people groups relationship based on ethnic, religious and linguistic differences, ways of making income for survival)

There are several camps (Al-Khol, Anisa, Muhayo-Rovzh, etc.) in the north-eastern part of Syria. Totally, about 75 thousand women and children from around the world are in these camps. Information on the number of women and children in Iraqi prisons is being clarified. The conditions people staying are determined by a number of facts: lack of access to clean drinking water and water for household needs, food, lack of electricity, medical services and medicines, climate and weather conditions. In summer, the air temperature reached 72 degrees Celsius. During the spring and autumn periods in Syria, the rainy season and high water floods the tents and makes living difficult. During the hot period, snakes and scorpions crawled into the tents. Outbreaks of various infectious diseases periodically occur among the camps inhabitants.

The situation is aggravated with the complicated relationships of citizens of different origins on ethnic and linguistic grounds, as well as the troubled criminogenic situation, as a result of which conflict situations periodically arise among camp guests, including their using of cold weapons and firearms. According to available information, representatives of the Red Cross, Red Crescent and UNICEF provide assistance wherever possible. The acquisition of food and other things depends on the ability and possibility to trade or provide services. Various conflict situations arise periodically among the guests of the camps. According to information

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<sup>1</sup> Information provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakstan.

received, the Al-Khol camp (where about 70 thousand women and children live) is under the control of unofficial armed groups of Kurdish origin.

### 5.3. Work with persons' relatives held in Syria camps and Iraqi prisons

To search and identify persons who found themselves in Syria and Iraq, Kazakhstan competent authorities conducted the preliminary work with returnees' relatives and friends. Among the key issues they faced were the acceptance and support of the above mentioned people after arriving in Kazakhstan. The adoption of orphans or children born outside of Kazakhstan is a work item. The procedure for establishing kinship, especially for orphans and genetic testing, may require the participation of relatives.

### 5.4. Consent to return to Kazakhstan, methods of agreements execution, subscription. Citizens refused to return

RK officials who visited camps and prisons in Syria and Iraq met with women. While contacting, the question was raised on the voluntary obtaining of their consent to return to the Republic of Kazakhstan. According to the employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Security Committee, the women were informed that they could be held responsible under the Republic of Kazakhstan laws if any illegal actions in the zone of terrorist activity. Women who expressed a desire to return to Kazakhstan wrote a receipt on their return on a voluntary basis. Some citizens stayed on. According to officials, six Kazakhstani women refused to return and stayed in Syrian camps. When identifying citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the question arose about children born outside the territory of Kazakhstan.

### 5.5. To highlight the situation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized press-conferences, providing an opportunity for the relatives and friends of the returnees to outspcak

Upon the returnees arrival from Syria to Kazakhstan, The President Nursultan Nazarbayev made a media speech, saying that Kazakhstan had returned its deceived citizens to their homeland. After the arrival of citizens from Syria, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan organized a press conference, providing journalists with access to relatives and returnees family members who agreed to contact the press. The NY Times journalist received access to the rehabilitation and adaptation center in Aktau, where he stayed for about a week, after he published an article about the center's work and the returnees conditions<sup>2</sup>.

### 5.6. Self-returners (case of a female returnee "A")

Some citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan independently applied to the consular departments of the Republic of Kazakhstan abroad with a request for all kinds of assistance for returning to Kazakhstan (preparation of a document for returning to their homeland). While monitoring, an interview was conducted with a woman - self- returner who found herself in Turkey without documents, accompanied with four children, her husband was in Syria and called them to him. Upon arrival in Kazakhstan, it was necessary to restore her documents and documents for children, including documents for three children born in Turkey.

## 6. Return to Kazakhstan arrangement objectives

### 6.1. Kazakhstan hadn't had any experience, so had to work out new approach

Kazakhstan, as the first state in Central Asia, worked out experience in the process of emerging issues resolving. It was necessary to coordinate the process due to some issues resolving was the responsibility of various authorities. The Republic of Kazakhstan Security Council and the National Security Committee considered their efforts as the contribution to the international adjudication on the Syrian issue by minimizing the number of the Republic of Kazakhstan citizens in the conflict zone.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/world/europe/kazakhstan-women-islamic-state-deradicalization.html>

The Aktau center for returnees became an experimental site where medical assistance was provided (examination for various types of diseases during a month stay in the center, surgical medical care and treatment). Each department and related authorities began to work in accordance with its mandate. The psychologists were involved in work with the returnees' rehabilitation and adaptation center.

## 6.2. Aktau Center opening (competent authorities and services involvement, conditions arranging: quarantine regimen, medical treatment, legal, psychological and nutritional support, etc.)

Due to the fact that staying of women and their children abroad could have different consequences, it was necessary to coordinate the work of different governmental agencies. Law enforcement agencies worked with the issues within their competence: legal assessment of the returnees' actions during their stay in ZTA, health authorities - ensuring quarantine, testing, surgical treatment, vaccination (especially for children, taking into account their age), social authorities with rehabilitation programs lent psychological and legal support. Quarantine measures were the first implemented. A work item was the correction of the consequences of malnutrition and inanition of the children. After the returnees were sent to their place of residence (where relatives were worked with on their readiness to take them into the family, taking into account the peculiarities of living in ZTA), local rehabilitation centers took the burden.

## 6.3. Testing the model, using the returnees program methodology: children, women, men

The first returnees' group experience was further developed and applied to the following groups. The Aktau center consisted of four buildings, so each following group was located in the vacant building. According to Nur-Sultan Center staff, while developing the methodology, the social characteristics of each returnees' group (orphans, children from solo parent families, women with children, women, men) were taken into account. Rehabilitation centers' program starting includes two types of working hours: in-patient (according to the information of Public Foundation "Pravo", for returnees - a "children's hostel») and day-time in-patient.

## 6.4. Personnel training and retraining for the juvenile re-socialization activities

It required the involvement of specialists in working with children to start resocialization programs. According to the PF "Pravo" information, due to the lack of such experience, trainings of such specialists had to be carried out on an on-going basis (child psychologists, religious scholars, psychotherapists, educators, social workers, lawyers).

## 6.5. Returnees working professions training

As part of the returnees re-socialization, one of the ways to ensure self-employment was to train their workers in rehab centers. Particularly, the research team was given examples of training returnees for the profession of translator and traffic rules training for driving test passing to ensure employment as a driver.

## 6.6. Granting mothers right to choose child's place of birth indicating, first and last name; kinship establishment through genomic examination by judicial procedure

To exclude stigmatization of children born outside the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan, mothers were given the right to choose the name and surname of the child, as well as indicate the place of birth. According to the results of the interview some women wanted to keep Syria's designation as the birthplace of their child. The relationship between a child and his mother or close relatives (especially in relation to orphans) was established by a genomic examination in a judicial proceeding. Conducting a genomic examination on a personal initiative is costly (taking into account various medical procedures and supplies, the cost exceeds 500 US dollars), if this issue is solved with the participation of the state, the cost of services was covered by the state.

#### 6.7. Returnees personal data protection. Personnel and officials involved non-disclosure data agreement

According to the Rehabilitation Center official and the representative of the NSC (National Security Committee), the persons involved in working with the returnees gave written consent not to disclose any information referred to a personal secret.