

# Best Practices for Reintegration Programming for Returning Spouses and Children



Homeland Security

Science and Technology

## AT RISK: STRANDED AMERICAN FAMILIES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Between 2013 and 2018, hundreds traveled from the United States to join the ranks of violent extremist organizations active in Iraq and Syria, including ISIS. Many foreign fighters brought their spouses and children with them. Others established families when they arrived. As the conflict slowed, the spouses and children of known foreign fighters were captured and placed in large camps. These detention sites located in Syria and Iraq now host tens of thousands—well beyond their design capacity. Living conditions are dismal and dangerous. The detained population includes Americans.

The issue of detained foreign fighter families (FFF) is time-sensitive, with notable security and humanitarian dimensions. A delayed or ineffectual response risks creating a new set of threats. Detained persons might escape and join active extremist organizations. Children in the camps are at risk of becoming radicalized themselves if they remain in such environments without treatment for their trauma. One former ISIS hostage said it succinctly: “The desperate conditions, lack of hope, and a lack of control within even the camps for women and children, risk creating conditions for a new generation of extremism.”

## REINTEGRATION PROJECT GOALS

The Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) Reintegration Project for Returning Spouses and Children aims to: **1)** comprehensively evaluate the existing knowledge and practice of the reintegration of spouses and children associated with foreign terrorist fighters, and **2)** promote evidence-based models for the reintegration of returning spouses and children.

## PROJECT RESEARCH PLAN

- **Investigative stream 1:** Amass and analyze the formative research on foreign terrorist fighters and their families
- **Investigative stream 2:** Identify trends and gaps in reintegration theory and practice
- **Development stream 1:** Create practitioner framework of guiding principles for reintegration programming
- **Development stream 2:** Develop a set of curricula and training materials pertaining to the reintegration of foreign fighter spouses and children



## MILESTONES AND DELIVERABLES

- Complete assessment of existing knowledge Fiscal Year 2022, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter (FY22 Q1)
- Conduct fieldwork research in Iraq, the Netherlands, and the United States (FY22 Q4 - FY23 Q1)
- Produce practitioner framework of best practices for reintegration programming (FY23 Q2)
- Disseminate training materials and curricula (FY23 Q3)
- Host bi-annual expert panel events (FY22, FY23 - Q2, Q4)
- Publish annual major reports (FY22, FY23 - Q4)

## PROJECT IMPACT

This project will identify gaps in research and practice, and inform future policy and research objectives, to support the successful reintegration of FFF and help to prevent any related generational cycle of Americans engaged in violent extremism. This project will identify models of best practice that have empirically proven records of successful reintegration of returning spouses and children of foreign fighters.

## RESEARCH TEAM

- National Counterterrorism, Innovation, Technology, and Education Center — University of Nebraska at Omaha
- Program on Extremism — The George Washington University
- International Centre for Counterterrorism

