Deradicalisation and Rehabilitation: Way Forward for Returnees

By Sabariah Hussin

SYNOPSIS

Countries continue to struggle to arrive at a cogent policy approach towards the thousands of Islamic State "returnees" – citizens who have joined the transnational terrorist group and who wish to return or are returning to their home country. It is crucial that the accepted returnees be placed in deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes where the involvement of the community is key.

COMMENTARY

AS THE last pockets of the so-called Islamic State's (IS) caliphate in Syria collapsed, the United States-backed coalition pushed for captured IS-affiliated foreigners to be returned to their home countries. Several cases have made international headlines, including those of British national Shamima Begum and US-born Hoda Muthana – both women left their respective countries to join IS in Syria and Iraq from late 2014 and are now trying to return.

Several Western governments continue to fiercely debate whether to accept these returnees. The US and United Kingdom have adopted a "hard-line" approach – both Begum and Muthana were refused re-entry. France has said it will tackle the issue on a case-by-case basis, and indicated that the estimated 130 French nationals held in Syria on suspicion of supporting IS will be repatriated and made to stand trial. Other countries have said they will accept child returnees – Russia has already repatriated 27 children and Belgium is working to bring back child citizens.

Individualised Approach

More than 7,000 of the estimated 40,000 foreign fighters that IS recruited have reportedly returned home or relocated elsewhere. One argument for accepting the

returnees back is that a refusal of return or stripping them of citizenship could be counter-productive for the long-term security of countries. A "hard-line" approach can play into the hands of extremists and fuel further radicalisation among vulnerable Muslims.

Other than ideological affinity, former militants cite a variety of motives for turning to extremism, including seeking a sense of belonging or acceptance, an escape from poor living conditions and political disenfranchisement in their home countries.

In their recruitment propaganda, transnational groups such as IS regularly tout narratives in which Western governments are accused of mistreating their Muslim citizens. Refusing their return or stripping them of their citizenship would add fuel to fire.

How to Re-integrate Returnees

Even if the decision is to accept their returnees, the question of how to reintegrate and disengage them from extremism is a challenge for many countries. One issue is the difficulty in gauging what IS fighters were exposed to while living in conflict zones such as Syria. Such assessments are critical to determine the extent to which an individual should be prosecuted. They are also crucial to determine their level of security risk and to tailor an appropriate deradicalisation programme.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that returnees can suffer from severe mental trauma that distorts their defence mechanism. This can severely hinder their ability to function normally in society.

Some also return with families whom they have travelled with, foreign wives or children born in conflict. The varied backgrounds and experiences of returnees mean that a one-size-fits-all approach to rehabilitating and reintegrating them into society may not be effective.

An individualised approach to rehabilitation and reintegration, although resource-intensive, can go a long way in addressing the complexities in resettling foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), particularly combatants, who may not only retain a strong commitment to IS but also be psychologically affected by their battlefield experiences.

Southeast Asian Experience

In Southeast Asia, where estimates suggest more than 1,000 fighters have travelled to the Middle East to join IS since 2014, both Malaysia and Indonesia have been accepting returnees on a conditional basis.

In Malaysia, 102 Malaysians are reported to have joined IS to date. According to law enforcement officials, Malaysian FTFs are believed to have participated in both combat and non-combat roles for IS. Returnees are subjected to investigations, prosecutions in the more serious cases and have to undergo mandatory rehabilitation. It also has an aftercare programme to reintegrate returnees into their communities.

On 12 March 2019, Malaysian authorities announced a formal request from 13 citizens in Syria to be allowed to return home. Among a previous batch of 11 returnees, eight – all males – were tried in court. The remaining three – one female and two children – had to undergo a mandatory one-month rehabilitation programme as a condition for (to) their return. There are currently at least 51 Malaysian nationals believed to still reside in Syria, including 17 children.

Indonesia, which is estimated to have 600 FTFs, has similarly prosecuted returnees, but it also takes a holistic approach with returning FTFs to best prepare them for reintegration into their communities. A range of rehabilitation programmes is run involving the government, civil society groups and the local community. Together, they attempt to comprehensively address the causal factors that contribute to a person being radicalised, including feelings of disenfranchisement, weak family ties, poverty and ideology.

Community Engagement

To effectively tackle the issue of returnees, countries need to ensure they are well equipped to handle the various reintegration challenges. This requires strong political will, adequate resources and the involvement of the wider community. An underappreciated aspect of the reintegration process involves community engagement.

Firstly, community engagement can serve to reinforce or complement official rehabilitation efforts. Community actors such as civil society organisations, the religious community as well as friends and family serve as gatekeepers of social and religious norms underpinning social harmony and peace.

Community-led programmes which attempt to strengthen such norms in returnees and their families, who have been imbued with IS' warped values and religious misinterpretation, are necessary to overcome misperceptions that rehabilitation is a securitised enterprise by the government. The effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes can be undermined by such misperceptions.

Secondly, the community also acts as a monitoring mechanism on the ground in ways that the authorities cannot, as they tend to have close personal connections and are hence likeliest to notice behavioural changes in returnees and vulnerable community members. Upstream, early intervention through community rehabilitation programmes can help mitigate the risk of recidivism among returnees.

Effective reintegration requires that returnees be willing to reject extremism and embrace mainstream values of peace and tolerance. Conversely, the community needs to pull together to support and engender a sense of belonging in returnees to mitigate the risk of recidivism. Successful reintegration of returnees is largely premised on their acceptance back into the community.

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