

The Returning
Foreign Terrorist Fighters
Detention Program

Achievements Report 2019-2023



UNODC
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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The support of UNODC is vital to overcome the challenges facing our prisons and achieve future development in our reformatory facilities. We will draw on the international expertise provided by UNODC to enhance the reformatory system in KRG-I and strengthen staff capacity.

”

Mr Ihasan Abdulrahman,
General Director of the
Reformatory Directorate,
Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Introduction

Prison systems around the world face fundamental challenges. Affected by punitive criminal policies as well as a shortage of social protection services in the community, the number of people in prison continues to grow in many countries, now standing at over 11 million globally. It is in this context that we must consider the challenge of returning foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs).



Countries in Central Asia have been some of the leaders in repatriating their citizens, both fighters and accompanying family members, and we applaud those countries' continued efforts to bring additional people back.



Mr John Herbst,
Eurasia Team Lead,
Bureau of Counterterrorism,
U.S. Department of State

The issues of violent extremist prisoners and radicalization to violence in prisons are of increasing concern to the international community, and the nexus between terrorism and transnational organized crime creates new challenges. Yet the ability of prison systems around the world to manage these evolving problems is severely limited.

High numbers of pre-trial detainees, underfunded and under-resourced prison systems with poor infrastructure, overcrowding, poor health conditions and other fundamental challenges heavily undermine the capacity of prison administrations to manage violent extremist prisoners effectively and to prevent radicalization. These shortcomings can leave prisoners in frustration and despair, providing dangerous entry points for attempts to radicalize them.

With the territorial defeat of Islamic State, the phenomenon of RFTFs has become one of the major global threats to international peace and security. It now constitutes one of the main areas of attention in the United Nations' ongoing efforts to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism. RFTFs pose specific challenges to prison authorities in their home countries: their risks and needs require careful assessment, and security is of the utmost importance; rehabilitation is vital, but programs must be tailored to their circumstances; social reintegration may be especially challenging. RFTFs also exacerbate the risk of radicalization to violence of other prisoners.

To address this, from 2019-2023 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has delivered the Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters Detention Program, generously funded by the US Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State. The program was delivered in Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

In close cooperation with these partner countries and with support of the Bureau of Counterterrorism, UNODC has implemented a program that has gained in-depth knowledge of the challenges, needs and priorities of the countries' penitentiary systems. It has equipped beneficiaries with the tools and policies they need to address existing threats and adapt to changing circumstances. The program has fostered the engagement of civil society organizations in rehabilitation and post-release support to enable the reintegration of violent extremist prisoners into society. Finally, it has both enhanced the coordination of different authorities within countries, and supported the sharing of best practice internationally.

In its resolution 2396 (2017), the United Nations Security Council notes that prisons can serve as potential incubators for radicalization to terrorism and terrorist recruitment – but also that prisons can serve to rehabilitate and reintegrate prisoners. Through technical assistance the RFTF Detention Program has helped beneficiary countries to translate the Security Council recommendations into effective action on the ground.

Areas of impact



Improving safety and security



Addressing risks and needs of terrorist and RFTF prisoners



Boosting capacity to counter and prevent terrorist threats within prisons



Sharing good practice

Program background

The Returning Foreign Fighters Detention program has aimed to enhance partner nations' capacity to manage threats posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs) through providing technical assistance to law enforcement, corrections, and justice sector agencies. By doing so it has encouraged partners' cooperation in repatriating their RFTF nationals in custody in Syria and elsewhere.

The program has built on international commitments made through UN Security Council Resolution 2396 (2017) that encourage Member States to develop tools that can help address radicalization to violence and terrorist recruitment; risk assessments to assess the risks of prisoners' susceptibility to terrorist recruitment and radicalization to violence; and tailored and gender-sensitive strategies to address and counter terrorist narratives within the prison system. These must be consistent with international humanitarian law and human rights law, as applicable and in accordance with relevant international law.

Relevant documents

The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006)

The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006) is a unique global instrument to enhance national, regional, and international counter-terrorism efforts. It is composed of four pillars, namely: addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism; measures to prevent and combat terrorism; measures to build states' capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations System in that regard; and measures to ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis for the fight against terrorism.

UN Security Council Resolution 2396 (2017)

In 2017 UN Security Council Resolution 2396 acknowledged that prisons could serve as potential incubators for radicalization to terrorism and terrorist recruitment, and encouraged Member States to: take all appropriate actions to maintain a safe and humane environment in prisons; develop tools to address radicalization to violence and terrorist recruitment; develop risk assessments to prevent terrorist recruitment and radicalization to violence; develop tailored and gender-sensitive strategies to address and counter terrorist narratives within the prison system; and rehabilitate and reintegrate prisoners and engage with offenders after release from prison to avoid recidivism.

The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)

A strong focus of the program has been on the promotion of the Nelson Mandela Rules. The rules, for which UNODC is custodian, provide the universally-recognized blueprint for good prison management and the treatment of all prisoners. When complied with they offer powerful barriers against violent extremism taking root in prisons, and provide a strong foundation on which effective interventions can be built.

The UN Common Position on Incarceration (2021)

In 2021 the United Nations system issued a common position on incarceration. This document lays the groundwork for a 'all-of-UN' approach under three thematic areas:

- Shifting policies towards crime prevention and alternatives to incarceration
- Strengthening prison management and improving prison conditions
- Advancing the rehabilitation and social reintegration of offenders

Madrid Guiding Principles

In July 2015, the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee held a special meeting in Madrid on stemming the flow of RFTFs. Participants identified a set of 35 guiding principles for stemming the RFTF flow; these were subsequently adopted by the Security Council (S/2015/939). They are intended as a practical tool for use by Member States in their efforts to combat terrorism in accordance with resolution 2178 (2014).

Definitions

Returning foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs): Foreign terrorist fighters travel to conflict zones to engage in terrorist acts. The persuasive use of propaganda by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) led to an unprecedented flow of volunteers from countries around the world. By 2015, approximately 40,000 individuals from over 120 countries travelled to Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic as fighters. An estimated 80 per cent of those travelled to join ISIL, creating a combined force with local Syrians and Iraqis of around 100,000 fighters. Since 2017, ISIL has lost most of the territory it occupied in Iraq and Syria and many FTFs have returned, or attempted to return, to their countries of origin. Returning foreign terrorist fighters pose a significant threat to peace and security. A likely outcome of not pursuing repatriation and prosecution is that these fighters re-engage in terrorism, which may go undetected in the countries where they relocate.

Violent extremist: A person who promotes, supports, facilitates, or commits acts of violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals or social change. In some cases, a violent extremist prisoner may not be in prison for an offence (or alleged offence) related to violent extremism but has been assessed as a violent extremist according to the definition set out above.

Radicalization to violence: The process by which people acquire radical or extremist beliefs and attitudes that involve the use of violent measures to achieve objectives.

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Initiatives of this kind support prison reform by introducing new approaches to prison management and streamlining international standards in our penitentiary policy.

”

Mr. Kynatbek Smanaliev,
Deputy Minister of Justice, Kyrgyzstan (October 2021)

Key challenges

All four partner countries have their own specific contexts, needs and issues faced when it comes to the management of RFTFs. Nevertheless, there are many common challenges:

- **Security and political sensitivities** around the topic of violent extremism and terrorism in prisons
- Persistent **prison overcrowding** and a limited range of alternatives to imprisonment
- **Inadequate prison conditions, infrastructure and staff capacity** for advanced interventions for RFTF prisoners
- **Punitive national legislation** related to the management of violent extremist prisoners and post-release supervision and support
- **Limited access to relevant data and evidence**
- **Few tailored age- and gender-responsive tools**
- No systematic approach to assessing RFTF prisoners' **risks and needs** to allow for appropriate sentence planning
- The **impact of COVID-19** on prison management
- Country-specific **implementation challenges**, including complex governance processes, border conflicts limiting cooperation, and limited direct access to RFTF prisoners
- **Stigmatization of prisoners**, including RFTF prisoners



Meeting of civil society organizations, Iraq, 2022



US Bureau of Counterterrorism visit to prison, Kyrgyzstan, 2022



Embedding the Nelson Mandela Rules, Kazakhstan

Partner countries



Iraq

Number of prisoners:

59,103

Number of prisons:

24

(under the Federal Government of Iraq)

10

(under the Kurdish Regional Government)

Background: Since 2017, Iraqi detention centres and prisons have witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of detainees charged with terrorism-related offences due to the territorial fall of ISIL. At the start of the RFTF program, the focus was on gaining an in-depth knowledge of prisons in the country to understand needs and define recommendations. From 2021 interventions began, focusing on technical coordination and capacity development to counter terrorist threats and address security needs.

Impact: The government of Iraq has gained in-depth understanding of the challenges, needs and priorities of RFTF prisoners, and the prison population more broadly. Prison staff have access to the latest best practice information and have received specialist training, including through a dedicated training center opened in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, boosting prison security and likelihood of rehabilitation and reintegration. With UNODC's support, national and international civil society organizations have been empowered and their coordination with government authorities improved.



Kazakhstan

Number of prisoners:

35,228

(including 7,140 in pre-trial detention centres)

Number of female prisoners:

2,457

Number of prisons:

80

(including 16 pre-trial detention centres)

Number of violent extremist prisoners:

673

Number of foreign terrorist fighter detainees:

50

(approx.)

Background: Kazakhstan has played a leading role in the repatriation of FTFs. Through the humanitarian operations Zhusan and Rusafa, 654 people were repatriated between 2019 and 2021, including 37 men, 164 women and 453 children. Most of men and women have been prosecuted and are serving their sentences in custody, and the country has taken a comprehensive approach in their prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration. However, Kazakhstan's prison system requires international expertise and methodological support to manage RFTF prisoners. This program has focused on building the capacity of prison officers and introducing new prison management instruments to ensure safe and secure custody as well as the humane treatment of high-risk prisoners.

Impact: Today Kazakhstan's prisons are equipped with new instruments to support the effective management of RFTF prisoners. The country's specialist prison officer training academy in Kostanay is equipped with relevant, tailored resources on the management of RFTFs, and national trainers are trained to ensure effective in-service development for all relevant staff on the management of RFTF prisoners and the prevention of radicalization to violence in prison settings.



Kyrgyzstan

Number of prisoners:

7,569

Number of female prisoners:

352

Number of prisons:

28

Number of violent extremist prisoners:

200

Number of foreign terrorist fighter detainees:

38 (approx.)

Background: While Kyrgyzstan has yet to repatriate adults from the conflict zones during the project period, the presence of self-returnees, combined with existing violent extremist and terrorist prisoners, created a challenge for the prison service. As a result, following consultations with national counterparts the RFTF program focused on improving prison security and safety, boosting staff capacity to manage risks and mitigate terrorist threats in prisons, and promoting interagency cooperation at the national level and experience sharing with other countries.

Impact: The pilot prisons involved in the program are now more secure, with officers not only able to manage RFTF prisoners more effectively, but to detect early signs of radicalization to violence among the general prison population.



Tajikistan

Number of prisoners:

12,491

Number of female prisoners:

362

Number of prisons:

19

Number of violent extremist prisoners:

2,133

Number of foreign terrorist fighter detainees:

281 (approx.)

Background: Tajikistan has the largest number of prisoners convicted of terrorism and extremism-related crimes in Central Asia. Approximately 20% of the prison population consists of terrorist and extremist prisoners, including around 281 RFTF prisoners. The presence of this disproportionate number of terrorist and RFTF prisoners is a major hindrance in the effective management of prisons, leading to safety and security risks and a very high degree of risk of radicalization towards violence in prisons. Interventions under the RFTF program therefore mainly focused on improving safety and security in prisons along with reducing the risk of radicalization.

Impact: With UNODC's support, Tajikistan's prison service is now better able to classify RFTF prisoners, manage risk and develop individualized sentence plans, meaning that the risk of radicalization to violence in prisons has greatly reduced. This also supports effective delivery of rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Prison authorities have a boosted capacity to gather and share prison intelligence, helping to prevent terrorist activity within prisons and in wider society.



Improving safety and security

A safe, secure, and humane prison environment provides the foundation for all other interventions, helping to prevent radicalization in prison, as well as the planning of terrorist activities within and beyond prison walls.

While many prisons authorities have a good existing understanding of physical security measures, procedural and dynamic measures – including staff establishing open and professional relationships with prisoners – are often not in place.

The RFTF program enhanced security and safety mechanisms and capacity across the four beneficiary countries by conducting security audits and developing audit tools to improve awareness of security challenges; providing training to prison staff; and supporting increased information sharing among criminal justice and other public agencies.



In the name of the Ministry of Justice, we express our appreciation to UNODC; including for recommending the formation of specialized intelligence units in prisons, and for supporting staff responsible for prisoner management through dynamic security training.



Mr. Majeed Abduredha,
Assistant Director General of Iraqi
Reformatory Directorate for Adults,
Ministry of Justice

Iraq

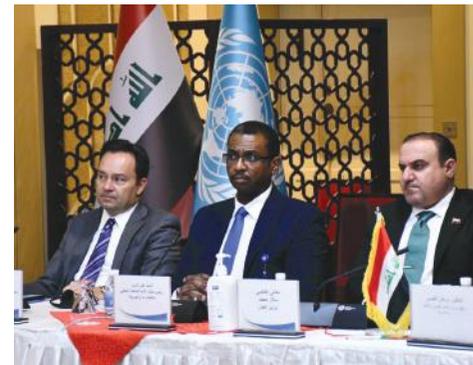
- National authorities have a better understanding of the prison service’s strengths and challenges in terms of physical, procedural and dynamic security, as a result of detailed security audits carried out in selected prisons.
- Prison officers have the expertise they need to build positive, professional relationships with prisoners as a result of UNODC dynamic security training. This supports the prevention of radicalization to violence and improves overall prison security.

Kazakhstan

- A comprehensive security audit framework is now in place across Kazakhstan’s prisons, developed by an interagency working group supported by UNODC.
- A security audit tool has been developed and piloted, and is currently being refined by UNODC experts.
- Interagency cooperation between prison service and law enforcement bodies has improved as a result of a new training module on the subject, now integrated into the curriculum for law enforcement senior management.
- Prison officers are better able to ensure dynamic security as a result of training in motivational and human rights compliant interviewing.

Kyrgyzstan

- National authorities have gained a thorough awareness of the security challenges facing the service in relation to RFTFs, following security audits in selected prisons.
- Physical and procedural security has improved across pilot prisons as a result of the implementation of findings from security audits, including the provision of new essential equipment.



High level meeting, Iraq, 2021

Tajikistan

- Security weaknesses have been identified and improvements recommended as a result of security audits in Dushanbe and Vakhdat prisons.
- Security systems have been improved in pilot prisons, with new surveillance systems and central control centers established.



Motivational interviewing in Tajikistan

“Motivational interviewing offers a framework to engage and support individuals. Professionals can effectively help prisoners to explore their motivations, make informed choices, and work towards positive and sustainable changes in their lives.”

Mr. Jörg Lorenz is an expert in motivational interviewing from Germany. In July 2023 he provided training to prison officers in Tajikistan in motivational interviewing, combined with wider human rights-compliant interviewing techniques.

Mr. Furkat Akbarov, Deputy Head of the Prison Service in Tajikistan, said, “Training is needed for prison officers to help them recognize and interpret signs of radicalization to violence, and to help them judge whether an intervention is appropriate. This will contribute to the timely elimination of risks posed by this category of prisoners.”

Lorenz agreed: “I am personally of the opinion that [this work] can and will lead to a more humane and effective prison system in Tajikistan, bolster safety and security, and improve the lives of prisoners by promoting effective rehabilitation. And it will have a positive impact on wider society by reducing violent crime and creating a safer community.”

Jumaboy's story

After engaging in crime in his early 20s, Jumaboy was sentenced to jail. On release he travelled to Afghanistan where he became involved in terrorist activities. When he returned to Tajikistan he was sentenced to 18 years in prison. He is now 28, and is three years into his sentence.

Jumaboy is one of over 2,000 prisoners convicted of violent extremist offences in Tajikistan, including around 280 RFTFs. The country has the largest number of prisoners convicted of terrorism and extremism-related crimes in Central Asia. The presence of this disproportionate number of terrorist and RFTF prisoners poses a major challenge in the effective management of prisons – but the UNODC RFTF program is making a difference that can be felt at every level.

“During my time here, I have discovered a new purpose. Learning how to read has been a turning point for me, as it has opened up new possibilities,” Jumaboy says. “I have been given the opportunity to educate myself and read literature, something I never before had the chance to do.

“Lecturers from the religious committee guide us in matters of faith, while the prison officers support in daily life. The prison administration assists in arranging family visits. They understand the importance of maintaining connections with loved ones.”

Jumaboy has benefitted from Tajikistan's developing approach to prison management, which focuses on rehabilitation and safety over punishment. This approach is better for people on both sides of the prison walls, reducing the risk of radicalization spreading within prisons and of ex-prisoners reoffending on release.

Today, Jumaboy is hopeful for his future. “My dream is to become a farmer and have a piece of land where I can rebuild my life. With no one left but my mother, who requires my care, this opportunity would not only offer me a second chance in life but help to support her.

“I firmly believe that once I am released, I will be able to create a better life for myself.”

“

Learning how to read has been a turning point for me. Once I am released, I will be able to create a better life for myself.

”

Jumaboy



Addressing prisoners' risks and needs

To run efficiently and effectively, prisons must assess the individual needs and risks of prisoners and respond to these through tailored interventions and an individual sentence plans. This maximizes the use of available resources, reduces risk and increases the likelihood of positive outcomes.

Though RFTF and terrorist prisoners may require specialized tools and approaches for understanding their risks and needs, these must be built on and adhere to international standards and general evidence-based best practice, and so work in this area benefits all prisoners.

The RFTF program has improved prison administrations' risk and needs assessment systems and skills in all four countries, including developing structured professional judgement tools to support effective assessments.



The starting point for the management of prisoners is a good assessment of risks and needs. Risk assessment allows prisons to categorize the convicted persons by their level of threat, contributing to the timely identification and elimination of risks through adequate support and rehabilitation programs.



Mr. Furkat Akbarov,
Deputy Head of the Prison Service of
the Republic of Tajikistan

Iraq

- Prison officers have developed an advanced understanding of risk and needs assessment tools and increased their willingness and ability to classify terrorist and RFTF prisoners effectively as a result of UNODC training for 115 officers, 17% female.

Kazakhstan

- The ability of prison authorities to assess prisoner risk and needs has been boosted through extensive support to the Prison Committee to develop a Prisoner Risks and Needs Assessment Tool, and the training of staff in individualized risk and needs assessments.
- Understanding of religious aspects of radicalization to violence in the context of risk assessment has been boosted through the provision of expert support.



Risk and needs assessment training, Tajikistan, 2023

Kyrgyzstan

- The ability of the prison service to assess risk and needs of terrorist and RFTF prisoners has been enhanced through the development of new risk and needs assessment tools, which have now been piloted in five prisons.
- The prison service has adopted the tools comprehensively due to their accuracy and ease of use, continuing their own piloting and exploring digitizing the tools.

Tajikistan

- Tajikistan faces a particular challenge as a result of the high proportion of prisoners who are charged with violent extremism and terrorism-related crimes. Prison administrations are now better able to identify those who actually pose a high level of threat as the result of the development of a new risk and needs assessment tool, which is now being piloted across the country's prisons.
- This additional knowledge has allowed the development of individualized disengagement programs, and as a result the risk of radicalization to violence in prisons has greatly reduced.



Assessing radicalization in Kyrgyzstan

"Utilising psychometric tools is not appropriate for classifying the general prison population, let alone violent extremist and terrorist prisoners. There is a psychological dimension to the problem, but to consider that all terrorist and extremist offenders are mentally ill is diminishing the issue.

"That's why the development of risk and needs assessment tools is so important."

Dr. Arie Kruglanski is a renowned psychologist in the field of terrorism research and provided assistance in the development of the risk and needs assessment tool in the Kyrgyz Republic. In October 2021 he participated in an expert working group, which also benefitted from the expertise of Dr Elaine Pressman and Pedro das Neves, in addition to prison officers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Germany.

The result is a comprehensive risk and needs assessment tool which seeks to establish not only the level of radicalization of a prisoner, but also the intrinsic and extrinsic factors which led them to seek the violent ideology, shedding light on factors that need to be considered in disengagement and reintegration activities. The prison service has found this highly useful and is continuing the piloting of the tools after the end of the project.



Boosting capacity and building infrastructure

The foundation for the effective management of RFTF prisoners and the prevention of radicalization in prisons is good, human rights-respecting prison management for all categories of prisoners. A basis for this can be found in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners – known as the Nelson Mandela Rules.

In addition to interventions focused on RFTF prisoners, the program enhanced the capacity of prison authorities and supported priority infrastructure improvements, ensuring solid foundations for the achievement of the program’s core aims.



Counter-extremism and rehabilitation programs have the best chance of succeeding when they are nested in a safe, secure, adequately resourced, and well operated custodial setting where the human rights of prisoners are respected. The prison service of Tajikistan acknowledges the importance of addressing challenges posed by violent extremist prisoners in full compliance with the Nelson Mandela Rules and other relevant international standards and norms, including from a gender perspective.



Mr. Mansur Umarov,
Head of the Prison Service of
the Republic of Tajikistan

Iraq

- Prison authorities now have greater capacity to ensure the safe, secure and humane detention of prisoners following the provision of essential office furniture and technological equipment.
- The Reformatory Directorate is now able to conduct training for staff and rehabilitation programs for prisoners as a result of the renovation of a building in the women’s reformatory facility in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, now a specialized training center.
- Cooperation between national counterparts and civil society organizations has been improved thanks to UNODC-run workshops. This has ultimately created better opportunities for individuals to reintegrate into society.

Kazakhstan

- The prison service has embraced the Nelson Mandela Rules and is working towards their practical application, with a new research and training centre on their implementation established at Kostanay Academy.
- The Rules have been further embedded in the country through the introduction of a UNODC e-learning course into the prison staff training curriculum in Kazakh and Russian. This has now been completed by 5,593 prison and probation officers.

- The overall capacity of the prison service to manage RFTF prisoners has been improved through wide-reaching staff training for 535 (30% female) prison and law enforcement officers.

Kyrgyzstan

- More than 100 prison officers’ capacity has been improved through staff training. One highlight has been training on human rights compliant interviewing, utilizing uncommon approaches such as role playing. This was praised by prison service leadership and further training on the topic has been requested.
- The security of three pilot prisons has been improved through the provision of radios, landline phones, lamps, fire alarm systems and CCTV monitors.

Tajikistan

- Improved capacity to gather prison intelligence and share information with other services has resulted in better early identification and management of threats across all categories of prisoner.
- The capacity of prison officers to identify the risks and needs of prisoners has significantly improved, leading to a higher likelihood of tailored disengagement and reintegration programs.



Civil society involvement in Iraq

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a vital role in prisons by providing a range of essential services, ranging from enhancing access to education and training programs, offering legal aid, and improving health services. CSOs contribute to addressing the gaps that arise due to limited human and financial resources within the prison system, and support national authorities to mitigate terrorist threats in prisons.

To empower the efforts of CSOs in Iraq’s prisons the RFTF program has worked to raise awareness among stakeholders of the work of different national and international CSOs; encourage governmental authorities to strengthen partnerships and coordination with CSOs; and establish a network of CSOs to ensure coordination and cooperation between them.

Mrs. Alyaa Al-Anssari, Head of Bint Al-Rafidain Organization, explained, “Prison conditions in Iraq continue to suffer from gaps, especially for women, so it is important to intensify international and national efforts to reform this reality. A recent meeting held by UNODC brought together relevant government institutions and civil society organizations with a group of international experts and workers in this field. Despite difficulties, I am sure of achieving successes.”

Adilzhan's story

Adilzhan* was sentenced to prison in Kazakhstan when he was just 22 years old, where he became radicalized. Since becoming involved in disengagement interventions, his life has changed.

"Since 2011, I have been serving my sentence in Taraz High Security Prison. The UNODC program has changed many things in my life, and my world outlook changed too. I found I was very superficial in everything related to religion. I was wrong about many things. Now I am firm and confident that I do not adhere to any radicalized trends anymore."

Disengagement related interventions often involve psychological counselling and support; cognitive-behavioural programs; social work interventions; faith-based debate and dialogue; creative therapies; physical therapies; and family activities.

To successfully reintegrate into society, it is critically important that a former violent extremist prisoner is employable and able to support his or her family. Employment can also reduce the need for, and the appeal of, re-joining a violent extremist group.

"They provided me with a job. I am a welder, with a salary, which is quite decent these days considering that I am in prison. I can provide for myself in the first place and give a helping hand to my family. I have a mother, a sister, a grandmother. I know whatever I do is a drop in the ocean – I am not there for my family. But this is how I make a difference. It brings me a lot of happiness."

“

I found I was very superficial in everything related to religion. I was wrong about many things.

”

Adilzhan

* Name changed.



Sharing good practice

A key focus of the RFTF program has been on sharing learning and best practice within and between partner countries. All faced varied but similar challenges at the start of the program and, through sharing their experiences, have been able to accomplish more. This is particularly true of the three Central Asian countries taking part in the program, who have benefitted from collaboration and will continue to do so following the completion of the program.

Another highlight has been the ability of partner countries to benefit from the expertise of UNODC's wider network of international specialists.

“

The exchange visit was organized at a high level, and we strongly believe that such events on a regular basis will significantly contribute to advancing the professional knowledge and skills of prison and probation officers throughout Central Asia.

”

Mr. Ilkhom Makhmudzoda,
Deputy Head of the Prison Service of
the Ministry of Justice of
the Republic of Tajikistan

The Central Asian Network on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

In 2020, a regional meeting of the UNODC-supported Central Asian Network on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism was organized and attended by 68 (49% female) representatives of government agencies, civil society, and academia from Central Asian countries, as well international experts, donors and representatives of the diplomatic community. This was the first time that prison and probation officers from Central Asian countries had participated in a regional platform of this kind, and this opened the door to the sharing of experience.

The meeting also saw the presentation of three key publications developed as part of the program: a background paper on assessing the risks and needs of violent extremist and RFTF prisoners; a document on key issues in defining and criminalizing terrorism and related offences by Central Asian countries; and a comparative analysis on procedural frameworks for investigating and prosecuting violent extremism and terrorism-related crimes. All were made freely available online for the ongoing use of criminal justice practitioners, academia and civil society organisations.

Developing regional cooperation

In October 2022, UNODC facilitated an event at the Kostanay Training Academy to promote regional cooperation in Central Asia. This focused on the professional training of prison and probation officers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on the management of violent

extremist prisoners and prevention of radicalization to violence in prisons.

The Academy committed to providing further training for prison and probation officers in Kyrgyzstan, demonstrating its dedication to the creation of a regional knowledge hub on preventing violent extremism in prisons, fostering long-term collaboration across the region, and the building of staff capacity. Its contribution played a critical role in laying the groundwork for sustainable program results. Participating countries committed to continued cooperation.



Project Steering Committee meeting, Tajikistan, 2023

“

The partnership between the Ministry of Justice, the Bureau of Counterterrorism of the U.S. State Department and UNODC has helped minimize the potential threats posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters and violent extremist offenders. By addressing the complex challenges of reintegration, this collaboration played a crucial role in safeguarding communities and promoting long-term stability.

”

Mr. Ayaz Baetov,
Minister of Justice, Kyrgyzstan

International expertise

UNODC serves as a crucial link to an extensive network of international experts and national prison authorities globally. Through these connections, UNODC taps into a vast pool of experience and knowledge and fosters the exchange of best practices, innovative approaches, and the sharing of experiences to drive positive change.

All partner countries benefitted from training and exchange via this network:

- **Iraq:** Trainings were conducted with the participation of international experts from Bulgaria, Sweden, Germany, Norway and Portugal.
- **Kazakhstan:** Training organized in partnership with the Kostanay Training Academy brought together representatives from various Central Asian countries. Throughout the program, training was delivered by international experts from Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Germany, and Slovenia.
- **Kyrgyzstan:** The prison service exchanged experience with Germany, Spain, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Indonesia and Australia. Training was delivered by international experts from the United States, Germany, Canada, and Malta.
- **Tajikistan:** Training was delivered by international experts from Germany, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Portugal, and Croatia.

What next?

This program has seen significant improvements in the management of violent extremist prisoners and the prevention of radicalization to violence across all partner countries – but there is more to do. All four countries have developed plans with UNODC to support ongoing improvement in the management of RTFs. The overarching aim is to ensure that achievements are sustained, learned from and replicated.



I believe that the efforts undertaken together with UNODC will play a vital role in making a positive change in violent extremist offenders' lives and enable them to develop skills, which will ultimately help them find their place in society.



Major General Askat Egemberdiev,
Chairman of the State Prison Service
of Kyrgyzstan

Sustainability

The program was developed based on the idea that sustainable change can be achieved by activating and reinforcing institutional capacities, awareness and ownership.

By providing individuals and organizations with necessary skills, knowledge and resources, the program has empowered partner countries to manage violent extremist and RFTF prisoners more effectively and prevent terrorist threats. In addition, capacity building initiatives created a sense of ownership among program beneficiaries, enabling them to identify and implement solutions to ongoing challenges.

Civil society engagement has ensured that the project reflects the needs and priorities of the communities it serves and fostered transparency and accountability.

This puts Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in a strong position to address the challenges posed by RFTFs going forward, in compliance with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules).

Yet more support is required. In all countries, further work will help to embed and extend the changes seen over the course of the program, leading to safer prisons and communities in the respective countries and beyond.

Priorities for 2024 onwards

Iraq

- Enhance the intelligence capacity of the prison service, and improve cooperation between agencies.
- Support the prison service to be ready for cross-border prisoner transfers, developing a centralized and standardized government-managed intake process including prisoner classification.
- Map and assess detention and prison facilities to gain a clear picture of existing accommodation capacities and population to identify further needs, including allowing the initiation of measures to fight overcrowding.

Kazakhstan

- Establish a regional learning hub based on the foundation of the Kostanay Academy, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.
- Enhance the capacity of prison security officers to deliver a comprehensive security framework by establishing a dedicated Dynamic Security Training Center.
- Forge partnerships with regional and international partners to leverage their expertise and resources, and establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems to assess training programs.

Kyrgyzstan

- Institutionalize training on the management of high-risk prisoners and dynamic security in prisons, utilize research to continuously improve this training.
- Improve the capacity of prison officers to counter the risk of radicalization to violence by using internationally accepted promising practices in prison intelligence.
- Establish a systematic process for evaluating and improving dynamic security protocols within prisons. Promote knowledge-sharing and exchange programs with international experts and practitioners.

Tajikistan

- Pilot protocols for sharing and analyzing intelligence to identify risks of radicalization to violence in prisons, and establish prison intelligence units.
- Develop and institutionalize a standardized training program for prison and probation officers on the management of high-risk offenders.
- Ensure the sustainability of training efforts, empowering local trainers to deliver high-quality training programs on counter-radicalization using best practices in prison intelligence.



“

Our goal is the same: to prevent and counter violent extremist and terrorism in our countries. By sharing information and international experience, we can help each other to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement and prison officers.

”

Mr. Meyram Ayubayev,
Deputy Chair of the Prison Service
of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Thank you

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