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 (FIFTs).

The phenomenon of FIFTs 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 also exacerbate the risk of radicalization to violence in prisons and can serve as potential incubators for radicalization to terrorism and terrorist recruitment – but also that prisons can serve as potential incubators for radicalization to terrorism and terrorist recruitment.

UNODC to enhance the reformatory system on the international expertise provided by in our reformatory facilities. We will draw and achieve future development in KRG-I and strengthen staff capacity. The support of UNODC is vital to the leaders in repatriating their citizens, both fighters and accompanying family members, and we applaud those countries’ continued efforts to bring additional people back.

With the territorial defeat of Islamic State, the phenomenon of FIFTs 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. RFTTs pose specific challenges to prison authorities in the 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. RFTTs 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’s Bureau of Counterterrorism, generously funded by the US Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State. The program was delivered in Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In close collaboration 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 reintegratio 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 radicalization to terrorism - but also that prisons can serve to rehabilitate and re integrate prisoners. Through technical assistance the RFT Ts Detention Program has helped beneficiary countries to translate the Security Council recommendations into effective action on the ground.

##### Areas of impact

- Sharing good practice
- Boosting capacity to counter and prevent terrorist threats within prisons
- Improving safety and security

##### Prison systems' challenges

- High numbers of pre-trial detainees, understaffed and under resourced prison systems with poor infrastructure, underfunded and underresourced prison systems.
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- Overcrowding, poor health conditions and transnational organized crime creates new challenges.
- 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.
- The ability of prison systems around the world to manage these evolving problems is severely limited.
- The support of UNODC is vital to the leaders in repatriating their citizens, both fighters and accompanying family members, and we applaud those countries’ continued efforts to bring additional people back.

##### 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.

- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

##### 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.

##### 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.

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##### RFTTs pose specific challenges to prison authorities in the 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.

##### RFTTs also exacerbate the risk of radicalization to violence of other prisoners.
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 partnerships and 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 terrorism, recruitment, and risk assessments to assess prisoners’ susceptibility to terrorist recruitment and radicalization; develop gender-sensitive strategies to address and counter terrorism, and manage prisoners after release from prison to avoid recidivism. This document lays the groundwork for a foundation on which effective interventions can be built.

Relevant documents

The UN 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: address 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 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.

The UN Common Position on Incarceration (2021) in 2021 the UN system issued a common position on incarceration. This document lays the groundwork for a foundation on which effective interventions can be built.

The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) are a set of international standards that afford prisoners fundamental human rights, such as access to medical care, education, and religious services, and provide a strong foundation on which effective interventions can be built.

The Madrid Guiding Principles on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners (2015) were developed as a global instrument to ensure that prisons could serve as potential incubators for extremism and terrorism to strengthen the role of the United Nations 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.

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 around the world. By 2015, approximately 80,000 individuals from over 120 countries travelled to Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic as fighters. As of December 2018, all of these towards to join ISIL, creating a combined force with local Syrian and Iraqis of around 100,000 fighters. Since 2017, ISIL has lost most of the territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria and many RFTFs have returned to their home countries of origin. Returning foreign terrorist fighters pose a significant threat to peace and security. Regional and international initiatives have made a significant contribution to the fight against terrorism, which may go unrecognised in the countries where they relocate.

Violent extremist: A person who promotes, supports, facilitates, or commits acts of terrorism; promotes political goals or social change. In some cases, a violent extremist may not be able to commit an offence due to the nature of their beliefs.

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

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:

- Political and security sensitivities: around the topic of violent extremism and terrorism in prisons
- Persistent prison overcrowding and a limited range of alternatives to imprisonment
- Insufficient prison conditions, infrastructure and staff capacity for advanced interventions for RFTF prisoners
- Insufficient prison management and support for advanced interventions for RFTF prisoners
- Limited access to relevant data and evidence
- Few tailored age- and gender-responsive tools

Initiatives of this kind support prison reform by introducing new approaches to prison management and strengthening international standards on counter-terrorism policy.

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

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## Partner countries

### Iraq

**Number of prisoners:** 73,715  
**Number of prisons:** 24  
**Number of female prisoners:** 10

**Background:** Since 2017, Iraqi detention centres and prisons have witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of detainees charged with terrorism-related offenses due to the territorial fall of ISIL. At the start of the RFTF program, the focus was on gaining an in-depth knowledge of prisoners in the country to understand their situation and make informed recommendations. From 2021 interventions began, focusing on technical coordination and capacity development to counter terrorism 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  
**Number of prisons:** 10  
**Number of female prisoners:** 2,457

**Background:** Kazakhstan has played a leading role in the repatriation of ISIL prisoners. Through the humanitarian operations “Zhusan” and “Kazahstan,” 164 people were repatriated between 2019 and 2021, including 27 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 management instruments to ensure safe and secure custody as well as the humane treatment of Kostanay prisoners.

**Impact:** Today, Kazakhstan’s prisons are equipped with new instruments to support the effective management of RFTF prisoners. The country’s specialized prison officer training academy in Kostanay is equipped with relevant, tailored resources on the management of RFTTFs, 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

**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 terrorism threats in prison, and promoting emergency 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 also develop 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

**Background:** Tajikistan has the largest number of prisoners convicted of terrorism and extremism-related crimes in Central Asia. Approximately 25% of the prison population consists of terrorist and extremist prisoners, including around 251 ISIL prisoners. The presence of this disproportionate number is now considered a 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 prison alone with reducing the risk of radicalization.

**Impact:** With UNODC’s support, Tajikistan’s prison service is now better able to classify and manage RFTF prisoners, manage risk and develop individualized sentence plans, meaning that the risk of radicalization to violence in prison 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.
National authorities have a better understanding of the prison services 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 radicalisation to violence and improves overall prison security.

A comprehensive security audit framework is now in place across Kazakhstan prison services, developing a strategic partnership group supporting 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 educate prisoners about law and order as a result of training in motivational and human rights compliant interviewing.

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 equipment, new access control 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.

Jumaboy agreed: “I am personally of the opinion that this work can and will lead to more humane and effective prison system in Tajikistan; better security and safety, and improve the lives of prisoners by preventing exhaustive rehabilitation. And it will have a positive impact on violent crime and creating a safer society.”

Tajikistan

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High-level meeting, Iraq, 2021.

Iraq

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To effectively and efficiently protect citizens, the prison system must establish a well-trained and skilled workforce, and proper handling of prisoners, including restructuring the prison's management and operational processes. This will contribute to the overall capacity of the prison system to handle prisoners effectively and efficiently.

Kazakhstan

The ability of prison authorities is a key aspect in ensuring that the prison system is effective. The prison system in Kazakhstan has been successfully implemented, allowing for the efficient management of prisoners. The prison service has adopted the Osmardad model, which has proven to be effective in improving the prison's capacity to handle prisoners.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan faces a particular challenge as it is developing its prison system. However, the Tajik prison service has made significant progress in improving the prison's capacity to handle prisoners. This additional knowledge has allowed the prison service to support effective assessments.

Kiev Small

The effective management of prison resources is essential for the provision of quality care and management of prisoners. The prison system in Kiev has been successfully implemented, allowing for the efficient management of prisoners. The prison service has adopted the Osmardad model, which has proven to be effective in improving the prison's capacity to handle prisoners.

Addressing capacity building and infrastructure in the prison system

The starting point for the management of prisoners is a good assessment of prison needs and risks. An assessment of prison needs and risks allows policymakers to prioritize the actions they need to take to manage prisoners effectively. The prison system in Kiev has been successfully implemented, allowing for the efficient management of prisoners. The prison service has adopted the Osmardad model, which has proven to be effective in improving the prison's capacity to handle prisoners.

Civil society involvement in Iraq

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a vital role in supporting the prison system by providing a range of services, including legal aid, and improving health services. CSOs contribute to addressing the gaps that exist due to limited human and financial resources within the prison system, and they play a critical role in advocating for the rights of prisoners.

Iraq

The overall capacity of the prison service to manage RFTF prisoners has been significantly improved through the provision of essential office furniture, a high level of threat, and improved security. The prison service leadership and further training will contribute to addressing the gaps that exist in the prison system.

Counter-extremism and rehabilitation programs

There is a strong emphasis on the development of counter-extremism and rehabilitation programs. These programs have the best chance of succeeding when they are well planned and tailored to the needs of the prisoners. The prison service of Tajikistan has worked to develop the counter-extremism and rehabilitation programs, which have been well received by the prisoners and the general population.

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Adilshan’s story

Adilshan* 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 running my own company - Taraz Trucking. The UNODC program has changed many things in my life, in my work, in my values, in my social relationships. 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 extremist and RFTF prisoners and prevention of violent extremism.

The Central Asian Network on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

In 2023, a regional meeting of the UNODC-supported Central Asian Network on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism was organized and attended by 48 representatives of government agencies, civil society, and academics from Central Asian countries, as well as 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 public developments on the program: a background paper on procedural frameworks for investigating extremism and RFTF prisoners; a document on terrorism and related offenses by Central Asian countries; and a comparative analysis on procedural frameworks for investigating and prosecuting ethnic violence and terrorism related crimes. All were made freely available online for the ongoing use of criminal justice practitioners, academics and civil society organizations.

Developing regional cooperation

In October 2022, UNODC facilitated an event: the Kostanay Training Academy to promote regional cooperation in Central Asia.

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.

Sharing good practice

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 the wealth of experience and knowledge and fosters the exchange of criminal justice innovations, effective approaches, and the sharing of experiences to drive positive change.

All partner countries benefited from sharing and exchanging the ideas and best practices.

■ Iraq: Trainings were conducted with the participation of international experts from Belgium, Sweden, Germany, Norway and Portugal.

■ Kazakhstan: Training organizations involved in the Kostanay Training Academy to promote regional cooperation in Central Asian countries. Throughout the program, training was delivered by international experts from Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Germany and Slovenia.

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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.

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“They provided me with a job. I am a welder with today’s income, quite a good daily income. I have a loving family, I have a mother a sister, a grandfather. I know whatever I do, my family won’t be able to accomplish more. My family. But this is how I make a difference. I am going to make a difference.”

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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.

What next?

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 RTF 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. Our society engagement has ensured that the project reflects the needs and priorities of the institutions it serves and fostered transparency and accountability.

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 Chief of the Prison Service of the Republic of Kazakhstan

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 coordinated 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.

Kyrgyzstan

- Institutionalize tracking 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 adopting 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.

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.

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.

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

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.
Thank you

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