Dear friends,

After three years of waiting in camps, six orphaned Tunisian children arrived at the Carthage Palace alone. Their parents had been killed while fighting for Daesh. They had been invited by the president to a space usually reserved for important and high-profile figures. There, he gave a press briefing welcoming them back and appealing to Tunisians to open their hearts. Recognizing the clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder in the children, the president preached the importance of proper medical and psychological care. But the public outcry against their return was deafening and the newspaper headlines were unequivocal in their condemnation of the president’s actions. Despite the fact that these kids were not involved in fighting, or even complicit in the decision to go to the conflict areas, the broader community was rebellious at the idea of their return. Imagine the feelings of fear and rejection that these children are experiencing and how that affects their outlook. Human Rights Watch estimates that there are 200 Tunisian children, born to ISIS members, still in custody in camps abroad. To what will they return?

Over the past decade, over 40,000 individuals from more than 100 countries have left their homes to fight for ISIS in Syria. While ISIS-controlled territories have largely been liberated, many countries are now faced with the challenge of investigating, prosecuting, and repatriating returnees and their families. Because entire families traveled to Syria, and new births occurred while there, a majority of these returnees are women and children. A complex set of challenges has formed for countries grappling with the return of large populations of what are generally called “foreign terrorist fighters” (FTFs) and their families.

Piloting this work in the Western Balkans, ICRD has been developing a new initiative that focuses on integrating psycho-social and spiritual support into the existing mechanisms of deradicalizing, rehabilitating, and reintegrating returnees. There is little available in the way of frameworks or methodologies that take a holistic approach to reintegrate FTFs and their families, while keeping communities safe. ICRD hopes to pioneer such an approach by including contemporary techniques in trauma-informed-care, which changes the narrative from “what is wrong with you?” to “what has happened to you?”.

Current reintegration methods largely focus on counter-terrorism and deradicalization, looking at the driving forces that lead to an extremist belief system. These methods are often based in an assumption that returnees are a potential danger, and typically do not address broader social cohesion and the mental health of returning FTFs. In an attempt to control violence and tackle the perceived threats posed by returnees to local communities, these same programs can deepen the grievances that were weaponized to radicalize individuals in the first place. Instead, ICRD seeks to inspire a sustainable program that holistically addresses the needs of both returnees and the communities to which they return, focused on effectively reconstituting the whole community with both security and dignity.
ICRD has expertise in programs seeking to prevent and counter violent extremism, and has worked on reintegration, which is useful for facilitating the successful return of FTFs. However, because many returnees are women and children there are particular social and familial dynamics that are vitally important to constructing lasting support mechanisms and require such a multidisciplinary approach. This program pushes the bounds of ICRD’s existing program portfolio in new and exciting ways.

ICRD is grateful to have the opportunity to provide assistance to communities grappling with these issues. Through our intensive research and local partnerships, we aim to facilitate the safe, healthy, and dignified reintegration and rehabilitation of returning foreign fighters and their families, while creating resilience to extremism over the long-term. Thank you for your continued support to our organization. Together, we can make faith part of the solution.

Warm regards,

James Patton

Formal peace negotiations have been delayed in Afghanistan. Yemen struggles to establish a ceasefire as its weak health infrastructure is crumbling. Extremist groups in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia are calling on their recruits to capitalize on the destabilized situation. However, as conflict-impacted communities continue to wrestle with the spread of COVID-19, local faith and community leaders are still striving to prevent violence and maintain stability.

ICRD has been working hard over these last few weeks to adapt our peacebuilding and conflict mitigation strategies to the evolving situation. Please consider making a contribution to the Center today. While many of our lives have been put on hold, violent conflict persists. Together, let's make faith part of the solution.