



Brain-be 2.0

Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks

POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief n° 2

REGUIDE – A Holistic, Restorative, and Gendered Approach to Guide Returnees to their Home Country: Media Report

This policy brief presents the findings of a four-year study on how Belgian media portrayed men who departed to Syria, the so-called (potential) returnees, between 2013 and 2022. The analysis of four newspapers shows that reporting was dominated by fear, suspicion, and exclusion. (Potential) returnee men were often depicted as barbaric threats or beyond redemption, while stories of successful reintegration were rare. Although some media also questioned political rhetoric and included alternative voices, political discourse dominated, often reinforcing fear, vindictiveness, and punitive measures. Such coverage fuels stigma, narrows public debate, and undermines support for repatriation reintegration, even though experts stress that these are the safest paths to long-term security and social cohesion. Moving forward requires: i) centring discourses grounded in democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law; ii) recognising the shared responsibility of media, politicians, practitioners and the wider public to move beyond fear-driven narratives; iii) media to act as watchdogs, to challenge political passivity and expose undemocratic and retaliative policy developments; iv) journalists to uphold ethical and deontological standards of anonymity, by refraining from disclosing personal information that risks to hinder reintegration.

Context and question(s) of research

Over the past decade, the issue of Belgians who travelled to the conflict zones of Syria and Iraq has sparked public and political debates marked by hostility and suspicion. Public opinion and political reactions have often been distrustful towards repatriation, while experts agree that controlled repatriation and guided reintegration offer the safest long-term approach. This tension between security, public opinion, and political decision-making poses a major challenge for Belgian society.

The Reguide project responds to this challenge by developing a holistic, restorative, and gendered approach to reintegration. Its aim is not only to support returnees and their families in the reintegration process, but also to prepare Belgian society to engage with this issue in ways that strengthen democracy and social cohesion. This report contributes to that effort by looking at the crucial role of media. More specifically, these dynamics are studied through an analysis of four Belgian newspapers: *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Le Soir*, and *La Dernière Heure*. This selection ensures variation across linguistic communities, press groups, and newspaper types (elite vs. popular), allowing us to compare the different reporting styles.

Traditional media, such as newspapers, are one of the few reliable sources on the returnee issue, shaping how citizens and politicians understand it. At the same time, media are also strongly influenced by political voices and public sentiment. This makes it essential to examine how Belgian media have reported on the returnee issue and which perspectives or voices have shaped this coverage.

Earlier studies paid attention to how women and children were often depicted as either victims or villains. By contrast, the portrayal of men has remained underexplored. This report therefore focuses on male (potential) returnees, with three main questions:

1. How have Belgian newspapers portrayed male (potential) returnees between 2013 and 2022?
2. How have these portrayals evolved over time and differed across linguistic communities and newspaper types (elite vs. popular)?
3. How have emotions and ideas about masculinity and race shaped these media narratives?

Main findings

Our main finding contends that Belgian media coverage of male (potential) returnees between 2013 and 2022 was dominated by fear, suspicion, and exclusion. Men who went to Syria were often depicted as barbaric, dangerous, or beyond redemption, while successful reintegration stories were rare.

When reintegration was covered, the reporting was often superficial, focusing on crime, prison incidents, or suspicious activities, which reinforced the idea of reintegration as a failure. Other perspectives, such as expert evidence of returnees rebuilding their lives, received little to no attention. Furthermore, alternative perspectives voiced by family members, lawyers, or academics did appear but were either marginal or treated as naïve or with suspicion. At the same time, some journalists occasionally acted as watchdogs, questioning political passivity and exposing contradictions in government responses. Nonetheless, political voices dominated the coverage, further amplifying the imbalance through fearful, punitive, and vindictive narratives.

A recurring issue was the frequent publication of names, photos, and personal details. This lack of anonymity fuelled stigmatisation and makes reintegration far more difficult, as returnees remain publicly identifiable long after serving their sentences. Some articles even reported on allegations or unverified claims, resulting in a kind of trial by media when connecting these stories to identifiable returnees. Without anonymity, these men are labelled in ways that stick long after legal processes have ended, leaving them little chance to move beyond these labels.

The comparison over time shows a clear evolution. In the early years (2013–2014), coverage occasionally still described men who went to Syria as “young men” or “Syria travellers” (Syriëgangers), leaving some space for nuance. After multiple attacks in France and Belgium (2015–2016), however, dehumanising and securitising discourses became mainstream, with a shift in terminology from “youth” or “Syria travellers” to “terrorists”, “jihadists”, or “foreign terrorist fighters”. From 2017 onwards, legal and ethical debates about controlled repatriation gained visibility, yet they remained overshadowed by exclusionary and fearful discourses. By 2020–2022, overall media attention declined. Coverage was less about individuals and more about abstract policy, legal, or ethical debates, further contributing to the perception of (potential) returnee men as a homogenous and dehumanised threat.

The comparison across newspapers revealed differences in editorial style, though not always along expected lines of elite vs. popular or Dutch- vs. French-speaking newspaper. Instead, cross-patterns emerged. The coverage of *Het Laatste Nieuws* (popular, Dutch-speaking) resembled that of *Le Soir* (elite, French-speaking), while *La Dernière Heure* aligned more with *De Standaard*. These differences were especially visible in the use of narrative and human-interest elements. At the same time, traditional dividing lines were also confirmed. Popular newspapers tended to prioritise sensational elements, while elite newspapers engaged more with diverse policy perspectives. Across all four newspapers, however, fear remained the dominant lens.

Finally our findings show how gendered and racialised portrayals repeatedly depicted male (potential) returnees as violent Muslim Others, embodying monstrous or threatening masculinities. This reinforced simplified understandings of them as irredeemable threats and left little room for narratives of vulnerability, remorse, or rehabilitation. By focusing almost exclusively on threat and violence, Belgian media discourses restricted public debate and made alternative responses harder to imagine.

Conclusion and recommendations

This report shows that media coverage has reinforced fear and exclusion, making it harder to imagine alternatives such as reintegration or controlled repatriation. This has consequences for public opinion, public decision-making, and the everyday lives of returnees who remain publicly stigmatised. Addressing these challenges requires action at different levels of society, which is why the following recommendations are directed at multiple actors.

The recommendations below aim to translate the report's findings into practical guidance. They are directed not only at journalists but also at political actors, practitioners, and the wider public, since responsibility for shaping public discourses on (potential) returnees is shared across different actors.

For the media and journalists, the task is to ensure balanced and fair coverage. This means protecting anonymity, keeping sensationalism in proportion, reporting incidents in perspective, and giving visibility to a wider range of voices and reintegration stories. For political actors, the task is to avoid amplifying fear and resentment and instead ground their communication and policies in evidence, long-term security, and democratic values such as the rule of law and human rights. For practitioners and those working with returnees, the task is to protect confidentiality, recognise and address the impact of media representations, and share reintegration successes more proactively. Finally, for audiences and the public, the task is to consume news critically, resist dehumanisation, remain open to change, and complement media with information from experts and practitioners.

Only through this multi-level effort, across journalism, politics, practice, and everyday civic life, can Belgium move beyond fear-driven discourses and build sustainable approaches to returnees.

For media and journalists

1. Balance fear with evidence-based reporting

Media and journalists should report on successful reintegration stories alongside security incidents, to avoid creating a one-sided image of deradicalisation and reintegration as a failure. Giving visibility to diverse perspectives allows the public to see (potential) returnees not only through the lens of risk and failure, but also to engage with alternative narratives grounded in expertise and democratic values. This creates more space in public debates for political discourses that go beyond fear and exclusion.

2. Respect anonymity and legal processes

Media and journalists should safeguard the anonymity of (potential) returnees in line with deontological codes that also apply to other suspects and convicted individuals. Reporting should avoid becoming a "trial by media" and instead respect ongoing legal proceedings and privacy. Particular care is needed when publishing names, addresses, or other private details, since such exposure fuels stigmatisation and makes reintegration more difficult.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that in some cases the disclosure of certain information may be legitimate. While journalists are expected to make such ethical judgments, the pressure of sensationalism and fast news production can complicate this process. For that reason, media should also reflect in hindsight on whether names or other details can be anonymised once individuals enter reintegration trajectories.

3. Ensure source diversity and balance

To ensure more balanced reporting, media and journalists should give space not only to political voices but also to academics, practitioners, families, and (potential) returnees themselves. It is equally important to avoid disproportionate dominance of any single group of actors, such as for example politicians, so that public narratives are shaped by a broader and more balanced range of perspectives.

4. Report on incidents in perspective

Media and journalists should report on incidents (ex. theft, aggressive behaviour) in a way that makes clear whether they are isolated cases or part of a broader trend. Individual cases should not be generalized as representative of all (potential) returnees. This does not mean that security issues or reintegration challenges should be ignored or downplayed. When patterns are supported by evidence and expert analysis, these should rightfully be part of the public debate. However, balanced reporting also requires highlighting successful reintegration stories and clarifying how (un)common certain individual behaviours are. This way, audiences are less likely to be left with a distorted image in which failure dominates.

5. Keep sensationalism in proportion

Sensational elements are an inevitable part of journalism, but they should not dominate coverage or overshadow other perspectives. When sensationalist reporting becomes the default mode, it risks amplifying alarmist discourses that reinforce fear and resentment. Reporting on (potential) returnees should therefore avoid taking sensationalism as the starting point for deciding whether and how stories are told. Journalists and media should instead follow their deontological codes by prioritising accuracy, fairness, and the pursuit of truth and justice, ensuring that news coverage reflects reality in a balanced way.

For political actors

1. Support successful reintegration by respecting privacy in public communication

Repeated publications of names, photos, and personal details in media make reintegration harder and fuel stigmatisation. Political actors should therefore avoid “naming and shaming” practices, knowing these are quickly echoed in the press. Instead, they should underline how such public exposure not only creates long-term security risks but also reinforces stigma, making successful reintegration far more difficult.

While the ethical balance around anonymity is primarily a journalistic responsibility, political actors should be aware of the impact of public exposure on (potential) returnees and integrate this concern into their broader media, communication, and security policy. Anonymity could for example be treated as part of reintegration strategies, recognising that limiting exposure in the long run helps create the conditions for a genuine second chance.

2. Prioritise evidence over fear in political communication

Political actors should avoid amplifying or constructing alarmist and populist discourses in the media. When isolated incidents occur or sensationalist stories are widely covered, they should not disproportionately set the political agenda, nor should politicians further reinforce discourses of fear. Instead, political communication and security policy should be guided by evidence-based assessments and expert input, emphasising long-term security approaches and social cohesion rather than fuelling polarisation, panic, or resentment.

3. Move from fear-driven to sustainable policies

Political voices dominate media debates on the returnee issue, creating a feedback loop in which fear and vindictiveness are amplified. To counter this, politicians should broaden the debate by actively including perspectives from experts, practitioners, and affected families in their own discourses. This not only brings more nuance into public discussions but also prevents political discourse from being reduced to fear and exclusion. Public information campaigns can further strengthen this by explaining to citizens why sustainable policy approaches grounded in evidence, democratic principles, the rule of law, and human rights serve collective security better than panic-driven measures.

For practitioners and others working with (potential) returnees

1. Protect confidentiality

In line with professional ethics, practitioners should safeguard the privacy of (potential) returnees and their families, recognising that unnecessary public exposure makes reintegration more difficult and fuels public hostility. This does not mean that all information should be withheld, but that sensitive details should be handled with care and weighed against the risks of stigma and exclusion. In their own communication and reporting practitioners and others working with (potential) returnees should ensure that these individuals are not publicly labelled in ways that keep stigma alive and undermine reintegration.

2. Address the impact of public representations

Practitioners and others working with (potential) returnees should be aware of how negative and fear-driven media portrayals affect these individuals and their families. This awareness can be integrated into support programmes, for example by openly discussing media coverage with them and preparing them for possible stigma. At the same time, practitioners should actively work with local communities to challenge stigma, reduce hostility, and create a better environment for reintegration. Finally, creating spaces for alternative narratives, such as through cultural or artistic initiatives, can counterbalance the one-sided images that often dominate public debates on the returnee issue.

3. Proactively share reintegration successes

Practitioners and others working with (potential) returnees should share good practices and reintegration successes proactively with media and policymakers. Highlighting positive cases can counterbalance dominant narratives of failure and bring nuance

into the debate. It also demonstrates that, when properly supported, reintegration contributes to long-term security and social cohesion. Academics and experts equally carry responsibility in this regard. By actively disseminating their findings to policymakers, the media, and the wider public, they help ensure that knowledge on reintegration, security, and its challenges informs debates and decision-making processes, rather than remaining confined to academic or expert circles.

For audiences and the public

1. Critical consumption of news

News on (potential) returnees is often shaped by fear, suspicion, exclusion or sensationalism. Citizens should not consume news uncritically, but remain alert to dominant language, alarmist metaphors, and what is left unsaid. It is equally important to be aware of the dominance of political voices in media stories and how their discourses shape the stories the audience is exposed to. Alternative or positive perspectives should not be dismissed as “naïve” but valued and treated with the same critical attention as other narratives. In essence, we urge people to approach news on the returnee question with awareness of selective reporting.

2. From hostility to nuance: Resist dehumanisation and stay open to change

(Potential) returnees are often portrayed as irredeemable or permanent threats. While hostility may exist, the public should resist reproducing dehumanising stereotypes in everyday discussions and remain open to more nuanced perspectives grounded in expertise, democratic values, the rule of law, and human rights. Openness does not mean acceptance, but it does create space to see (potential) returnees as individuals rather than a homogenous group, and to recognise change, second chances, and greater social cohesion.

3. Proactively inform yourself

Rather than relying on emotion-driven headlines, political one-liners, or sensationalist stories, citizens are encouraged to also consult information from experts, practitioners, and evidence-based sources that work closely with (potential) returnees. This does not mean distrusting media, but complementing news consumption with perspectives that provide depth and context. Proactive engagement helps prevent fear and resentment from dominating and allows for a more nuanced understanding of reintegration and security.

Read more

Baker-Beall, C. 2022. “The Concept of The Foreign Terrorist Fighter: An Immanent Critique.” *European Journal of International Security* 8 (1): 25–46.

Berbers, A., Joris, W., Boesman, J., d’Haenens, L., Koeman, J., and Van Gorp, B. 2016. “The News Framing of the ‘Syria Fighters’ in Flanders and the Netherlands: Victims or Terrorists?” *Ethnicities* 16 (6): 798–818.

Delhaise, E., Remacle, C., and Thomas, C. 2020. “Après le Califat, l’Embarras.” *La Revue Nouvelle* 2020 (6): 48–64.

Duffy, H. 2018. “‘Foreign Terrorist Fighters’: A Human Rights Approach?” *Security and Human Rights* 29 (1-4): 120–172.

Jackson, L. B. 2022. *The Monstrous & the Vulnerable: Framing British Jihadi Brides*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Krona, M., and Olivia C. 2023. “The Gangster and the Bride: The Media Representation of Masculinity and Femininity in News Coverage of Jihadi Terrorists.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*: 1–16.

Lechkar, I., & Sliti, J. (2024). “‘No Punishment is Enough For Monsters’: Vindictiveness as an Important Political Emotion in Dealing With Belgian (Potential) Returnee Men.” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*: 1-23.

Renard, T. 2023. “Europe and Its Returning Foreign Fighters: Overview of the Policy Response.” In *Retuning Foreign Fighters: Responses, Legal Challenges and Ways Forward*, edited by F.Capone, C. Paulussen, and R. Mignot-Mahdavi, 9–32. The Hague: Asser Press.

Stenger, H. 2023. “Victim Versus villain: Repatriation Policies for Foreign Fighters and the Construction of Gendered and Racialised ‘Threat Narratives’.” *European Journal of International Security* 8 (1): 1–24.

Information

Contact

Name, First name: Jihane Sliti
Institution/Departement: DFutur, Political Science Department, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)
e-mail: jihane.sliti@vub.be

Contact

Name, First name: Iman Lechkar
Institution/Departement: DFutur, Political Science Department, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)
e-mail: iman.lechkar@vub.be