



Brain-be 2.0

Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks

POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief n°6

REGUIDE B2/202/P2 – Reintegration from the perspective of Belgian returnees from Syria

This policy brief explores the reintegration of Belgian returnees from Syria, challenging the dominant security-focused framing that views them mainly as risks. Based on ethnographic research, it shows that reintegration is a long-term process beginning with disillusionment in Syria and continuing through imprisonment and life after release. Returnees define reintegration as regaining legitimacy as social and civic actors, not merely completing legal sanctions. Their trajectories are shaped by obstacles such as harsh prison regimes, judicial distrust, surveillance, and media exposure, as well as support from families, social workers, and religion. The brief calls for policy reforms that better balance security concerns with social justice and reintegration support.

Context and research question(s)

The reintegration of returnees – individuals who travelled to Syria after the 2011 conflict broke out and later returned to Belgium – is a key topic in public and political debates in Belgium and across Europe. Since the terrorist attacks in 2014 (Brussels' Jewish Museum), 2015 (Paris) and 2016 (Brussels and Zaventem), returnees have primarily been viewed as potential threats, raising concerns about dangerousness, radicalisation and counterterrorism prevention. However, this focus on risk tends to obscure an essential dimension: the social, professional, and civic trajectories of individuals convicted of terrorism after returning from Syria, as well as the institutional mechanisms intended to support their reintegration into ordinary life. This was not always the framing. Before the mid-2000s, the issue of returnees was largely absent from public policy. The security focus gradually gained ground as a result of international developments, anti-terrorism legislation and, especially, the waves of departures to Syria and multiplication of attacks in Europe from 2014 onwards. In this context, returnees became embedded in judicial, police and administrative systems that tightly regulate their post-return trajectories.

This Policy Brief examines the reintegration process from the returnees' perspective. Through their narratives, it assesses the judicial and social policies they experience and explains what 'reintegration' means to them. Their narratives reveal the obstacles they face and the resources and opportunities that influence their varied journeys. Their experiences emphasise the challenge of establishing a legitimate social identity following such a profound rupture, demonstrating that reintegration necessitates both personal reconstruction and negotiation within a society characterised by mistrust and ambivalent policies that combine punishment and support.

This Policy Brief is based on a report which is one of the first long-term analyses of reintegration among Belgian returnees. The report is based on an ethnographic study conducted between 2021 and 2025 with fifteen returnees and fifteen family members affected by departures to and returns from Syria.

Main findings

From the returnees' perspective, reintegration is not limited to institutional measures or defined by the moment of release from prison. Rather, it is understood as a dynamic process that begins with the decision to leave Syria, continues during imprisonment and extends far beyond it. We conceptualise reintegration empirically as *the ability to re-establish oneself as a legitimate social actor who is fully able to participate in society and exercise civic and political rights*. This definition shifts the focus away from security concerns and highlights the human, social, and political dimensions of reintegration, such as changes in ideas, evolving social roles, and the obstacles experienced by those directly affected. Below, we summarise the main findings of the study.

Finding 1: Reflective process and disillusionment as first step in the return: For many participants, the process of reintegration begins with the decision to return to Belgium. This decision, which is often prompted by profound disillusionment with the situation in Syria, represents the first rupture with their initial commitment. The gap between youthful solidarity with oppressed Syrians and the reality of fratricidal violence caused participants to break with the jihadist project and initiate their return – the first step towards reintegration.

Finding 2: The role of religion in reintegration: Religion plays a significant role in the reintegration process. Contrary to dominant discourses that treat religious practice as a risk factor, interviewees describe religion as a valuable resource in this process. In prison, religion can help individuals to make sense of their sentence, even when they firmly believe that their incarceration is unjust. Rather than fuelling confrontation, religious practice often acts as a mediating force, enabling individuals to rebuild a moral relationship with society. Many returnees describe a shift in their faith towards a more spiritual and ethical orientation, rather than an oppositional one.

Finding 3: Returnees and the justice system: the challenge of understanding punishment: One of the most recurring themes in the interviews is the incomprehension of the sentences handed down by the returnees. The standardisation of case histories in counterterrorism proceedings generates frustration, as individuals feel that the judicial system emphasises intention over proven facts. Many emphasise that their confidence in European justice, which they expected to be based on *evidence and facts*, was undermined by their experience of the trials, which they perceived as unjust.

Finding 4: The prison experience: Prison is a central, but ambivalent, step in the reintegration process. Some see it as a period of reflection; however, all denounce the detention conditions and isolation that hinder genuine reconciliation with the sentence. Several interviewees also report exceptionally long pre-trial detention, often justified by presumed risk. The DeRadex isolation regime is among the most criticised elements. Intended to monitor and evaluate prisoners considered radicalised, it relies on continuous surveillance and isolation in cells without access to sunlight or communal spaces. Interviewees describe these conditions as degrading and counterproductive.

Finding 5: Reintegration under surveillance: Being released from prison does not mean that constraints end. Those released remain subject to strict monitoring during probation, which typically lasts two years. These conditions include regular police visits, creating an ambivalent relationship oscillating between suspicion, surveillance, support and, in some cases, friendship.

Finding 6: Media filing: A major obstacle: Media coverage of terrorism cases can have lasting consequences. Many returnees find that their private lives are exposed to the public domain, which makes reintegration extremely difficult. Even when in employment, many fear being discovered by employers who find out about their past via Google searches.

Some people who have disclosed their situation have subsequently been dismissed, while others conceal their conviction but fear future exposure. Attempts to anonymise names by news outlets or search platforms often fail, which reinforces a profound sense of injustice towards the media.

Finding 7: The importance of social workers and family support: Social workers who supported returnees in their reintegration process are seen by the returnees as important links in their reintegration. They point to the role they often play in their search for work or solutions to administrative problems. However, for several interviewees, it was mainly their family that played a very important role, often providing accommodation and, in several cases, assistance in finding work. In several cases, family members also often acted as foster parents for minors.

Conclusion and recommendations

Drawing on interviews with returnees, we observe an ambivalent reintegration process shaped by the coexistence of restrictive security and legal measures that hinder reintegration—such as the denial of certain civil rights, bank account closures, travel bans, and loss of nationality—and support mechanisms designed to facilitate a second chance, including the involvement of social workers, families, and, in some cases, police officers. This tension between control and support underpins the following recommendations:

1. Abolish the so-called DeRadex units and conduct a thorough evaluation of their functioning.
2. Reassess the anti-terrorism legislation of 3 August 2016 and the pre-trial detention criteria associated with it.
3. Encourage religious guidance in reintegration efforts and recognise the important role played by religious actors in this process.
4. Provide targeted support to families, who are often deeply involved in reintegration processes and frequently subject to administrative, judicial, and police sanctions.
5. Assess the impact, relevance, and proportionality of nationality revocation.
6. Examine the applicability of the “right to be forgotten” and data erasure for returnees, particularly regarding personal data in search engines.
7. Establish mechanisms to enhance transparency in the circulation of personal data within security databases (BDG, BDC-TER, VSSE) and in information sharing at both national and international levels.
8. Raise awareness among professional journalists about the harmful consequences of disseminating private information.
9. Make the national terrorism list, disseminated by the Federal Public Service Finance and compiled by the National Security Council, confidential.
10. Create avenues for appeal against the closure of bank accounts.
11. Promote greater awareness of the diversity of profiles among returnees from Syria by highlighting the wide range of reintegration pathways and personal testimonies.

Further Reading

Sakhi, M. & Fadil, N. (2025). *Reintegration from the Perspective of Belgian Returnees from Syria*. Leuven: KU Leuven.

Contact information

Name : Montassir Sakhi

Institution/Department: KU Leuven – Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology

Email: montassir.sakhi@gmail.com

Name: Nadia Fadil

Institution/Department: KU Leuven – Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology

Email: Nadia.Fadil@kuleuven.be