



The RAN Declaration of Good Practices for Engagement with Foreign Fighters for Prevention, Outreach, Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Introduction

Governments have been increasingly focused on the rise of foreign fighters¹ departing to fight in Syria and, to a lesser extent, other regional countries, since the beginning of the 'Arab Spring' uprisings of 2011. The level of foreign fighters travelling to Syria to date has been unprecedented in comparison to previous conflicts. Foreign fighters can pose a potential threat to states in numerous ways: At the minimum level, it is likely that, on their return, they will have experienced psychological trauma associated with war and will require health care assistance, rehabilitation and reintegration type interventions. While abroad, foreign fighters also pose a threat by attempting to recruit others to join the fight. They can also acquire more advanced terrorist and fighting skillsets and significantly expand their transnational extremist networks. Finally, and at the most extreme level, it is probable that some will have joined Islamic extremist factions whilst fighting abroad and may seek to attack their home countries on return to export the al Qaeda ideology of global jihad against the West. Evidence-based research shows that they are more likely to succeed, they are more determined and likely to use more deadly force if they have been abroad for terrorist training or in conflict zones..

The issues outlined above have been the primary focus of the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)'s Working Group (WG) on Internal and External factors (INT/EXT). The INT/EXT WG has explored these in several ways. Firstly, it brings together the relevant European Union Member States' experts to establish a baseline estimate of levels of foreign fighters and various challenges and experiences that Member States have faced. Secondly, the WG has examined the diverse initiatives which are taking place across member states to tackle this challenge, particularly from the point of view of practitioners. These good practices are based, *inter alia*, on three workshops which took place in Berlin in October 2012, Amsterdam in April 2013 and Antwerp in September 2013 organised by the RAN INT/EXT WG (the latter was organised in collaboration with the RAN Prevent WG). This list of RAN good practices is a living document and is not intended to be exhaustive. It will be modified and/or expanded based on the upcoming 'Cities Conference', which will gather the relevant actors from, practitioner to government level, who will provide feedback on this document for future use and beyond.

General principles:

Although programmes must be tailor-made to the local conditions, cultures and legal traditions, certain conditions can be conducive for engagement with (potential) foreign fighters, their families and communities.

¹ For the purposes of this document, 'foreign fighters' refers to those non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict. As this document deals with suggested good practices for dealing with foreign fighters, the word 'potential' will often accompany the term (to denote the preventative phase) and they may also be referred to as 'the recipient' which denotes their involvement in an engagement programme.



- *Good Practice Number 1: Actors² should set clear goals and objectives to determine the outcome of engagement, including indicators of success and failure.* Clear goals are crucial to establishing the method of engagement and defining the target group of engagement. Indicators of success are likely to be difficult to establish, for instance, in terms of preventing someone from travelling. Risks and failures should also be carefully considered before undertaking engagement, in order to do no harm.
- *Good Practice Number 2: Engagement programmes should be tailor-made and informed by the context and environment.* Actors must remember that all cases will be different based on the individual involved. For instance, not all of those returning from Syria will be violent, or have suffered mental health traumas. Most commonly practitioners report that each individual case is different and that there is no 'one-size fits all' approach. This will result in more targeted efforts that make success more likely. The downfall is that it is more time consuming and often more expensive to personalise individual treatment.
- *Good Practice Number 3: Actors should determine the level of engagement from a wide range of possible actions.* Practitioners have available a wide array of engagement options. These can range from utilising legal and law enforcement mechanisms to employing social workers, religious scholars, psychologists or a combination of several options. However, actors must realise that certain measures will cause challenges and sometimes even be counterproductive. For instance, heavy-handed legal measures, such as the threat of revoking a passport, may deter foreign fighters from engagement and prompt them to travel to another conflict or region. Religious engagement may also prove challenging as (local) authorities might be reluctant to or inexperienced in addressing religious issues and so should work to identify appropriate interlocutors that are both credible and effective.
- *Good Practice Number 4: Actors should be aware of the timespan of intervention and the correct opportunity to engage: before (prevention), during travel (outreach) and after travel (rehabilitation, reintegration and in some cases de-radicalisation).* There are various times where opportunities to engage are possible. For instance, prior to travel (and targeting those at risk individuals with the intention of prevention), reaching out to family members while relatives have travelled abroad, or undertaking rehabilitation and reintegration activities for those on their return. The level of intervention necessary and the point at which to intervene should be determined by the goals set for the programme and the available resources.

Engagement is a systemic process:

- *Good Practice Number 5: Engagement is a systematic process, in that it should not be undertaken in isolation.* Rather like a jigsaw puzzle, engaging with a (potential) foreign fighter and their environs will require dialogue and engagement with a wide range of actors from the micro to macro level, such as families (both immediate and wider), community members and leaders, religious scholars, teachers, local authorities, police and intelligence services. A multi-agency approach means shared responsibility, but it must be clear who the lead party is for good coordination purposes. Within this lead party there will then, preferably, be a key

² Similarly, for the purposes of this document, 'actors' refers to any person or organisation undertaking engagement programmes. This spans the micro – macro level and can include, but is not limited to, families (both immediate and wider), community members and leaders, religious scholars, teachers, civil society actors, local authorities, police, intelligence services and any other relevant government worker or practitioner.



intermediary. It may also be advantageous to build on already existing partnerships and networks.

- *Good Practice Number 6: Engagement must be coordinated throughout the system by a capable, trusted intermediary.* Any engagement programme will be undertaken by a host of actors. In order for the (potential) foreign fighter to be open to engagement, a direct point(s) of contact should be established and that person(s) should assess what types of agencies and targeted intervention should be employed. It is crucial that this intermediary be trusted by all parties, but primarily by the (potential) foreign fighter in order for the engagement to be able to succeed (good practices related to trust-building will be elaborated upon below). At times, the intervention may be directly with the foreign fighter or indirectly through their family or social network.
- *Good Practice Number 7: All actors involved in delivering an engagement programme should make an informed decision about who to include and who should potentially be excluded.* Within the complex system of actors who can potentially be involved in prevention, outreach or rehabilitation and reintegration, some controversial figures may exist. For instance, groups with hard-line opinions (but not necessarily violent extremists) may seek to be part of a public dialogue on prevention. Or, programmes may use former extremists ('formers') to try to dissuade a potential foreign fighter. Actors may also choose to utilise or exclude recruiters (of foreign fighters). There is no agreement on who should be included and excluded, however the actor implementing the programme should make an informed decision based on the tailor-made needs of the individual case.

Trust:

Trust is the most important characteristic of the engagement system. Nearly all practitioners agree that for any programme to stand a chance of success, the (potential) foreign fighter or those with an influence over foreign fighters must trust those who are intervening. The following are several good practices related to trust-building.

- *Good Practice Number 8: Actors engaging with a (potential) foreign fighter must win his/her trust through transparency, honesty and openness.* Many practitioners agree that when they are transparent about their intentions, those they are engaging with are more receptive. Transparency can also help to prevent any unwelcome surprises throughout the engagement which will lose the receivers' trust. Where possible, information sharing should be reciprocal between the actor engaging and the (potential) foreign fighter. It should be noted, however, that in many cases some police or intelligence information will be classified. In these cases, clear rules and guidelines about the sharing of this information should be established and, depending on the situation, shared with the recipient.
- *Good Practice Number 9: Actors should attempt, where possible, to speak the same language as those they engage, both in the literal sense and wider empathetic and cultural sense.* In dealing with (potential) foreign fighters, practitioners will often experience persons who speak various languages and come from various cultures. Therefore, it is important to communicate in the mother tongue that the (potential) foreign fighter is comfortable with, or employ a trusted translator. Furthermore, actors who engage should be very aware of the cultural norms of the recipient and steer an intervention with these in mind. It is highly important that the person engaging is empathetic, treats the recipient with respect and refrains from using stereotypical or negative labels. In this sense, anyone can intervene once they have the right characteristics, and this can be true for women, or persons who do not



share the same cultural background as the foreign fighter – once language is not an issue, the culture is understood and respect is shown.

- *Good Practice Number 10: Actors should note that trust-building is a necessary, long-term, time consuming commitment that should remain a top priority throughout engagement. Being present and available in a visible and sustained way is essential for building trust. The benefit of this is increased trust with the (potential) foreign fighter, however, those engaging may also experience conflict with their parameters of work and workload. Often, practitioners may need to juggle workload with this commitment and so a balance of necessary time spent with the individual must be found within the parameters of the practitioner's job.*

Outreach:

Outreach and engagement can be undertaken in a variety of ways and, at various times, there will also be different avenues to initiate outreach and different actors to approach in order to begin engagement.

- *Good Practice Number 11: Actors should look for opportune moments to initiate engagement. A key challenge to any engagement process with (potential) foreign fighters will be initiating outreach. This is the crucial period before trust has been established and, as such, a ripe time for failure. Several instances have arisen where outreach has started successfully:*
 - Cases, where others from the community have travelled can provide an opportunity to engage community members or local religious/educational authorities.
 - In advance of (or after) a feast day or event that might cause demonstrations or ill-feeling, local police or authorities can approach the community/schools/religious institutions.
 - Practitioners can use mainstream activities, such as day trips and movie nights, to make initial contact and to provoke discussions conducive to trust-building and intervention.
 - Police can initiate contact in cases where parents fear for minors or there have been domestic disturbances and they can then recommend the necessary actors.

There is no tried and tested method for initiating contact and so practitioners must be aware of opportune times and signals, but must also be creative and innovative in order to gain initial meetings. Furthermore, persistence will be crucial at this stage. Long-term engagement will also greatly help if an important incident does occur, as this will mean that there is a need to identify mechanisms that are already in place to reach out to relevant actors enabling pro-active rather than re-active engagement.

- *Good Practice Number 12: Actors should provide a safe space and publicly known 'point of contact' for worried (potential) foreign fighters and their families (or other persons) to contact with their fears, and the requisite protocols in place to address these fears. Actors should attempt to make outreach for interested/worried persons as simple as possible. This can be done using specialised units within a local authority/law enforcement or using a phone hotline for (potential) foreign fighters or their families to discuss their fears and have easy access to services to help deal with these fears.*
- *Good Practice Number 13: Practitioners should look for interested and committed parties such as family members, local community groups, teachers, or religious figures (amongst others) that are trusted by the (potential) foreign fighter and who can provide an opening for engagement. In this case, other actors can provide trust 'by proxy', and may be able to vouch*



for the practitioner engaging. This can also provide an opportune moment to begin contact. Actors can include family members (both of the [potential] foreign fighter's immediate and extended family), local community or youth groups already in the area, teachers, or trusted religious figures.

- *Good Practice Number 14: Actors should work with families to help the (potential) foreign fighter understand their support and the impact that travel can have.* Family members can provide key forms of support to, or have a positive influence on, the (potential) foreign fighter and, in many cases, can help with prevention or rehabilitation, reintegration and, to a lesser extent, de-radicalisation. However, it should be noted that families can equally pose risk factors, such as neglecting their relative or influencing (or even promoting) violent extremist ideologies. Actors should bear in mind potential challenges when working with families who may be fearful of sharing information or worry about stigmatisation of involvement in an intervention. Where possible, it is important to proactively encourage the recipient's family and other networks not to reject or stigmatise their relative.
- *Good Practice Number 15: Actors should anticipate the need to utilise mental health services in some cases.* Being aware and recognising possible mental health issues of the (potential) foreign fighter is key. In some cases, actors could undergo specific trainings by psychologists in order to recognise signals and receive the tools to address the issue. It is important for actors to have access to the requisite mental health services and those providers should, preferably, be trained to deal with similar cases to those of foreign fighters. Cultural sensitivities may require innovative ways to persuade those in need of mental health intervention.

Substance:

Once contact has been established and trust has been built, actors will be required to discuss a range of topics both directly related to the foreign conflict and beyond.

- *Good Practice Number 16: Actors should remember that the foreign conflict will often only be the beginning of the discussion and they should be prepared to deal with (either themselves or in cooperation with other actors) a wide range of topics, from the local micro level to the international macro level.* Most commonly, (potential) foreign fighters will initially speak of their assumptions or experiences of the conflict abroad. However, it is important to note that a wide range of issues will arise, for instance, in the home or in the community (such as discrimination or polarisation), at a national policy level (for instance discussing foreign policy) or about other international grievances. The practitioner should have all available actors and strategies on hand to anticipate, as much as possible, the recipient's needs.
- *Good Practice Number 17: Actors should be prepared to understand practical problems experienced by (potential) foreign fighters and have strategies in place to deal with such problems and requests.* Often, and particularly if undertaking a prevention type intervention, (potential) foreign fighters will have more practical problems than only related to the conflict abroad: these can include family issue such as the lack of a father figure, issues at school, issues related to children or (un)employment. Often, a practitioner may not be able to help with these problems directly but should be prepared to help find someone who can, or to explain to the recipient that it is not within the scope of their work.
- *Good Practice Number 18: Actors should understand the implications of cultural norms and particularly those related to gender.* Many cases have shown that the (potential) foreign



fighter will come from a family with highly patriarchal traditions, but in reality, when placed in a new (often western) environment, these traditional norms are challenged and in fact disenfranchise and emasculate the dominant father in favour of the mother. As such, gender issues must be addressed, explored and discussed with the recipient and commonly also with his/her family.

- *Good Practice Number 19: Actors should analyse and assess level of engagement of foreign fighters from their social media footprints.* Often it is possible to discern the chosen symbolism and iconographic images selected by foreign fighters, and to determine their different levels of involvement. These can serve as an early-warning signal for schools, social services and law enforcement that individuals are involved and as a mechanism of dialogue with prospective foreign fighters. Knowledge about and interpretation of early warning signs from social media can serve as a mechanism of dialogue. For instance, the notion of Bilad al-Sham as reference to the Syrian conflict has deep resonance for those that are considering to join the conflict.
- *Good Practice Number 20: During engagement, actors should encourage critical thinking and challenge the recipient to think about their actions and the potential for alternatives.* Often, those thinking of travelling abroad in a foreign conflict will not be aware of alternative courses of action. Those intervening should highlight these areas. This can be done by inviting humanitarian workers or soldiers of national armies to visit the recipient to share their experiences (depending on the specific case). Those intervening should engage the recipient to critically think about their actions and challenge assumptions in respectful manner. It will be likely that the (potential) foreign fighter has not been engaged in this way before.

Sustainability:

It is one thing to begin an engagement process, but as demonstrated above, these programmes are often long term and require sustained commitment. As such, strategies must be put in place to ensure the longevity of programmes which will help aid success.

- *Good Practice Number 21: Actors should instil longevity in their programmes through training of colleagues and other actors to ensure sustainability, consistency and maintain a long term commitment to individuals.* A key component of any engagement programme should be training: both with colleagues (a 'train the trainers' exercise) and with other actors in the community, including (where possible) family members as well as education and religious institutions. Trainings can be undertaken using hand-outs (of signs for potential foreign fighters), using checklists of previously successful activities, simulations and role play exercises and training conferences, at the individual or group level.

Conclusion:

It is understood that this document can only provide general principals related to engaging with (potential) foreign fighters and their social environments in order to build resilience and resistance to (potential) travel to foreign conflicts. In many cases, it will not be possible to undertake all of the above practices, but practitioners may be able to choose those relevant to their situation. It is important to remember that engagement will always be context specific and will be heavily dependent on the capacity of the actor(s) undertaking engagement, both in terms of funding and manpower and also on the scope of the programme. These considerations should drive the aims of the engagement which should be realistic in order to optimise success.