

Supporting Returnee Families:

Guidance for States and Communities on Reception, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation.

Key Principles and Recommendations

from RTC Sweden and RTC Denmark

REPATRIATE THE CHILDREN – SEPTEMBER, 2025



Introduction

The repatriation of children and women from detention camps in Northeast Syria calls for reception strategies that are humane, rights-based, and practically effective. Over the past several years, many returnee families have been repatriated to a range of countries, offering a growing body of experience. These lessons can support the development of more coordinated, sensitive, and sustainable approaches to reception, reintegration, and rehabilitation.

The nature of the reception matters, whether it is experienced as welcoming and humane can significantly shape the returnees' reintegration journey. Families returning from conflict and detention have often endured extremely difficult conditions over a prolonged period. The receiving society must be prepared to build trust and offer a strong and supportive social response. Social response refers to how a community or system reacts to a crisis or serious event, and those affected by it. A constructive and rights-based response from institutions and communities fosters safety, trust, and social cohesion at the community level, while supporting psychological recovery for individuals. It is a key element in laying the groundwork for successful long-term reintegration.

Drawing from experiences of RTC Sweden and RTC Denmark, this paper provides a framework of best practices to states and communities in managing returnees' reception, with emphasis on protecting children, maintaining family unity, and preventing future radicalization.

Key Principles

Child-Centered Approach

All reception measures must be guided by the best interests of the child, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This includes ensuring children are protected from harm, treated with human dignity, and supported in their emotional, educational, and developmental needs. Children should be given the opportunity to express their views, and their perspectives should be taken seriously in all matters that affect them.

Individualized Case Management

Returnees' needs and risks must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, recognizing that every person and family has experienced conflict and detention differently. A standardized or one-size-fits-all approach risks overlooking specific vulnerabilities or strengths. Personalized assessments are essential for providing appropriate interventions, as well as meaningful, and timely support.

Family-Centered Reintegration

Keeping families together, or ensuring timely and compassionate reunification, is vital for psychological recovery, especially for children. A stable family environment fosters emotional healing and helps returnees rebuild trust and identity. In most cases, the mother has been the child's only attachment figure and source of safety throughout their upbringing, making the bond especially critical to preserve. Arriving in the country can feel like a crisis-like experience for a child. In such a vulnerable moment, they should not be deprived of their only source of safety and emotional stability. Whenever possible, interventions should strengthen the family unit and avoid unnecessary disruptions to these primary bonds of care and psychological and emotional safety.

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration and Trust-Building

Coordination across government agencies, civil society including faith leaders, and local communities is essential to provide holistic, effective, and dignified support. Collaborative efforts must prioritize building trust with returnee families, many of whom may feel uncertain or fearful upon arrival. Establishing respectful, transparent, and consistent communication from the start fosters confidence in public systems and strengthens the foundation for long-term reintegration.

Do No Harm Perspective

All interventions must aim to support and ease returnees' transition - not complicate it. The guiding approach should be one of sensitivity and responsiveness to the unique needs of each family. Not all returnees will require or wish to receive support, and services must never be imposed. Respecting a family's autonomy and readiness is crucial for building trust and enabling long-term stability.

Recommendations

1. Establish a National Coordination Mechanism

- Create a multiagency task force to manage repatriation consistently across regions.
- Provide specialized training for professionals in social services, law enforcement, and child protection.
- Coordinate between relevant agencies for assessments on child protection and other needs.

2. Ensure Child Protection Without Unnecessary Separation

- Avoid automatic separation of children from caregivers unless it is necessary or there is a clear and present risk for the child to be with its mother.
- If available, use joint placements for the children and their mother in supervised institutions for social workers to observe and assess parental capacity, risks and needs upon arrival.
- If separation is necessary, prioritize reunification timelines and allow regular contact during custody review.

3. Provide Practical Support for Integration

- Support enrollment in education systems for children, and when appropriate also for adult returnees.
- Provide guidance on accessing livelihoods, job training, and employment services.
- Assist with finding stable housing and navigating national housing services.
- Enable legal support when needed, and facilitate access for returnees to essential civil documentation, such as identity papers and birth registrations in cases where the children were born abroad.

- Where appropriate and legally permitted, offer returnees the option to change their names and apply for protected identity status to reduce stigma and enhance safety during reintegration.
- When a parent has passed away, steps should be taken to ensure the family can claim relevant support or compensation according to their rights, even if official documentation confirming the death is unavailable.

4. Include the Returning Family and the Extended Family in Reintegration Plans

- Include the returning family in the planning over their own lives, ensuring that returnees are active participants in decisions affecting their reintegration, support plans, and long-term well-being.
- Engage grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other relatives or key persons that can contribute to the stability of the children as part of the care network.
- If appropriate, prioritize extended family as foster caregivers when necessary.
- Offer psycho-social support and relevant information to the wider family circle, recognizing that they are likely to remain part of the child's life long after public sector interventions have concluded.

5. Support Mothers with Social Workers or Mentorship and Practical Guidance

- When needed, assign trained social workers or mentors to help mothers rebuild their lives.
- Support paths to access to housing, education, employment, and legal guidance.
- Encourage self-efficacy and participation in pro-social settings.

6. Empower Civil Society Participation

- Recognize and support the unique role of civil society in reception and reintegration efforts, including NGOs, faith community groups, and grassroots initiatives if they are meaningful to the family.
- Enable and strengthen their work by providing access, resources, and formal opportunities to contribute within national frameworks.
- Support community-based reintegration, education, and therapeutic initiatives that are grounded in trust, local knowledge, and long-term commitment.

7. Prioritize Mental Health and Psycho-social Support

- Provide access to mental health services for both children and caregivers. Let them decide when and if they are ready to enroll in such.
- Train frontline staff in trauma-informed care and psychological first aid.
- Establish referral networks for long-term psychological rehabilitation if needed.

8. Incorporate Religious Literacy and Existential Health Support

- Avoid stigmatizing religious affiliation; promote inclusive identities.
- Train frontline workers to distinguish between religious identity and violent extremism.
- If appropriate, collaborate with faith leaders to support existential health support and offer theological guidance.

9. Enable Social Cohesion Networks

- Support the path to safe spaces for returnees to engage with others in society without stigma, fostering mutual respect, inclusion, and dignity.
- Facilitate access to prosocial activities such as sports, arts, and cultural events that promote belonging and constructive engagement.
- Encourage participation in local community groups, language classes, or volunteering initiatives to build new relationships and social ties.

10. Respect Family Autonomy and Self-Determination

- Allow returnee families to identify their own needs and set the pace for when and how support services are accessed.
- Clearly communicate that support is voluntary, not mandatory, and always offered on the family's terms, at the right time for them. If the family feels pressured, not listened to, or forced, the intended support risks having counterproductive effects and may push the family further away from engagement.
- Maintain consistent but respectful follow-up, ensuring availability of services without pressure or intrusion.
- Support families in choosing when to end engagement with public services and transition to full independence.
- Recognize that for many, healing includes the right to start over in life without being defined by their past, and systems should respect and enable this transition.

Conclusion

Experiences show that returnee families can reintegrate successfully when the reception is structured, compassionate, and rooted in rights-based principles. A well-prepared reception process is not only a matter of legal and ethical obligation, it is also an investment in long-term social cohesion, public trust, and national security.

Returnee families have often endured years of instability, violence, and deprivation. Their recovery and integration depend not only on access to services, but on how they are welcomed and treated by the systems and communities they return to. Respectful, humane reception lays the groundwork for rebuilding trust and creating conditions for better results.

States and communities have an opportunity to lead with empathy, professionalism, and foresight. By learning from the experiences of returnees and those who work with them, policies and practices can be shaped to support dignity, resilience, and the chance to begin anew. The goal is not only to manage return, but to create the conditions under which returnee families can truly belong, participate, and thrive.

About Repatriate the Children (RTC)

Repatriate the Children (RTC) is a non-governmental, non-profit, children's rights organization committed to promoting the dignity, safety, and long-term well-being of children affected by conflict and detention. RTC advocates for knowledge-based decision making where humanitarian principles, the rule of law, and global security converge.

RTC has supported the reception, reintegration, and rehabilitation of returnee families in Sweden and Denmark, with a focus on centering the best interests of the child and promoting a rights-based approach to post-conflict, post-detention recovery.

Drawing on its operational experience, RTC offers technical support and policy guidance to states and communities developing or improving reception frameworks for returnee families. This includes guidance on child protection, psycho-social support, civil society collaboration, and strategies for long-term social cohesion.

Through close engagement with returnee families and frontline practitioners, RTC provides practical, context-sensitive expertise to help governments and other relevant stakeholders implement effective, humane, and sustainable reception systems.

Published in September, 2025 by Repatriate the Children - Sweden (RTC Sweden) and Repatriate the Children - Denmark (RTC Denmark)

Contact: info@repatriatethechildren.org

This guidance paper builds on and further develops the report: Reception of Returnees: Reintegration and Rehabilitation after Repatriation from Northeast Syria – Guidance Document for Emerging Practices With Lessons From Sweden (2022) available at: www.repatriatethechildren.org/reception-of-returnees

This is the second version of this paper, originally published in June 2025.

Layout: Nina Derkert

Copyright © 2025. All rights reserved.