

# **A Grassroots Guide to Community Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Returnees & Their Children**



organization for  
the prevention  
of violence

# A MESSAGE FOR THE COMMUNITY

As salam 'alaikum wa rahamatullahi wa barakaatuhu,  
Greetings of Peace and Blessings,

Before you are a set of guidelines with some good practices to help deal with the challenge of returnees. These guidelines have been put together by the Organization for the Prevention of Violence and the Islamic Family and Social Services Association in Edmonton with the community's best interests in mind. It is important to be proactive in such situations to make sure we are not caught off guard by the challenges our community may face.

Please read these guidelines, and implement where applicable, but most importantly please share these with as many masajid and community organizations as possible so that everyone is on the same page. In such times it is imperative to have a united front and hopefully these guidelines will facilitate that.

**"It is important to be proactive in such situations to make sure we are not caught off guard by the challenges our community may face"**

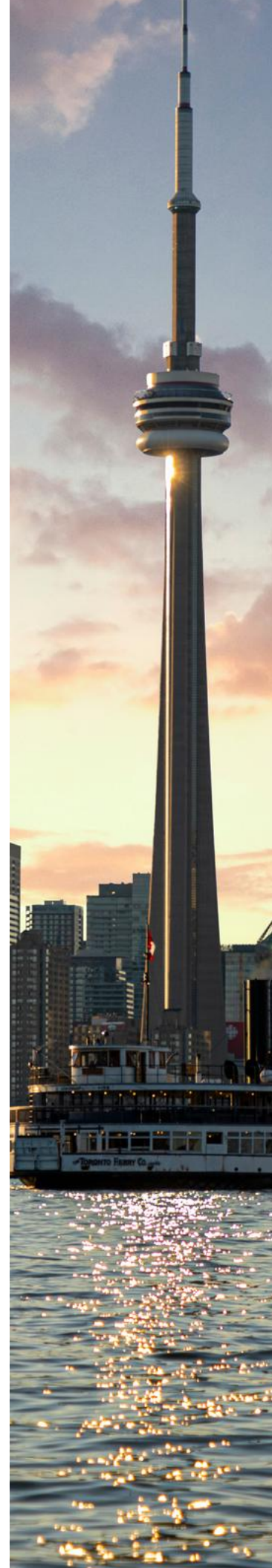
We may be wondering: why does our community have to deal with this challenge? The reality is that these individuals ascribe themselves to our faith and as a result people will look to our community for answers. Please understand that we are not alone in addressing this challenge and we have the support of many community, government and non-government organizations behind us. Let us purify our intentions and lead with mercy.

May Allah protect and bless our community, country, and all its citizens. Ameen.

Sincerely,

*Navaid Aziz*

Sh. Navaid Aziz



# WHO ARE THE RETURNEES?

Individuals and families who left Canada to join groups like Daesh in Iraq and Syria may at some point return home. If they do return, these Canadians will be referred to as “returnees”. A majority of these individuals are young children; many of them are under the age of five. While the Canadian government has not identified how many individuals may return, journalists and international organizations suggest there are between 40 and 50 Canadians in prisons and camps in Northeastern Syria. Initially set up as refugee camps to house individuals fleeing Daesh, the camps were partially repurposed to house individuals who may have been associated with the group.

## PURPOSE OF THE GUIDELINES

The goal of this document is to provide practical advice on how to interact with returnees and deal with the attention they will receive. These guidelines provide recommendations to help address this complex and challenging issue with practical advice for engaging with the returnees themselves, as well as media and law enforcement.

## WHO PRODUCED THIS DOCUMENT

The Organization for the Prevention of Violence (OPV) and Islamic Family and Social Services Association (IFSSA) have cooperatively developed this document. IFSSA and the OPV are both non-profits based in Edmonton, Alberta. IFSSA has been combating gender-based violence, poverty and exclusion for 30 years. This includes assisting with food and economic security, settlement supports for newcomers, and counseling/outreach services.

The OPV is a community and expert-led organization that uses research to develop prevention programs related to hate-motivated violence. This includes providing social work and counselling support for those impacted by hate incidents and hate-motivated violence. It was founded in 2016.

OPV and IFSSA in no way condone or support the past actions of returnees. Our objective is to support the community, public safety, and healthy outcomes for all Canadians.

# UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

The number of people who may return is quite small and most are children. This is important to keep in mind in order to avoid creating fear and to foster an environment of rehabilitation and community safety. The attention returnees will receive in the media, and from politicians and law enforcement means that the issue cannot be avoided. Promoting clear messages and facts about the issue while promoting the rehabilitation of children and adults are important steps in addressing this challenge.

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Most of the adult returnees are women, reporting suggests there are only between five and seven men who may return. The limitations of Canada's judicial system means that many of the individuals who left Canada voluntarily may not face legal consequences for their actions, instead they will return to our communities. This is despite the fact that these individuals joined and fought with a violent movement that is responsible for countless human rights violations, even if they may now regret their actions.

The children in particular will likely have suffered trauma (due to witnessing, or possibly experiencing or engaging in violence and abuse), have been denied basic access to health care and education, and will need our help and compassion.



# ENGAGING WITH RETURNEES

In the unlikely event that you encounter a returnee, avoid confronting or attacking them, even though you may strongly disagree with their decisions. These kinds of interactions will only serve to isolate individuals who need positive community connections to successfully rehabilitate. It is important to engage with them in a calm and rational way. Because of their choices and experiences returnees may not know who they can talk to, or trust, and it may be challenging to communicate with them at first. They may be easily upset, withdrawn and dealing with feelings of hopelessness. If you have contact with the returnees on a regular basis, the following guidelines can help promote rehabilitation and reintegration among adults and children.

Please remember that each returnee will be different. Some of these individuals will return from Syria or Iraq entirely disillusioned with the ideology espoused by Daesh (and like-minded groups) and may have tried to leave. Others will return still committed to the group's toxic goals and ideology. It is important to be aware of both opportunities for rehabilitation and risks. These guidelines are not an exhaustive list of recommendations, rather they are basic suggestions on how to interact in a productive manner.

- **Don't confront their beliefs and actions.** Aggressively confronting returnees may push them away and discourage them from getting help.
- **Do help them develop healthy social relationships in the mainstream community and identify avenues for professional help.** This can help them overcome personal difficulties and aid them in turning away from negative relationships and ideas.
- **Do ask them about their needs and try to direct them to practical assistance they are comfortable with.** Offers of help will go a long way in building important trust with those who are viewed with suspicion and anger.
- **Don't question them about their actions overseas.** Returnees, especially children, may have been exposed to events they may not want to discuss. These questions may generate confrontation or bring back traumatic experiences.
- **Do listen carefully to what they say.** When returnees volunteer their feelings and talk about their experiences they may indicate the kind of professional or community help they require to successfully rehabilitate.
- **Don't confuse "mixed feelings" or unclear statements with deception or dishonesty.** Expect returnees to have conflicted feelings, and display a lack of trust and contradictory behaviors.

# ENGAGING WITH RETURNEES

- **Don't be surprised if you encounter reactions of helplessness and frustration.** These kinds of feelings are to be expected following their return to Canada. They may also be accompanied by feelings of anger.
- **Don't ignore or neglect your own feelings and reactions when engaging with a returnee.** If you need support for yourself, seek it out.
- **Do contact police if returnees make specific threats or discuss plans to conduct violent acts.** The first priority in engaging with returnees should be maintaining the safety of the community and all Canadians.
- **Don't ignore feelings of fear. Returnees may feel highly insecure because of their experiences.** Dismissing or reasoning against their fears may not be an effective way to respond. These kinds of feelings should be addressed by a professional counselor and spiritual assistance, where needed.
- **Do try to build a network of supports around the individual.** You may not be able to provide them with everything they need. If you are uncomfortable with engaging it is okay to say so. Encourage returnees to contact one of the specialized services listed below, or someone else in the community that you think would be able to support them.

## SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

Children and teenagers who left Canada when they were very young, or who were born abroad, have likely suffered trauma due to witnessing, experiencing or being forced to participate in violence, abuse and other disturbing events. They have also likely been unable to access basic health care, their education has been interrupted and some will have been exposed to a toxic ideology. Additionally, many children will have experienced loss, potentially including one or both of their parents, their sibling(s), or other loved ones. Nearly all of these youth will have endured multiple displacements in their formative years: leaving Canada, moving within Syria or Iraq, and now into a camp.

Due to these experiences, children and teenagers may be experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a condition that is caused by exposure to disturbing and terrifying experiences that can lead to anxiety, emotional numbness, flashbacks, and a sense of hopelessness. Traumatic experiences of loss may also lead to complicated grief, depending on the circumstances of the loss and whether or not there have been opportunities for appropriate bereavement. Some youth may feel unable to grieve their loss or be torn

between the promises of the present and the loyalties of the past. This may include children presenting with loyalty conflicts, particularly those who were exposed to indoctrination or a harmful belief system. For many, the experience of multiple traumatic events might produce a type of complex trauma, which can impact brain development and the ability to form secure relationships.

Professionals should focus on developing and demonstrating trust, while recognizing the complex feelings the returnees may be experiencing. Younger children, in particular, may develop difficulties forming positive relationships or attachments. This can be complicated by grief and loss trauma if they have been separated from their parents or caregivers throughout, and/or have had numerous caregivers come and go leaving them with a precarious sense of belonging and poor sense of worth. Hence, they may display anxiety in relating to others, or in tolerating interaction with their peers. In middle (5-8) and late (9-12) childhood, they may start displaying defiance and cynicism toward authority figures. They may nervously vie for control when facing the prospect of change or challenge. In teenage years, young returnees may feel alienated and disconnected from others, or may conversely try to fit in and feel vulnerable to peer pressure. Such behaviours must be treated with the utmost care.

Teenagers in such circumstances are well defended. They may see new or existing relationships as threatening their control, see those helping as not trustworthy, may have difficulty self-regulating (are stuck in the flight, fight, or freeze mode), and have trouble problem-solving and managing social situations competently. Understanding how their behaviour makes sense for them, given their life experiences, is important for professionals, as is the need for patience. Making a connection requires consistency, and for the helping team to not give up. Demonstrate caring, reinforce the sense of value in the child or teenager, refrain from power struggles, and ensure the team is sharing the same messages with everybody involved to reduce the potential for alienating any one base of support in the child's life.

## **"Make them feel included in the community and help them build friendships that make them feel like they belong and are cared for"**

From research with child soldiers we know these types of behaviors can happen after early exposure to disturbing and traumatic experiences and can affect their development into adulthood. Should you be asked to work with one of these children or teenagers, try to help them manage their experiences by building healthy, supportive relationships and providing access to resources and the supports they need. Treat young returnees in a way that is as normal as possible. Make them feel included in the community and help them build friendships that make them feel like they belong and are cared for. As they were unable to access or attend a regular school while abroad, school will likely involve some challenges and they will need support catching up on years of missed lessons.

Finally, these children may relive traumatic experiences of their past. They may feel terrified and overwhelmed by their intrusive and recurrent flashbacks. They may find themselves trapped in a cycle of fear, panic, anger and helplessness. This can add to the challenges they face with respect to connecting to safe adults, building trust, and exhibiting testing behaviours to keep people at a safe emotional distance. As the child's brain is more malleable, stable, nurturing and long-term connection to a caregiver(s) is essential. The older the child when reintegrating, the more challenging it will be for the child or teenager, the caregiver, and those providing help and support

## WORKING WITH ADULTS

The adults you may interact with will also face challenges. Most of the women have been widowed and some will have experienced gender-based violence. Families may need help meeting their basic needs, such as shelter, food, clothing, childcare and employment. Look for opportunities to help returnees feel a sense of ownership in their lives as you work with them to rehabilitate.

Identifying and connecting returnees to appropriate professional services is important. Refer to the resource list at the end of this document if you want to find a local organization that can support the individual. Often it is close friends, family or a spiritual leader that are successful in referring people to the services they need. Counseling and spiritual support can be helpful, especially for those experiencing PTSD. Work with community services to help returnees meet their basic needs. Use opportunities to help returnees feel a sense of ownership over their day-to-day lives. If these individuals feel connected to the community and helpful services, there is a much better chance that they will be successfully rehabilitated.

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# ENGAGING WITH THE MEDIA

If you are approached to comment about a returnee it is strongly recommended that you refer media requests to the National Council of Canadian Muslims' (NCCM) [media centre](#). The NCCM can provide media with authoritative, articulate and timely responses. Taking on the role of media spokesperson yourself may impact your professional and personal life in negative ways.

Reporters may ask for comments from community members. Please discourage community members who are not designated spokespeople from commenting on this issue in order to keep consistent messaging, prevent negative attention, protect individuals/families from reprisals, and avoid creating further fear or misinformation.

Some media outlets have already identified most of the returnees by visiting prison camps abroad. Therefore, once returnees are back in Canada, reporters may know how to contact them, their families and community.

If your organization (community center, mosque, non-profit, school) has the capacity and a specific need, explore professional training for a spokesperson who can deal with the media. NCCM, IFSSA and OPV can provide further suggestions on how to deal with media requests.

# ENGAGING WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

Law enforcement will assign a high priority to returnees. With this in mind, if you are aware of the possibility of returnees coming to your community, it is best to start building relationships between community leaders and law enforcement as soon as possible. Your local community liaison officer from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) or local police department can be a source of information and direction; their primary role is to build relationships in the communities – not necessarily conduct investigations, unless they are told about a crime. If you would like information and advice on how to go about building this relationship, please contact one of the programs listed at the end of this document.

Canadian law enforcement and intelligence agencies are governed by strict legislation with numerous layers of oversight and parameters they must operate within. If you are anxious about being interviewed by police or the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), contact the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) beforehand to learn about your rights or read their brochure, which can be downloaded on their website. You can also read these guides produced by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association on your rights as they relate to [contact from CSIS](#) or [the police](#).

It is possible that some returnees will continue to support a violent ideology and may try to negatively influence others in your community. If you see or hear something that worries you, contact your local community outreach officer. If you are concerned about the immediate safety of an individual or others, phone 9-1-1.

# HATE CRIMES AND INCIDENTS

Community members may be concerned that coverage related to the returnees could lead to hate crimes or incidents. If you are worried about this, contact your local police to ask for information and training on reporting these incidents and securing your places of worship. If you or members of your community have experienced a hate crime or incident it is important to report it to your local police. This includes returnees, who may be targeted.

To report a hate crime or incident, phone the non-emergency line at your local police force or 9-1-1 if there is an immediate safety concern for an individual or others. It is important to be clear and say that you believe that the event was motivated by hate. Give as many details as you can remember, including the time and place of the crime or incident. All reports will be investigated by police. You can also complete an [Incident Report Form](#) with the NCCM.

It is important to get help for victims of hate crimes and incidents. Accessing victims support can allow individuals to access counseling, receive updates on investigations or court proceedings as well as potentially access funds to help them pay for repairs to damaged property. It is also helpful to speak with leaders in your community about improving security at your mosque, community center or school. Through the [Security Infrastructure Program](#), Public Safety Canada can provide matching funds to improve security and train staff. The OPV and IFSSA can assist with information and support to complete a grant application.

# RESOURCES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

## **British Columbia**

### **Shift BC (Provincial)**

- <https://shift.gov.bc.ca/>

## **Alberta and Saskatchewan**

### **Islamic Family and Social Services Association (Edmonton)**

- [info@ifssa.ca](mailto:info@ifssa.ca)
- 780-900-2777

### **Organization for the Prevention of Violence (Provincial)**

- [refer@preventviolence.ca](mailto:refer@preventviolence.ca)
- 780-782-8070

### **Calgary Police Redirect (Calgary)**

- [redirect@calgarypolice.ca](mailto:redirect@calgarypolice.ca)
- 403-428-8200

## **Ontario**

### **Yorktown Family Services' ETA Program (Greater Toronto Region)**

- [davidob@yorktownfamilyservices.com](mailto:davidob@yorktownfamilyservices.com)
- 416-394-2424 ext. 250

### **Further Our Communities Uniting Services (FOCUS) Toronto**

- [FOCUSToronto@Torontopolice.on.ca](mailto:FOCUSToronto@Torontopolice.on.ca)
- 416-808-0145

### **Ottawa Police MERIT (Ottawa)**

- 613-315-4983

### **John Howard Project Reset (Ottawa)**

- [arobleh@jhsottawa.ca](mailto:arobleh@jhsottawa.ca)

## **Quebec**

### **SHERPA-RAPS (Provincial)**

- [equipe.polarisation.ccomtl@ssss.gouv.qc.ca](mailto:equipe.polarisation.ccomtl@ssss.gouv.qc.ca)
- 514-267-3979