

# A Difficult Homecoming: The Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Their Families to Bosnia and Herzegovina

An analysis of attitudes towards the return, reintegration, and trial  
of foreign terrorist fighters of the Syrian war and their families,  
using data from the BiH SCORE Index 2020



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CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT (SEED)

For more information about SeeD visit: [seedsofpeace.eu](https://seedsofpeace.eu)  
For more information about SCORE BiH data visit: [scoreforpeace.org/en/bosnia](https://scoreforpeace.org/en/bosnia)

## Background

This report investigates attitudes towards the return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) and their families based on data collected for the 2020 Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The data for SCORE BiH 2020 was collected by Prism Research between October 2019 and March 2020, with a representative sample of 3637 respondents. The project was implemented by the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (Seed) in partnership with the Bosnia and Herzegovina Resilience Initiative (BHRI), funded by USAID/OTI and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This report aims to map the support of Bosnian citizens for the return, reintegration, and trial of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their families.

On a regional level, “The Western Balkans Joint Action Plan on Counterterrorism” was set up in 2019 to facilitate cross-national collaboration aiming to unravel terrorist networks and align prosecution frameworks (European Commission, 2019). The national strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for combatting terrorism and violent extremism focusses on 4 goals: prevention, protection, prosecution, and response to terrorist attacks (Bosnia and Herzegovina Council of Ministers, 2015). Some returned FTFs integrated into normal life of their communities, while others stayed directly or indirectly involved in terrorist networks. In either case, returned FTFs and their families might still endorse divisive ideologies which promote violence and undermine social cohesion (Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund, 2020).

**323**

BiH FTFs  
181 men,  
61 women,  
81 children

More than 300 Bosnians left to Syria and Iraq up to 2016, about half of which were women and children (European Commission, 2020), and thus reintegration concerns both combatants themselves and their families. The return, reintegration and trial of these citizens will occur in a context of fragile social cohesion and tense intergroup relations in BiH. Therefore, it is crucial to take into account the desires and concerns of the populace, gleaned from the SCORE survey. Any policy decision must consider the willingness of communities to accept returning FTFs and their families, and the contested political space in which demands on policy will be made by the public, political groups and civil society.

The findings presented below reveal that among citizens of BiH there is a distinct ethnic and regional variation in policy preferences related to the return of FTFs, implying that any policy decisions must be taken with the concerns of different groups in mind. On one hand, consensus exists in all ethnic groups that families of FTFs should be allowed to return to the country without facing trial, and that FTFs themselves should face trial. On the other, there is disagreement among ethnic groups about whether reintegration should occur, with 51% of Bosniaks supporting it but only 32% of Serbs (overall, 44% support it). There is a very slim majority of just over 50% supporting the return of FTFs. Results also show that those who support the return and reintegration of FTFs without a trial tend to be more influenced by nationalist narratives, whereas those who support return and reintegration but also insist on a trial are more inclusive and more resilient against ethnonationalism. Among Croats and Serbs, reluctance about return and reintegration is associated with dissatisfaction with the functioning of the state and the economy. With this information, reintegration strategies can be tailored to each group and area.

The SCORE BiH 2020 has uncovered how to build resilience against radicalisation and polarising narratives. For more, see the [SCORE platform](#) and the [SCORE BiH Resilience Citizenship Report](#).

**50%**

Support  
the return  
of FTFs

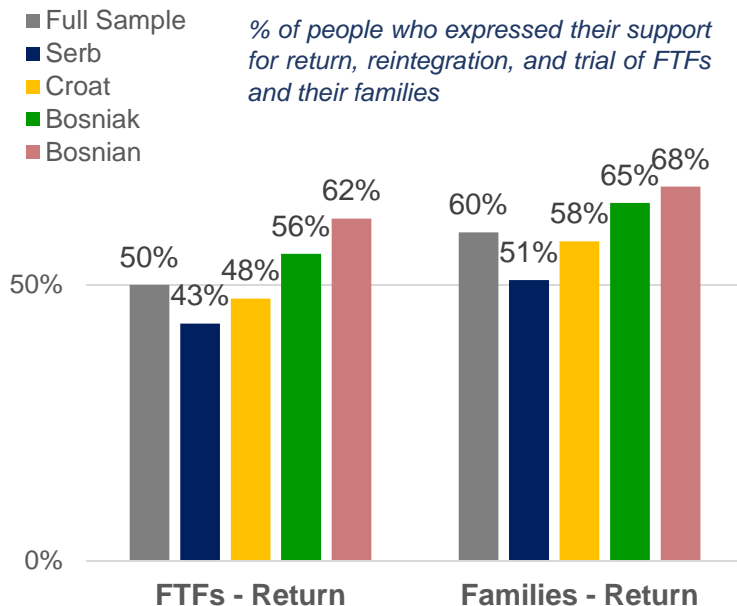
**44%**

Support re-  
integration  
of FTFs

Croats, Serbs  
support return  
& re-integration  
less than  
Bosniaks

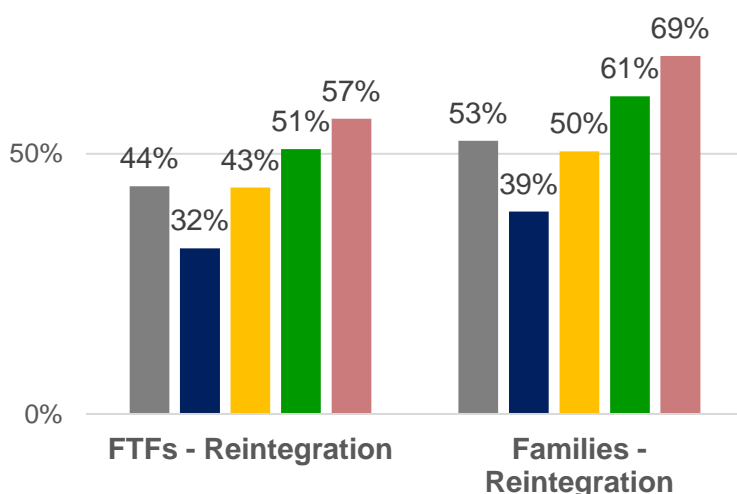
# Attitudes Towards Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters

SCORE BiH surveyed citizens' attitudes on the return, reintegration and trial of FTFs and their families. The graphs below reveal vast differences in preferences among the ethnic groups of BiH. However, there are separate majorities in all ethnic groups who support the return of families of FTFs, the trial of FTFs themselves, and reject the trial of families of FTFs. What to do about reintegration is much less clear, with different ethnic groups having diverging preferences.



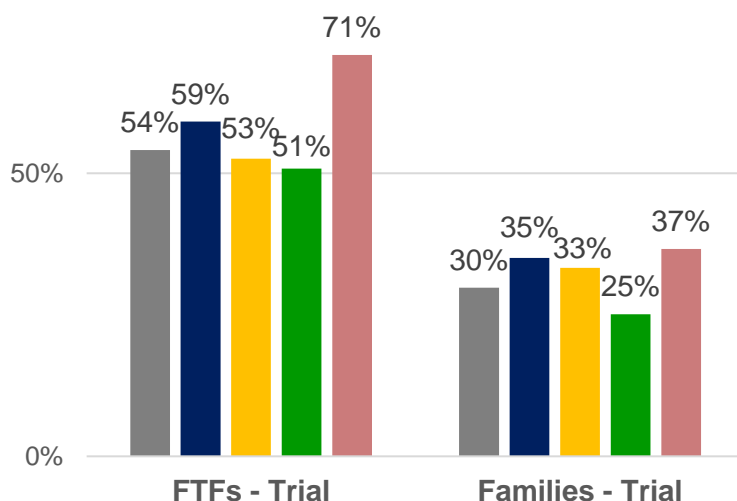
## Return

There is a very slim majority in support of the return of FTFs, while citizens tend to be more supportive of their families returning to BiH. People who identify as Bosnians tend to be the most open to their return, followed by Bosniaks, while among Croats and Serbs there is no majority in support for FTFs' return. Older people (65+) are also likely to be less supportive of the return of FTFs.



## Reintegration

Support for reintegration of FTFs and their families differs vastly across the ethnic groups. Most Bosnians and Bosniaks are open towards the reintegration both of FTFs and their families, whereas this is a minority among Serbs. Croats seem slightly more open towards the reintegration of families of FTFs, with a small majority.



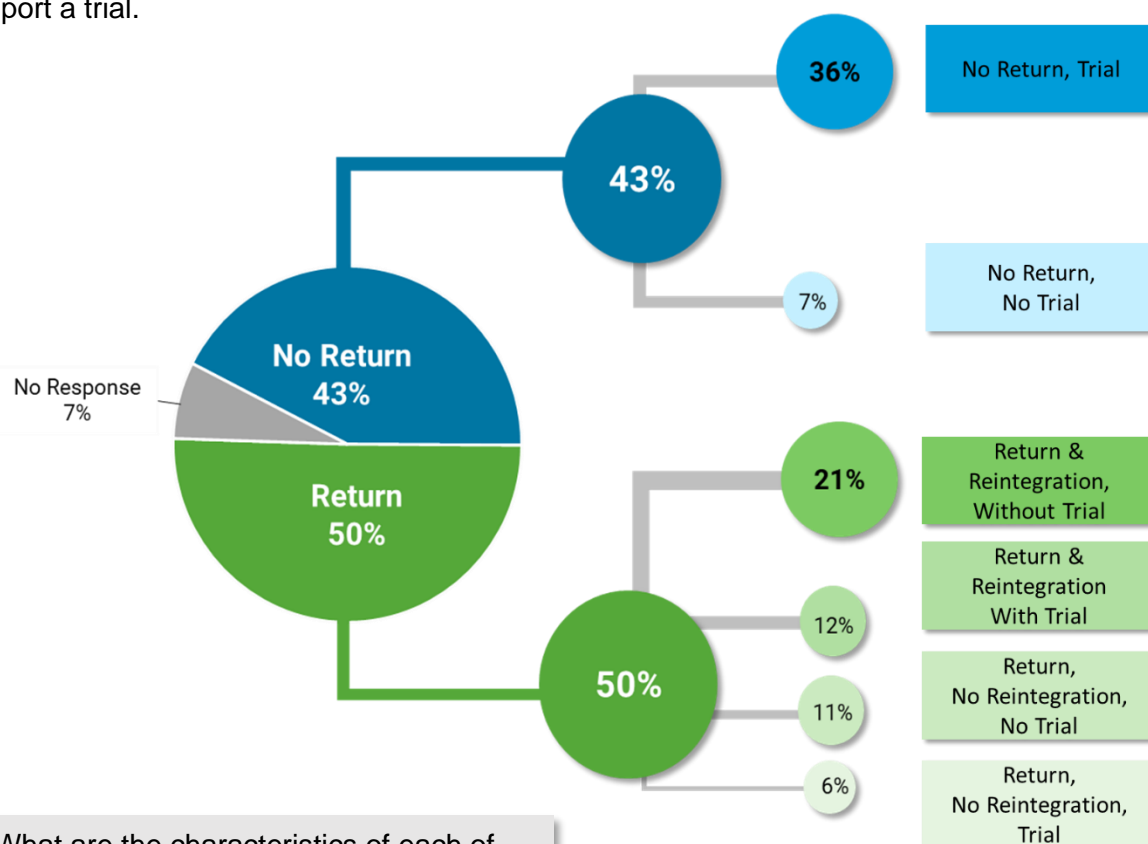
## Trial

Bosnians have an accepting stance on FTFs, but also express the strongest desire for FTFs to be tried. A majority across all ethnic groups tend to agree that families of FTFs do not have to stand trial, but FTFs do. Overall, older people (40+) are more in favour of a trial compared to younger groups (18-39).

*Respondents were asked their ethnicity, and could select "Bosnian", any of the three constituent ethnic groups of BiH, or other groups (Jews, Roma, ...) here not shown due to small sample size. Results refer to data collected between October 2019 - March 2020.*

## Profiling Policy Preferences

SCORE has grouped citizens by what combination of return, reintegration, and trial they support. We can break down the 50% of citizens who support the return of FTFs into 21% who support reintegration without trial, 12% who support reintegration with trial, 11% who do not support reintegration nor a trial and 6% who support a trial but no reintegration. 43% of respondents would prefer FTFs not to return, broken into 36% which would have them tried and 7% who do not support a trial.



No Return, Trial	Older Higher proportion of Serb respondents Dissatisfied with the course of the economy Dissatisfied with the way the government passes and implements laws
No Return, No Trial	More marginalised High exposure to Salafi narratives in their personal life
Return & Reintegration, Without Trial	Support a role for religion in politics Support ethno-nationalist narratives Less respect for human rights than other groups Satisfied with economy and the way the government passes and implements laws Less resilient to nationalist narratives than other groups Higher proportion of Bosniak respondents
Return & Reintegration, With Trial	Older Higher proportion of Bosniak respondents and tend to live in Bosniak-majority areas Display tolerant religiosity and an inclusive identity Reject a role for religion in politics Support reconciliatory political system Resilient against ethnonationalist ideology
Return, No Reintegration, No Trial	Lower scores in soft skills (negotiation, cooperation, and higher callousness) Lower indirect conflict exposure Feel less free to express their political views Disconnected and disengaged civic profile Experiences higher tension with both their ingroup and with outgroups. Lower levels of tolerant religiosity and are less tolerant towards other groups

## Support for Return & Reintegration of FTFs per Municipality

The two maps below show the average percentage of support of **both** return and reintegration for FTFs (top), and their families (bottom). Nationally, **33%** support both the return and reintegration of FTFs while **42%** support that for FTFs' families. Municipalities with particularly high or low support have been highlighted, showing where integration might be smoother or more fraught with challenges.

### Velika Kladuša

At least three FTFs and one family have already returned here and faced trial<sup>1</sup>

### Srebrenik

At least one BiH national killed in Syria<sup>2</sup>  
Active parajamaat<sup>3</sup>

### Kalesija

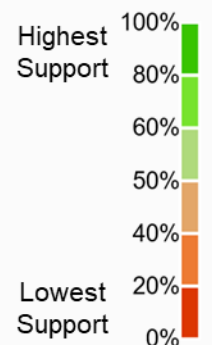
At least one BiH national now in Syria<sup>4</sup>  
Active parajamaat<sup>3</sup>

### Central Bosnia and Herzegovina

Municipalities in this region of BiH strongly oppose return and reintegration of FTFs, but are more relaxed about families

Among Serbs and Croats, support for return and reintegration is associated with these factors:

- Satisfaction with the functioning of the state and the economy
- Tolerance of Salafi Muslims
- Rejection of nationalist narratives, Inclusiveness, and Positive feelings towards other ethnic groups



## Support for Return & Reintegration of Families per Municipality

### Oštra Luka

Areas that are accepting of FTFs also tend to be accepting of their families too

Nobody surveyed supported return and reintegration of FTFs or their families in these municipalities:

Gradačac/Pelagićevo, Orašje/Donji Žabar, Konjic, Istočna Ilidža, Istočno Sarajevo, Travnik, Široki Brijeg, Bužim

Reintegration to such areas will face strong opposition from residents

### Greater Sarajevo

More accepting of family members than FTFs themselves

### Čapljina

### Stolac

1: [reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-bosnia-idUSKBN1YV0Z4](https://reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-bosnia-idUSKBN1YV0Z4); [nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Na-aerodromu-Sarajevo-priveden-Mirel-Karajic-Zeni-zabranio-da-radi-pa-otisao-da-ratuje-u-Siriji/349189](https://nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Na-aerodromu-Sarajevo-priveden-Mirel-Karajic-Zeni-zabranio-da-radi-pa-otisao-da-ratuje-u-Siriji/349189) 2: [vecernji.hr/vijesti/dorin-tata-dvije-godine-ne-znam-nista-o-njoj-i-onda-cujem-da-je-ranjena-964395](https://vecernji.hr/vijesti/dorin-tata-dvije-godine-ne-znam-nista-o-njoj-i-onda-cujem-da-je-ranjena-964395) 3: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, from Sead and Turcalo 2019. 4: [finchchannel.com/world/opinion-3/78463-uk-government-has-ordered-to-freeze-assets-of-additional-300-persons-related-to-isil-and-al-qaida](https://finchchannel.com/world/opinion-3/78463-uk-government-has-ordered-to-freeze-assets-of-additional-300-persons-related-to-isil-and-al-qaida)