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**STRIVE** Preventing and Responding to Violence against  
**JUVENILE** Children by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups

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# TARGETED BY TERRORISTS:

CHILD RECRUITMENT, EXPLOITATION  
AND REINTEGRATION IN INDONESIA,  
IRAQ AND NIGERIA



## **STRIVE JUVENILE**

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Preventing and Responding to Violence  
against Children by Terrorist and Violent  
Extremist Groups

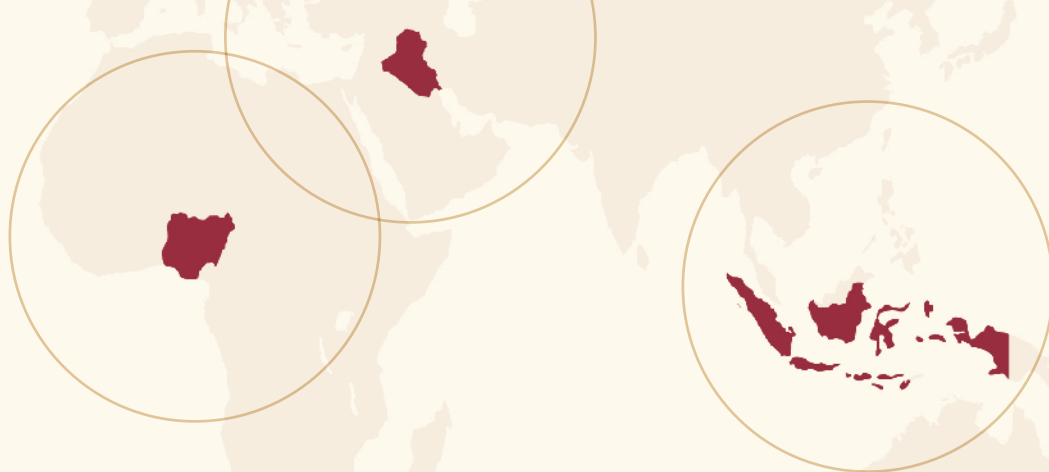
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# Abbreviations

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<b>ADI</b>	Anshor Daulah Islamiyah (Indonesia)
<b>AQIM</b>	Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb
<b>ARF</b>	ASEAN Regional Forum
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>BNPT</b>	Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terrorisme, National Counter Terrorism Agency (Indonesia)
<b>CJTF</b>	Civilian Joint Task Force (Nigeria)
<b>CRA</b>	Child Rights Act (Nigeria)
<b>CRC</b>	Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>CVE</b>	Countering violent extremism
<b>DDRR</b>	Demobilisation, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation
<b>DI</b>	Darul Islam (Indonesia)
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>FGD</b>	Focus group discussion
<b>FMoD</b>	Federal Ministry of Defence (Nigeria)
<b>FMoWA</b>	Federal Ministry of Women Affairs (Nigeria)
<b>FTF</b>	Foreign terrorist fighter
<b>HRW</b>	Human Rights Watch
<b>ICCT</b>	International Centre for Counter-Terrorism
<b>ICG</b>	Islamic Crisis Group
<b>IDP</b>	Internally displaced persons
<b>IHL</b>	International humanitarian law
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation
<b>INGO</b>	International non-governmental organization
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>IPAC</b>	Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict
<b>IPCR</b>	Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution
<b>ISS</b>	Institute for Security Studies
<b>ISWAP</b>	Islamic State West Africa Province

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<b>JAD</b>	Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (Indonesia)
<b>JAS</b>	Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati wal-Jihad (Nigeria)
<b>JAT</b>	Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid (Indonesia)
<b>JI</b>	Jemaah Islamiyah (Indonesia)
<b>JIC</b>	Joint Intelligence Centre (Nigeria)
<b>JN</b>	Jabhat Al-Nusra
<b>KRG</b>	Kurdistan Regional Government
<b>MIT</b>	Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (Indonesia)
<b>MTR</b>	Mujahidin Tanah Runtuh (Indonesia)
<b>NACTEST</b>	National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (Nigeria)
<b>NDLEA</b>	National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (Nigeria)
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>NHRC</b>	National Human Rights Commission
<b>NII</b>	Negara Islam Indonesia
<b>NSAG</b>	Non-State armed group
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>ONSA</b>	Office of the National Security Advisor (Nigeria)
<b>PCVE</b>	Preventing and countering violent extremism
<b>PMU</b>	Popular Mobilization Unit (Iraq)
<b>PTSD</b>	Post-traumatic stress disorder
<b>RAN-PE</b>	Rencana Aksi Nasional Pencegahan Ektremisme Berbasis Kekerasan, National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism that leads to terrorism 2020-2024 (Indonesia)
<b>SSD</b>	Safe Schools Declaration
<b>TPA</b>	Terrorism Prevention Act (Nigeria)
<b>TPAA</b>	Terrorism Prevention (Amendment) Act (Nigeria)
<b>TPPA</b>	Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act (Nigeria)
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNAMI</b>	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNIDIR</b>	United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research
<b>UNODC</b>	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
<b>UNU</b>	United Nations University

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# Terminology

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**Armed groups** Armed groups that are distinct from the armed forces of a State<sup>1</sup> in contexts of armed conflict.

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**Child** Every human being under the age of 18 years, in accordance with Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).<sup>2</sup>

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**Children associated with terrorist groups** Children who have been recruited and exploited by terrorist groups and/or are linked to the foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) phenomenon. The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Seventh Review resolution A/75/291 mentions “children formerly associated with armed groups, including terrorist groups, as guided by the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (the Paris Principles)” (OP 117). In Resolution S/RES/2396 (2017), the Security Council “emphasizes that women and children associated with foreign terrorist fighters returning or relocating to and from conflict may have served in many different roles, including as supporters, facilitators, or perpetrators of terrorist acts.”<sup>3</sup> As the above-referenced documents make clear, the term is neutral, and does not entail criminal liability for such children.<sup>4</sup>

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**Conflict setting** A setting in which conflict triggers the application of international humanitarian law (IHL). This includes international armed conflict (as defined under common article 2 of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and article 1(4) of Protocol I of 1977), and non-international armed conflict (as defined under common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions). Common article 3 has been interpreted to require firstly that there must be sufficiently “intense” military violence, and secondly, that the non-State armed group must be sufficiently “organized” for violence to meet the threshold of non-international armed conflict.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A/RES/54/263 (2001).

<sup>2</sup> A/RES/44/25 (1989).

<sup>3</sup> S/RES/2396 (2017), paras. 31 and 36.

<sup>4</sup> See 2, Research Design, below, for further explanation.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Counter-Terrorism in the International Law Context* (Vienna, 2021).

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**Deprivation of liberty** Any form of detention or imprisonment, or the placement of a person in a public or private custodial setting from which they are not permitted to leave at will by order of any judicial, administrative or other public authority (United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty, para. 11 (b)).<sup>6</sup>

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**Exploitation** The use of the child in work or other activities for the benefit of others and to the detriment of the child's physical or mental health, development, and education. Exploitation includes, but is not limited to, sexual exploitation and forced labor or services, including the commission of crime, slavery, or practices similar to slavery. The term indicates that advantage is being taken of the child's lack of power and status.

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**Foreign terrorist fighters** Nationals who travel or attempt to travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, and other individuals who travel or attempt to travel from their territories to a State other than their States of residence or nationality, for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts, or the providing or receiving of terrorist training.<sup>7</sup>

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**Non-conflict setting** A setting in which conflict is not taking place and/or does not trigger the application of IHL. Conflict to which IHL does not apply includes that which involves lower levels of violence and "internal disturbances and tensions, such as riots, isolated and sporadic acts of violence and other acts of a similar nature."<sup>8</sup>

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**Organized criminal group** A structured group of three or more persons existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing serious offences for a financial or other material benefit, whose organization is criminalized by national law.<sup>9</sup>

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**Recruitment** Conscription or enlistment of children into any kind of armed force, armed group, or terrorist or violent extremist group.

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**Rehabilitation** Medical and psychological care and legal and social services provided to child victims of recruitment and exploitation by terrorist and violent extremist groups to help them recover from physical and psychological harm.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A/RES/45/113 (1990).

<sup>7</sup> S/RES/2178 (2014), S/RES/2253 (2015), and S/RES/2396 (2017)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See the definition of organized criminal group in article 2 (a), United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2003)

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from the definition of rehabilitation provided in UNODC, *Justice in Matters Involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime, Model Law and Related Commentary*, (Vienna, 2009), p. 58 of the Commentary in reference to article 29 (7) (c). It also takes into account the provisions of article 7 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

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**Reintegration** The safe process through which a child transitions back into the community, achieves physical and psychological recovery and acquires attitudes and behaviors conducive to his or her assuming a constructive role in society. Such reintegration shall take place in an environment that fosters the health, self-respect, and dignity of the child.<sup>11</sup>

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**Resilience** For the purposes of this study, resilience is defined as a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation in a context of significant adversity.

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**Terrorist groups** There is currently no universally accepted, comprehensive definition of “terrorism” or “terrorist group.” As noted in the Report of the United Nations Secretary-General, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*,<sup>12</sup> definitions of “terrorism” are the prerogative of Member States and must be consistent with their obligations under international law and in particular international human rights law.

For the purposes of this study, the term “terrorist group” encompasses at least the entities designated by the UN Security Council on the ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions List. It may also include other groups that resort to acts proscribed by the universal counter-terrorism conventions and protocols, as well as groups designated as terrorist groups at the national or regional level.

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<sup>11</sup> This definition has been adapted from articles 39 and 40 of the CRC, taking into account United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, February 2007.

<sup>12</sup> A/70/674).

# Executive Summary

## CHILDREN'S ASSOCIATION WITH TERRORIST GROUPS: FILLING THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

**T**his study was carried out in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria with the aim of **increasing knowledge regarding children associated with groups designated “terrorist”** (henceforth terrorist groups). Children's association with such groups and their abduction, recruitment, use and exploitation by them has gained greater visibility in recent years, with reports indicating that thousands of children are affected worldwide. The groups groom and indoctrinate them, use them as servants, sexually abuse and exploit them, and directly involve them in fighting and various auxiliary activities including serving as spies and informants.

Despite the growing visibility of this group of children who are experiencing significant violations of their rights, there is a **lack of reliable and comparable data and evidence about the phenomenon, which makes developing effective policies and programmatic responses challenging**. In particular, there is limited research drawing on the direct experiences of these children in their own voices, due to the difficulty of accessing, collecting, and analyzing relevant data, especially in conflict contexts. The political sensitivities associated with terrorism and the gaps and challenges in the methods used for data collection, situation analysis, and information-sharing add to the difficulties.

The lack of evidence-based research has significant implications for the identification of effective responses, including in policy and programmes. There is an urgent need to address how the security, justice, child-protection, development, and humanitarian sectors can effectively prevent and respond to the recruitment and exploitation of children by terrorist groups. This research therefore investigates **the ways in which specific aspects of terrorist groups' modus operandi and related State responses pose unique protection risks for children, and why specialized policies and programmes may be required**.

The research aims to identify the drivers and manifestations of children's association with terrorist groups in specific contexts, examine whether and how terrorist groups pose unique protection risks for children, and analyze existing interventions responding to this phenomenon. It explores the issues across three axes of investigation: child association, responses from and coordination among actors, and impact of the representation of children on policy.



**The study has seven key findings:**

- 1** Child recruitment by terrorist groups is not exceptional and largely overlaps child recruitment by other armed and criminal groups.
- 2** Children do not join terrorist groups voluntarily. Their association is characterized by a spectrum of coercion, even when they exercise some form of agency.
- 3** A background of political conflict and the perception of a broken social contract are determinants of children's association with terrorist groups both in conflict and non-conflict settings.
- 4** While children's roles in association with terrorist groups vary according to the duration of the association, their gender, and other factors, their experiences are consistently characterized by violence and harm.
- 5** Children exit and disengage from terrorist groups despite serious risk of retaliation when they reach a tipping point of negative experience within the group and positive prospects for life outside it.
- 6** The barriers and incentives to successful reintegration are determined by gendered and stereotypical representations of children's association with terrorist groups.
- 7** While upholding children's rights has proved challenging in efforts to counter terrorism, it contributes to the effectiveness of counter-terrorist programmes and the promotion of peace and security.

# 1

## Child recruitment by terrorist groups is not exceptional and largely overlaps that by other armed and criminal groups.

Children are recruited in various ways across the three case studies, including the use of overt force, recruitment campaigns in schools, the exploitation of peers to spread propaganda, and even via specifically targeted social media content. **None of these recruitment patterns are specific or unique to terrorist groups. What characterizes the children's journeys is their experience of violence, harm and exploitation**, which also affect children associated with other armed and criminal groups.

The emphasis on recruitment techniques and campaigns targeting children directly shows that **children are a valued resource** for such groups. Beyond economic and tactical reasons, **children hold enhanced value for terrorist groups as pawns that raise their visibility**, particularly through widely shared depictions of their involvement in violence.

**When abduction or other overt forms of force are not involved, the recruitment process is non-linear and influenced by multiple factors:**

- Terrorist groups recruit new members by capitalizing on sociopolitical tensions and conflict both within and outside the territory in which they operate.
- Peers, family, and virtual communities, and other close relationships also exert a strong influence on children's pathways into such groups.
- At the individual level, a range of factors including perceived or actual material benefit, direct or indirect experience of abuse, a quest for status and significance, and the need to belong and experience acceptance in a group are involved.

This research finds that **positive experiences and feelings also play a role in determining children's association with terrorist groups**. Feelings of injustice and a desire for revenge do not necessarily conflict with prosocial motivation. Children may be motivated to associate with these groups to protect their family, friends, or community. The pursuit of socioeconomic opportunities and social recognition was found to be another significant influence on children's behavior in all three case studies, manifesting differently in boys and girls depending on how wealth, prosperity, and responsibility for providing for family and community are perceived across genders and locales.

The study finds that the **role of ideology in recruitment patterns is often overstated**. If religious and ideological narratives are indeed instrumentalized to attract children, they do not appear to drive the association of children with terrorist groups. Rather, they tend to become attractive when they feed into broader political discontent caused by perceived absence of the State or the unfairness of existing policies, in which case there is a **risk that especially harsh or punitive counter-terrorism strategies will further enhance the attractiveness of terrorist groups' rhetoric** by legitimizing it.

**Children's association with terrorist groups is distinguished from their association with other armed and criminal groups by the role of counter-terrorism in the exacerbation of societal division, whether actual or perceived.** In some cases, terrorist groups intentionally exploit existing discontent among local communities that have been affected by severe counter-terrorism laws and practices. Measures intended to counter terrorism and repress these groups that are perceived as unfair or discriminatory may inadvertently contribute to driving recruitment.

2

**Children do not join terrorist groups voluntarily. Their association is characterized by a spectrum of coercion, even when they exercise some form of agency.**

**Children do not associate with terrorist groups voluntarily.** This study finds that child recruitment through overt use of force is prevalent in conflict contexts where terrorist groups have the resources to engage in open hostilities and maintain some form of territorial control. In such circumstances children are often abducted from residential schools, villages, or their families, or taken using intimidation, threats, or deception. However, these forms of overtly forced recruitment should not obscure the crucial role of coercion in the experiences of children recruited in other ways.

The socioeconomic instability caused by ongoing conflict in Iraq and Nigeria has deprived families of their breadwinners and made children household heads. In such circumstances, joining a terrorist group may represent a child's only opportunity to fulfil their most basic needs, including survival. In Indonesia recruitment processes are often predicated upon family members' affiliation to terrorist groups, which puts overwhelming pressure on children to join. All these circumstances contribute to **the creation of a coercive environment underlying the imbalance of power between children and the groups that exploit them.**

Regardless of the context of their recruitment, children's experiences show that **coercion determines both their journey into and their experience within a group.** Whether forced, induced, or persuaded to join, once associated with a terrorist group they enter a highly hierarchical and organized network in which they are exploited according to the group's objectives and needs. Many of the children interviewed reported wanting to leave after experiencing violence, manipulation, and deception in the group, but faced considerable obstacles to doing so, including a credible threat of death.

**There is evidence of agency even among children recruited by force,** suggesting that intent and coercion are not mutually exclusive, but rather that child association with terrorist groups is the outcome of a coercive environment within which children may act with some elements of agency.

While childhood is a period of gradual psychological and physical development and attendant vulnerability, **children are not passive victims, and their decision to join a terrorist group should not be dismissed as irrational.** It is often influenced by social, economic, family, and political pressures, as well as by emotional motivation such as a need for recognition, purpose and belonging. The complex interplay between exploitation and agency in the lives of children associated with these groups highlights the need for nuanced and comprehensive policy and programmatic responses. **The research findings suggest that involving children as partners in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts addressing the consequences of violations of their rights** is likely to be the most promising approach.

### 3

**A background of political conflict and the perception of a broken social contract are determinants of children's association with terrorist groups both in conflict and non-conflict settings.**

The study's findings underscore the extent to which terrorist groups, much like other armed and organized criminal groups, systematically capitalize on children's innate need for attention, love, and a sense of belonging, and on their vulnerability to material or social pressure. However, in the countries under **study there was no direct correlation between the extent of armed violence and the scale of victimization experienced by children.** Rather, exposure to violence is the shared factor that defines the trajectories and experiences of affected children.

In line with other relevant studies, the findings indicate that children engage in political violence in the context of a larger political conflict, whether real or perceived, that serves as the basis for their actions. However, **political conflict does not necessarily have to escalate to armed conflict to trigger children's association with terrorist groups.** Children may experience powerful and historically ingrained pressures even in countries that are not experiencing active armed conflict.

In this context, evidence collected across the three case studies reveals two interconnected processes that create fertile ground for association. Firstly, when socioeconomic opportunities are seen as being denied to specific groups of citizens, **they experience social marginalization and perceived injustice on the part of public authorities** that some described as a "**broken social contract.**" Such grievances play a crucial role in determining children's association with terrorist groups, regardless of whether the tension leads to armed conflict.

Secondly, **the securitization of political debates and social spaces, in some cases directly linked to counter-terrorism efforts, exacerbates underlying societal fractures** even in areas and regions not affected by full-scale armed conflict. The research has found that this process of securitization has encouraged rather than deterred child recruitment in all three case studies. The belief that their country is in a state of emergency is widespread among terrorist groups. As a result they often encourage children to join their ranks, triggering a vicious escalation of even more securitized responses from the State.



This does not mean that armed conflict does not affect children's vulnerability to recruitment by terrorist groups, as exemplified by **the varying magnitude of the phenomenon across the three case studies, which is greater in contexts of conflict**. Moreover, the consequences of war and political violence **create further challenges for children's rehabilitation and reintegration**. Children who have exited terrorist groups may have acquired physical injuries, acute or chronic health conditions and/or diseases through their participation in armed conflict.

## 4

**While children's roles in association with terrorist groups vary according to the duration of the association, their gender, and other factors, their experiences are consistently characterized by violence and harm.**

The three case studies have found that indoctrination and training are the first phases following children's recruitment into terrorist groups. Training is typically military in nature and often includes desensitization to and the justification of violence, along with dehumanization of the group's perceived enemies. **The importance of ideology and religion during this phase is not as central as policy responses and academic literature often assume**. The training period varies in length across regions and groups, but physical training and weapons training are usually emphasized more than religious training in the first phase of a child's association with a group.

After training, children are assigned various roles in the groups including active combat or related activities, non-combat roles, and domestic tasks. **Their roles are flexible, changing in response to demographic and sociopolitical factors**. The influence of these variables, however, should not be interpreted in a strictly deterministic manner. Gender is a case in point: female members are not always consigned to domestic, sexual, and reproductive functions, with some girls and women also responsible for recruiting or mentoring new members and participating in combat operations.

**The trauma of performing and living through violence is a shared feature of children's association with terrorist groups across the three case studies**. They are exposed to multiple and severe forms of physical and psychological violence both within and outside combat zones. A key strategy used to foster shared group values involves having them engage in violent acts or training them to become accustomed and desensitized to such acts. **Besides causing severe harm, the traumatic experiences and hardship to which the children are subjected build a sense of solidarity and camaraderie among them that is instrumental to the group's continuation**.

## 5

Children exit and disengage from terrorist groups despite significant fear of retaliation when they reach a tipping point of negative experience within the group and positive prospects for life outside it.

The ways in which children exit terrorist groups range from leaving the group independently to being abandoned by it or rescued by the authorities. Overall, a **child's decision to leave a terrorist group is influenced by multiple motives that accumulate over time until they reach a point at which they actively seek to disengage**. Such motives include frustration with or resentment against the group leadership, traumatic experiences, poor living conditions, the belief that they have committed wrong and harmful acts, a perception of having been deceived and used, and awareness of government campaigns encouraging and supporting their exit. Increasing disillusionment with the group's ideology and general loss of faith in its leadership is a common trend across Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria.

Deciding to leave does not guarantee the child's actual exit from the group, however, as leaving is difficult and may even be impossible. **Fear and stigmatization are the primary deterrents, with the children afraid of being arrested, rejected by their communities, abused by the authorities, or caught and killed by the group**. The intensity of fear and stigmatization can be greater in contexts where counter-terrorist policies and practices are particularly severe. Other factors that hinder children's prospects of disengagement and reintegration vary from country to country and group to group, and include summary executions, family and affective ties within the group, and the absence of realistic possibilities for reintegration, poverty, and unemployment.

## 6

The barriers and incentives to successful reintegration are determined by gendered and stereotypical representations of children's association with terrorist groups.

Children's rehabilitation and reintegration after exiting a terrorist group are complex and challenging, and often fraught with multiple obstacles. The success of the reintegration process depends on the presence or absence of various barriers and incentives including, but not limited to, economic incentives, societal stigmatization, physical and psychological traumas, intragroup pressure, the risk of exposure to their former recruiters, and individual expectations.

**The study findings indicate that reintegration does not present challenges distinct from those associated with leaving other armed groups but may be more complex when children are identified as associated with terrorist groups.** The peculiarity of being associated with a terrorist group exacerbates the perception of children as potential security threats, contributing to the sidelining of child-protection mechanisms and jeopardizing successful reintegration.

**Gender affects both girls' and boys' reintegration patterns in ways that are influenced by cultural and environmental contexts and by generalized stereotypes about girls' inherent powerlessness and boys' inherent dangerousness.** Girls are assumed to have been abducted and exploited and as a result are largely not subject to arrest or harsh treatment by security forces or other law-enforcement institutions. Boys, on the other hand, are believed to have joined a group deliberately and are treated as suspected violent extremists or fully-fledged terrorists.

Boys who disengage from a terrorist group are usually subject to interrogation, arrest, physical violence, deprivation of their liberty, and abuse. Many interviewees reported remaining with the terrorists longer than they wished due to fear of punishment by the security forces, upon release from which many are then rejected and stigmatized by their local communities. Girls also face ostracization from their local communities and discrimination at the hands of the authorities, often in connection with their reproductive role, having given birth to children of terrorists.

**7** While upholding children's rights has proved challenging in efforts to counter terrorism, it contributes to the effectiveness of counter-terrorist programmes and the promotion of peace and security.

Countering terrorism has become a global security priority with the emergence of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Da'esh over the past decade. While the growing body of international law relating to counter-terrorism has played a role in harmonizing national counter-terrorism practices, it has also **revealed practical challenges for the implementation of policies and programmes that fully align with human rights, including child rights.** One such challenge is the lack of an accepted comprehensive definition of "terrorism" in international law, which has contributed to an overly broad application of counter-terrorism measures by States that have led to serious violations of human rights. While the study covers children associated with groups listed as terrorist by the Security Council, it is also conscious of the abuse of terrorism designations at the national level.

This challenge is compounded by the emphasis on **overly punitive and securitized approaches in national counter-terrorism laws and policies** that do not take account of children's vulnerability and entitlement to specific and non-derogable rights. This approach has led to extensive violations of children's rights, including their prolonged detention without charge based only on suspicion of association with, affiliation to or membership of a terrorist group, and has overshadowed the importance of prevention, reconciliation and reintegration-focused strategies and measures.

**The tactics used by terrorist groups have created a perception that child recruits are dangerous terrorists, and a potential security threat.** All the groups analyzed for this study rely heavily on propaganda featuring children being trained and involved in the perpetration of violence, a process instrumental to their State-building goals and warfare strategies. The impact of such propaganda tactics on the perception of these children has been detrimental to child protection, as it has led both public authorities and communities to see children as a security threat at the cost of recognizing the complex circumstances that led to their association with terrorist groups.

Over the past few years, **States have increasingly recognized the phenomenon of child recruitment and exploitation by terrorist groups as an urgent matter to be addressed in line with international law, particularly international child rights laws, standards and norms which identify these children as victims.** They have taken innovative measures to promote rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, prioritizing reconciliation and peacebuilding over punitive approaches. This progress is evident in the case studies from Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria, where children have received varying degrees of specialized treatment and protection. In these countries the political leadership has played a key role in signaling the importance of appropriate treatment for children in accordance with their rights and international obligations.

Yet while progress has been made in the three countries analyzed, **a comprehensive shift in attitudes to laws and policies and their implementation is still needed.** Stigmatization and labelling continue to be notable barriers to the effectiveness of reintegration programmes. Holding perpetrators of the crime against children that is recruitment accountable sends an important signal to communities that children who have been associated with terrorist groups are victims and shifts the blame for joining such groups from their shoulders. Data shows how nationally-led programmes that offer rehabilitation and reintegration support motivate children to leave violent extremist groups, while positive encounters with national authorities strengthen their disillusionment with violent extremist narratives and support their reintegration.

This research shows how **punitive approaches are not only detrimental to children's well-being and contravene international human rights but are also counterproductive, increasing the risk of their marginalization and acceptance of terrorism, and perpetuating the cycle of violence.** Child-centered and child-rights-based approaches to counter-terrorism should thus be prioritized. The evidence presented shows that **changes to attitudes and practices bring positive results, bridging the gap between the child-protection agenda and the security agenda.** By recognizing the long-term detrimental impact of violations of children's rights on security and focusing instead on building inclusive societies, such initiatives contribute to creating the foundations for peace.

## HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

**The field research for this study was carried out between November 2021 and June 2022 in Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria**, the three partner countries implementing The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) STRIVE Juvenile project. Local research partners – namely the Habibie Centre in Indonesia, Social Inquiry in Iraq, and the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) in Nigeria – carried out the field research. **The study explores children’s association with terrorist groups across three axes of investigation: their association with terrorist groups; response and coordination among actors;** and impact of the representation of children on policy. The combination of these cross-cutting themes creates a novel and robust theoretical framework from which to explore this phenomenon.

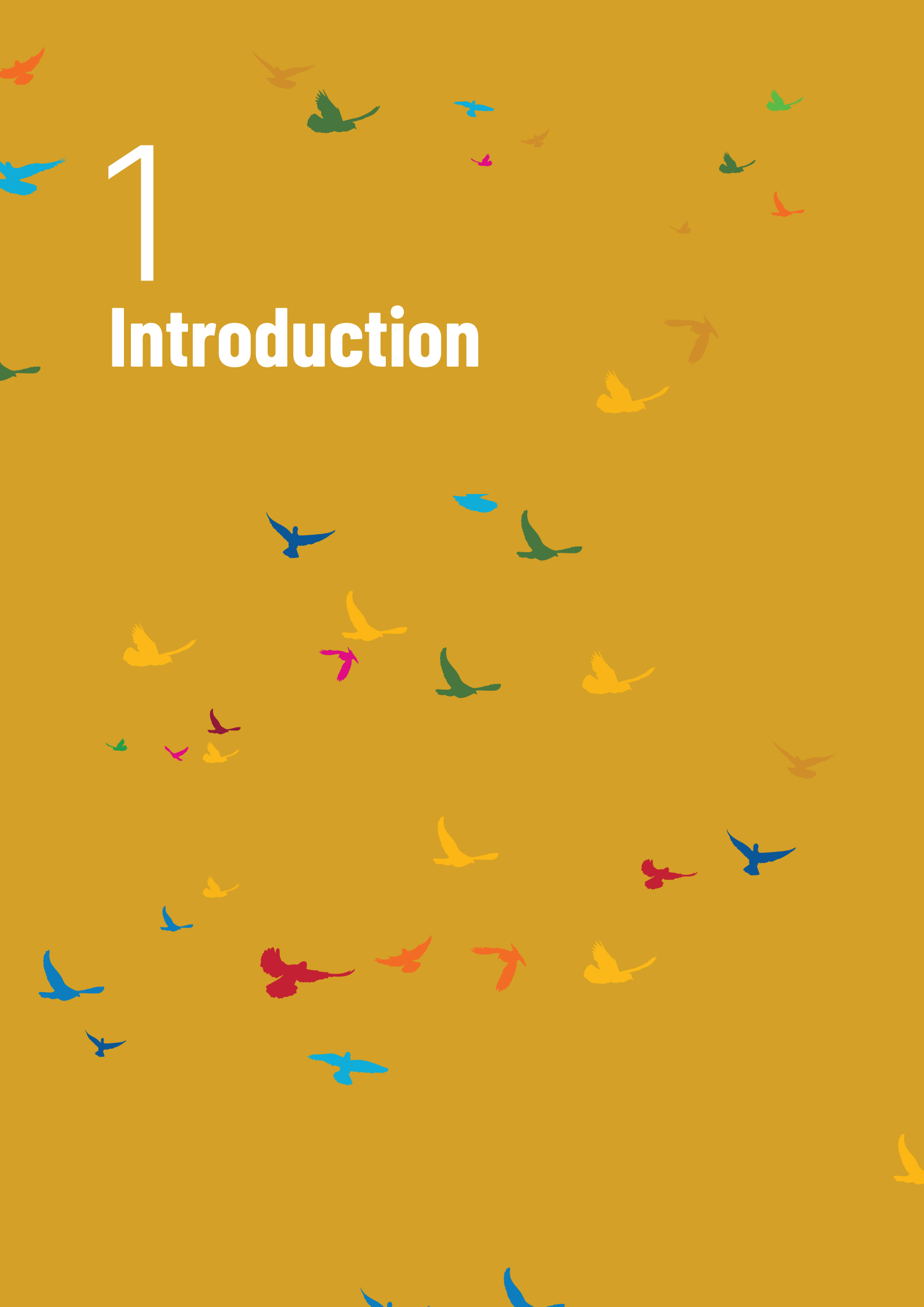
The study consulted **two distinct groups of research participants: 65 young people (49 m, 16 w) who had been under 18 years old at the time of their association** with terrorist groups, and **188 key informants from various involved sectors**. Qualitative research methods including semi-structured and unstructured interviews, focus group meetings and field notes were used to gather information and perspectives from people both directly and indirectly affected by children’s association with terrorist groups.

Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria were selected for investigation on the basis of specific criteria. These countries are similar, in that groups classified as “terrorist” by both the UN Security Council and their respective governments are active on their national territories, with child recruitment a feature of their modus operandi. However, Indonesia is distinct in that child association with such groups does not occur in the context of a recognized armed conflict, and a relatively large number of “foreign terrorist fighters” originate within the country, making **Indonesia’s inclusion in the research propitious for the drawing of wider conclusions about the phenomenon**.

Mapping the scope, nature, and dynamics of children’s association with these groups in three different countries allowed **the generation of a unique dataset** and the exploration of both shared characteristics and distinctive features across the three countries. The analysis of three countries also affords better understanding of existing approaches to child protection and counter-terrorism and their effectiveness in fulfilling the rights of children associated with these groups and promoting safety and security for the affected populations.

# 1

# Introduction



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

**T**his study aims to provide evidence for lawmakers, policymakers, and other professionals who make decisions about the protection of children associated with terrorist groups. It considers children associated with groups listed as terrorist entities by the United Nations Security Council on the grounds that they are affiliated with Al Qaida or Da'esh.<sup>13</sup> However, the findings and recommendations are equally relevant to children associated with other groups sharing the characteristics of the Security Council-listed groups in terms of the type of violence they engage in, their recruitment and exploitation of children, and the political arguments advanced for the violence.

In recent years the issue of children (anyone below the age of eighteen<sup>14</sup>) associated with groups listed as terrorists has gained visibility. Reports indicate that thousands of children are abducted, recruited, used, or otherwise associated with terrorist groups. Children from all over the world are groomed, indoctrinated, used as servants, and sexually abused. They may also be involved in different auxiliary activities for such groups including serving as spies and informants, or directly involved in fighting or the preparation for and/or carrying out of attacks.

While images of these children have been published globally, one of the main obstacles to developing effective policies and programmatic responses to their situation is the lack of available, reliable, and comparable data and evidence on the phenomenon itself. There is limited research reflecting their experiences in their own voices. This is due to difficulties accessing, collecting and analyzing relevant data, especially in the context of conflict, to the political sensitivity of terrorism, and to gaps and challenges in the methods of data collection, situation analysis, and information sharing. Specifically:

- there is a lack of research on how association with terrorist groups affects children as a distinct group;
- there is insufficient data and information on the causes and the manifestations of this phenomenon in specific contexts; and
- there is limited evidence regarding interventions that effectively ensure the best interests of the child while also increasing the safety of communities and societies affected by terrorism and promoting children's effective rehabilitation and reintegration.

The lack of evidence-based studies has a pervasive effect on the identification of effective responses, including policy and programmes. There is an acute need to address how people working in the security, justice, child protection, development, and humanitarian sectors can

<sup>13</sup> Negara Islam Indonesia, (NII) also known as Darul Islam Indonesia (DI), Mujahidin Tanah Runtuh, and Anshor Daulah Islamiyah (ADI) are the only exceptions that have not been listed as terrorist entities by the United Nations Security Council to date.

<sup>14</sup> In line with Article 1 of the CRC, "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years".

effectively prevent and respond to violence against children perpetrated by groups listed as terrorist. This study investigates the ways in which terrorist groups pose unique protection risks for children and why specialized policy and programmatic responses are required and sets out the implications for developing effective interventions.

## 1.2 Building on previous research and addressing key gaps

The recruitment and use of children for purposes of violence, crime and armed conflict is a historical constant rather than a new phenomenon. This study builds on the decades of research in this area while also attempting to fill some key knowledge gaps. Existing research has highlighted structural national, regional, and global factors that lead to children's association with armed groups,<sup>15</sup> including those listed as terrorist by the United Nations or by national governments.<sup>16</sup> This study also draws relevant parallels between children's exploitation by groups such as non-State armed groups (NSAGs) and criminal organizations.

### Recruitment patterns

Ethnic, political, religious, generational, and geographical cleavages affect recruitment and association patterns. As in the case of NSAGs, while terrorist groups all over the world recruit and exploit children, conflict situations exacerbate this phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> Children living in non-conflict countries may also be influenced into association by conflicts elsewhere.

While scores of studies have shed light on how sectarianism and faith-based conflicts drive child recruitment,<sup>18</sup> recent research warns of the risks of overestimating the importance of religion and calls for a better understanding of how interaction with other structural and social factors such as ethnic and political marginalization or inter- and multigenerational tensions drives child recruitment into armed groups.<sup>19</sup> Cultural factors can also play a role, as children's engagement in violence or association with armed groups may be embedded in cultural and social norms relating to violence, gender,<sup>20</sup> and the transition from childhood to adulthood.<sup>21</sup>

The relevant literature is broadly in agreement that child recruitment tends to occur against a backdrop of economic stagnation and high rates of unemployment: the appeal of criminal and armed groups as well as terrorist groups lies to a certain extent in their capacity to attract teenagers

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<sup>15</sup> Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight*, (Geneva, International Labor Organization; Boulder, Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004); Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Cambridge Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Scott H. Decker and David C. Pyrooz, "'I'm down for a Jihad: How 100 Years of Gang Research Can Inform the Study of Terrorism, Radicalization and Extremism'", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 1 (2015), pp. 104–12; Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, eds., *Cradled by Conflict* (New York, United Nations University, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Isaacs, "Sacred Violence or Strategic Faith? Disentangling the Relationship between Religion and Violence in Armed Conflict", *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 2 (2016), pp. 211–25.

<sup>19</sup> International Alert/Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance, "We Don't Trust Anyone: Strengthening Relationships as the Key to Reducing Violent Extremism in Kenya", 2016.

<sup>20</sup> The term 'gender' used in relation to Iraq throughout the study refers to boys and girls, men and women.

<sup>21</sup> Jens Christopher Andvig and Scott Gates, "Recruiting Children for Armed Conflict", in Jens Christopher Andvig and Scott Gates, eds., *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, vol. 77 (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 92; David M Rosen, *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism* (London, Rutgers University Press, 2005); Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*.



and young adults with material incentives and promises of a way out of misery, starvation, and lack of future prospects.<sup>22</sup>

Findings across the social sciences also indicate the role of social and individual factors in influencing child trajectories into criminal and armed groups, including terrorist groups. Studies have investigated how family and community influence children's trajectories into armed groups<sup>23</sup> as facilitative factors for association<sup>24</sup> or, conversely, protective factors against recruitment.<sup>25</sup> Research also sheds light on the role of community leaders and community practices.<sup>26</sup> Social pressures and the stigma of not conforming with the rest of the community are powerful determinants in the decision to join these groups,<sup>27</sup> especially in the case of those styled as self-defense groups.<sup>28</sup>

Research shows consistent findings on the importance of the peer group for child recruitment. As a United Nations University (UNU) study puts it, "peers serve as role models and signal social norms, thus exerting a powerful influence on behavior ... including over family opposition."<sup>29</sup> Peer pressure is particularly relevant for teenage children, who tend to struggle more than other age-groups with impulsive and risk-taking behavior, especially in the presence of their peers.<sup>30</sup> Similar dynamics have been remarked upon among boys and girls associated with criminal groups.<sup>31</sup> Risk-taking behavior, a drive for autonomy, and hostility to authority are common in teenage boys and are often overtly encouraged by their peer group. An emerging subset of this scholarship explores the role of virtual networks such as chat rooms, online video games, and social media platforms in recruitment.<sup>32</sup>

At an individual level, the relevant literature has amply investigated the role of trauma, shock, and suffering as a potential trigger for child recruitment, although more recent studies dismiss the notion of a clear causal relationship between trauma and association.<sup>33</sup> Finally, more recent scholarship has begun to move beyond an exclusive focus on anger, hatred, and revenge to look at the role that more positive feelings and motivations play in the decision to join an armed group. Studies show how association can be motivated by love for the group and other prosocial

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<sup>22</sup> International Labor Organization (ILO), "Wounded Childhood" (Geneva, ILO/IPEC, 2003); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement*, New York, 2017. More recent studies, however, have dismissed a strong causal relationship between economic marginalization and the phenomenon. See, for example, O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Demobilization and Reintegration", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 4 (2007), pp. 531–67.

<sup>24</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight*.

<sup>25</sup> Meg Aubrey and others, "Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and Resilience to Recruitment by Violent Extremist Groups in Syria", *International Alert: London, UK*, 2016; Salman Elbedour, Robert Ten Benschel, and David T. Bastien, "Ecological Integrated Model of Children of War: Individual and Social Psychology", *Child Abuse & Neglect* 17, no. 6 (1993), pp. 805–19.

<sup>26</sup> Skye Wheeler, *"We Can Die Too": Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in South Sudan*, (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> ILO, "Wounded Childhood."

<sup>28</sup> Krijn Peters, "Group Cohesion and Coercive Recruitment: Young Combatants and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone", in Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder, eds., *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration*, (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 76–90.

<sup>29</sup> O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Rachel A. Gordon and others, "Antisocial Behavior and Youth Gang Membership: Selection and Socialization", *Criminology* 42, no. 1 (2004), pp. 55–88; Jody Miller, *One of the Guys: Girls, Gangs, and Gender* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Imran Awan, "Cyber-Extremism: Isis and the Power of Social Media", *Society* 54, no. 2 (2017), pp. 138–49; Galit M. Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story via Tumblr Analytics: Europe's Young Muslim Female Attraction to ISIS", *International Annals of Criminology* 56, no. 1–2 (2018), pp. 55–78; Revital Sela-Shayovitz, "Gangs and the Web: Gang Members' Online Behavior", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 28, no. 4 (2012), pp. 389–405; Sarah Womer and Robert J Bunker, "Sureños Gangs and Mexican Cartel Use of Social Networking Sites", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 1 (2010), pp. 81–94.

<sup>33</sup> O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

attitudes that experts have identified as fundamental needs, especially among adolescents.<sup>34</sup> Terrorist groups provide children and young adults with a way of contributing to what they see as the greater good and acquiring social recognition.<sup>35</sup>

## Association with and disengagement from the group

There is scant and fragmented information about the roles of children used by armed groups and the specific risks and rights violations they experience and to which they are vulnerable. Available evidence shows that both State and non-State armed groups have multiple reasons to recruit children, from compensating for a shortage of adults due to high casualty and defection rates<sup>36</sup> to the advantage of children have over adults as a cheap, expendable, adaptable, and malleable resource.<sup>37</sup> One of the most important findings of this body of literature is the common misconception that all children associated with such groups are ultimately used or trained for direct involvement in violence. While there is no lack of evidence about children's engagement in combat roles, large numbers of children are also exploited in support roles such as scouting, spying, acting as couriers at military checkpoints, taking supplies to the front line, and domestic work.<sup>38</sup>

While the experiences and roles of children in armed groups depend on how the group uses them, all studies concur that children undergo multiple and severe forms of physical and psychological violence during their association. Like criminal and armed groups, terrorist organizations show a capacity to get children and young adults to internalize certain modes of behavior. Significantly, one way of attaining cohesion around group-centered values is through violence or desensitization to violence. This process, as widely demonstrated in the anthropological and sociological literature, entails an intensive period of indoctrination or initiation intended to strengthen social bonds between group members and reinforce the friend-versus-enemy distinction.<sup>39</sup> Studies have also shed light on the use of drugs and alcohol within these groups to reduce fear of engaging in military action, curb inhibitions against killing, and instill obedience to the leader.<sup>40</sup>

According to the literature, the exit motives and modalities are often group- and context-specific, and vary depending on the social context in which disengagement occurs, the form of recruitment, and the vulnerabilities that a child experiences during association.<sup>41</sup> The scant available evidence on children's motivations for leaving armed groups, criminal groups, and terrorist groups pinpoints

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<sup>34</sup> Aubrey and others, *Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and Resilience to Recruitment by Violent Extremist Groups in Syria*, London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, International Alert; Michael J Gilligan, Prabin Khadka, and Cyrus Samii, "Intrinsic Social Incentives in State and Non-State Armed Groups", *American Political Science Review*, 2022, pp. 1–20; O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, pp. 57–58.

<sup>35</sup> Eli Berman and David D. Laitin, "Religion, Terrorism and Public Goods: Testing the Club Model", *Journal of Public Economics* 92, no. 10–11 (2008), pp. 1942–67.

<sup>36</sup> Alcinda Honwana, "Child Soldiers in Africa", in *Child Soldiers in Africa* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Mara Revkin and Ahmad Mhidi, "Quitting ISIS", *Foreign Affairs*, 1 May 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Vera Achvarina and Simon F Reich, "No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers", *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006), pp. 127–64; Roméo Dallaire, *They Fight like Soldiers, They Die like Children* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2011); International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), "Children Associated With Armed Forces or Armed Groups", ICRC, 2013, pp. 1323–1419; Mara Revkin, "I Am Nothing Without a Weapon: Understanding Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in Syria and Iraq", in O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

<sup>38</sup> O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*; Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*.

<sup>39</sup> Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, vol. 10 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003); Steve Decker, Scott H. Decker, and Barrick Van Winkle, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence* (Cambridge, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Cambridge University Press, 1996); Decker and Pyrooz, "I'm down for a Jihad."

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Coercion and Intimidation of Child Soldiers to Participate in Violence" (Human Rights Watch, 2008); Lotte Vermeij, "The Bullets Sound Like Music to My Ears" PhD dissertation, Wageningen University, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, pp. 74–76.

a few often interrelated motives for exiting: loss of faith in the group's cause or ideology, frustration or resentment at the group's leadership, an accumulation of traumatic experiences, and a change in the cost-benefit ratio (the cost associated with involvement may increase, or a child may become aware of the real risks connected with their association). Often the decision to exit can be summarized as the outcome of prolonged exposure to an accumulation of multiple factors to reach a trigger point that leads children to actively seek to disengage.<sup>42</sup>

Studies also show how several factors can jeopardize the chance of exiting a group. For example, recruiters and leaders often feed associated children with information, at times exaggerated, about their communities and families no longer wanting them, or summarily execute those who have tried to escape as a warning to the others.<sup>43</sup> Fear of retaliation from other group members, as observed among street gangs and other criminal groups, also appears to negatively affect disengagement from terrorist groups.<sup>44</sup> Here, leaving the group may not only expose relatives to revenge from other members but also expose those who disengage to the contempt and retribution of their own family who militate in the group.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the societal stigma against ex-fighters, rampant poverty, and unemployment can all make the likelihood of disengagement and reintegration less appealing.

These challenges and obstacles also contribute to significant rates of re-recruitment among children who have left. As the UNU report states, "children exiting an armed group ... may face the same conditions that made it difficult for them to avoid NSAG association in the first place (e.g., physical and economic coercion) ... Moreover, a child's time with a NSAG may have created or exacerbated certain conditions that make recidivism likely."<sup>46</sup>

## What do we still need to know?

The relevant literature reveals multiple key factors and processes that combine to determine children's association with, roles within, and exit from NSAGs including terrorist groups. To date, however, there are still gaps in our understanding of the peculiarities and specificities that determine children's association with terrorist groups and how these affect their experiences and trajectories. Various factors contribute to this gap in specific knowledge:

- The challenges of collecting data in contexts of high insecurity
- The ongoing evolution of recruitment tactics used by the groups, exit opportunities available to children, rehabilitation and reintegration interventions proposed by States, and
- A reluctance to address the situation of children associated with these groups separately from their association with other armed groups and organized criminal groups.

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<sup>42</sup> David C. Pyrooz, Gary Sweeten, and Alex R. Piquero, "Continuity and Change in Gang Membership and Gang Embeddedness", *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 50, no. 2 (2013), pp. 239–71; Terence P. Thornberry and others, *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective* (Cambridge: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>43</sup> Bernd Beber and Christopher Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion", *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013), pp. 65–104; Human Rights Watch, "Coercion and Intimidation of Child Soldiers to Participate in Violence," Background briefing, April 2008.

<sup>44</sup> O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

<sup>45</sup> For a comparison with mafia-style group see, for example, Anna Sergi and Anita Lavorgna, *Ndrangheta: The Glocal Dimensions of the Most Powerful Italian Mafia* (Basingstoke, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, p. 76.

The last point merits particular attention. Previous studies have warned against the risks and dangers of studying child association with terrorist groups.<sup>47</sup> Some highlight the difficulty of accurately measuring ill-defined and inherently political and contested terms such as terrorism;<sup>48</sup> others point out the many moral and policy pitfalls arising from this discourse<sup>49</sup> and the way in which terrorism designations are abused by some governments to suppress opposition and restrict civic space.<sup>50</sup> All critiques converge on one core point: many depictions of these groups and the role of children in them are simplistic at best and outright dangerous at worst.

The use of the term “terrorist groups” is criticized for wrongly suggesting that they are a homogeneous and coherent group of organizations that are different from other armed groups and organized criminal groups, while tending to overlook the analogies and overlap between the phenomena of terrorism, crime and conflict. These mistaken assumptions are often used to justify exceptional legal and policy responses, disregarding important lessons learned in other areas of policy intervention and can be used to override well-established principles of human rights and international humanitarian law.<sup>51</sup>

As a consequence, the focus on terrorist groups can also lead to neglecting the analysis of States’ action and impact on the phenomenon of child association. Furthermore, it is argued that taking at face value categories such as ‘terrorism’ and ‘violent extremism’ “obscures important local dynamics [especially the role of crime or pre-existing conflicts over natural resources, livestock, or identity] and may lead to the development of incomplete, inadequate or counterproductive solutions.”<sup>52</sup>

This research is framed by an understanding that the use of categories such as “terrorist” has a notable impact on how associated children are treated by the State. They are not only treated according to exceptional laws and policies related to counter-terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism but also often labelled “terrorists” themselves. In addition, security practices and their interaction with pre-existing grievances can further influence recruitment patterns and motivations. For all these reasons it is important to explore the application of these categories to the phenomenon of children’s association, to analyze its consequences, and to explore how children themselves understand, participate in and are affected by such categorization.

Robust and comprehensive studies of children’s experiences of recruitment and exploitation in such contexts are rare, often focusing on NSAGs in general or criminal groups,<sup>53</sup> and the few that exist seldom document the differences between these and groups categorized as “terrorist.”<sup>54</sup> None of these studies have combined evidence-based empirical research with a comprehensive

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<sup>47</sup> Harmonie Toros, “We Don’t Negotiate with Terrorists! Legitimacy and Complexity in Terrorist Conflicts”, *Security Dialogue* 39, no. 4 (2008), pp. 407–26.

<sup>48</sup> Alex Schmid, “Terrorism: The Definitional Problem”, *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 36 (2004), pp. 375.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Richard Jackson and others, *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing) 2011).

<sup>51</sup> O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

<sup>52</sup> Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni and others, “Mali’s Young ‘Jihadists’ Fuelled by Faith or Circumstance?”, Institute for Security Studies Policy Brief, 2016, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Siobhan O’Neil, ‘Trajectories of Children into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups’, in O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

<sup>54</sup> Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair, and Chad Hazlett, “Beset on All Sides: Children and the Landscape of Conflict in North East Nigeria” (Tokyo, UNU, 2018).

comparative analysis of three in-depth case-studies embodying both conflict and non-conflict contexts in different regions of the world.

This research initiative intends to fill this gap and addresses the conceptual risks of focusing on terrorist groups by:

- Adopting an empirically grounded approach to the use of terrorist groups that recognizes the inherent limitations of this terminology, while at the same time acknowledging that definitions of terrorist acts in international law which denote certain elements as characteristic (though not unique) to terrorist groups may help to frame the specificity of the experience of children associated with these groups.
- Interrogating the specific consequences of adopting this terminology when children are affected by recruitment and exploitation, and exploring children's agency in this context and the influence of the category of "terrorist" on their experiences.
- Including States' responses to terrorism and child association with terrorist groups as an object of the analysis while also accounting for the impact of local dynamics on State practices.
- Investigating, rather than denying or avoiding, the notable overlap and commonalities between terrorism, criminality, and armed conflict when it comes to children's recruitment and exploitation.

This study aims to provide an in-depth and comparative study of child association with terrorist groups and to analyze contexts where there is armed conflict and those where there is not. It is the first study of this kind in this field and its unique comparative perspective provides a nuanced and varied picture of this very complex phenomenon, which is necessary to promote comprehensive and evidence-based responses, ensuring that children's rights are fulfilled, respected, and protected, and public safety is secured.

## 1.3 The project

Building on its dual mandate to counter terrorism and end violence against children, UNODC has delivered specialized technical assistance to countries facing the phenomenon of child association with terrorist groups since 2015. Its work has focused on recognizing that children associated with these groups are primarily victims and promoting a common approach and coherent strategies for preventing and responding to violence committed against children.

Technical assistance in this area is often limited by the lack of relevant data on the phenomenon, the ways it affects children specifically, and the effectiveness and limitations of responses that have been adopted in different contexts. Indeed, while security concerns associated with terrorism increase the need to act with urgency, at the same time they limit the possibility of gathering and analyzing meaningful evidence.

The present research helps to fill this gap by contributing to the understanding of the complex challenges raised by children's recruitment and exploitation by groups that fall under the category of "terrorist." It is carried out by UNODC under the project STRIVE Juvenile: Preventing and Responding to Violence against Children by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups. Funded by the European Union, STRIVE Juvenile is a five-year initiative (2021-2025) aiming to improve

government strategies, policies and mechanisms related to the recruitment and exploitation of children by terrorist groups and to increase vulnerable children's resilience to terrorist groups' agendas in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria.

Within this framework, the study sets out to address two main research questions:

- 1** What are the specific protection challenges arising from children's association with, experiences within and exit from terrorist groups?
- 2** What policies and practices exist that address children's association with terrorist groups and what are their repercussions?

The project connects gender and other variables (e.g., age, origin, family relations, socioeconomic status) to obtain a comprehensive picture of children's association with terrorist groups, using comparable data from different case studies and contributing to the development of transferable knowledge on this subject. From here, through a process of grounded theory building,<sup>55</sup> the research addresses the following overlapping objectives:

- 1.** Provide a cross-regional and comprehensive analysis of child association with terrorist groups
- 2.** Contribute to strengthening strategies and policies related to child association with these groups to overcome the dichotomy between security and child rights

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<sup>55</sup> Grounded theory building is a systematic methodology involving the construction of hypotheses and theories through the collection and analysis of data.

2

# Research design



# 2. Research design

## 2.1 Research objectives, scope, and terminology

**T**he objective of this study is to inform policymakers and justice, security and child-protection professionals and humanitarian and development actors about the protection risks faced by children in the context of their association with terrorist groups, and to provide robust evidence on how rehabilitation and reintegration interventions can be improved.

It should be noted that this study relies on disputed terminology. The term “children,” in accordance with article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), refers to all human beings under the age of 18, regardless of their level of maturity. However, local and community-based understandings may substantially diverge from international parameters for defining childhood.<sup>56</sup> Throughout the text we use the internationally recognized definition of “child” in operational terms to delineate our research focus and on the basis that all persons under 18 years of age are entitled to a specific set of rights as per the CRC. However, the discrepancy was taken into consideration during data collection and is made transparent in the analysis with a view to providing more tailored policy recommendations.

While there is no consensus on the definition of what “association” entails, the term “children associated”, derives from the Paris Principles<sup>57</sup> and is used also in Security Council Resolution 2396 (2017).<sup>58</sup> Its use here is designed to highlight the overlap between child association with armed groups and their association with terrorist groups, recognizing that the latter is not a new phenomenon. The term “associated” is intended to be neutral and does not suggest that the children are criminally liable. The focus of this research is on children associated with these groups because they are especially likely to be perceived as security threats and to be affected by specific laws and policies related to terrorism and violent extremism. On this basis, children *associated with* terrorist groups are those come under one or both of the two categories below:

- c.** Children recruited and exploited by terrorist groups: children are recruited by terrorist groups and exploited in a variety of roles that serve the groups’ purposes, including combat and support roles. As a result of their recruitment and as part of their exploitation the children may at times be involved in acts that pose a security threat and/or constitute an offence, including terrorism-related offences.

<sup>56</sup> Iman Hashim and Dorte Thorsen, for example, in *Child Migration in Africa* (London, Zed Books, 2011) show that the Western classification of “childhood” is of little use in many African societies where adulthood is embedded in social relations and generational hierarchies rather than chronological age and cognitive development.

<sup>57</sup> United Nations General Assembly, The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007).

<sup>58</sup> SCR 2396 (2017), paras. 31 and 36.



- d. Children linked to the foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) phenomenon: this category includes children who have travelled outside their country of origin – either alone or with family members - to join terrorist groups; and children who are living or were born in areas outside their country of origin that are under the control of terrorist groups. While not all children associated with the FTF phenomenon have been recruited into the groups and take part in their activities, they are all likely to be perceived as potential security threats, and to have their treatment defined by the counterterrorism policy agenda.

Although this study addresses children associated with terrorist groups, it is also relevant to young adults in similar conditions. Current research shows that “[this] cohort suffers similar disruptions to their social, emotional, and educational development as children, but they receive less legal leniency and often less programmatic support, while shouldering greater responsibilities and expectations.”<sup>59</sup> Additionally, there is a numerically consistent group of individuals recruited and exploited as children who exited the group as (young) adults.<sup>60</sup> For all of these reasons, the transition of teenage children into adulthood in this context can be especially sensitive and should be considered an important factor in rehabilitation and reintegration.

This study recognizes the limitations of the terminology related to terrorism. While international law fails to provide a comprehensive and universally accepted definition of what terrorism entails, it is however useful to identify the core characteristics of “terrorist acts,” which are generally identified as acts that constitute offences intended to cause death or injury and are committed with intent to intimidate a population, government or international organization.<sup>61</sup> It also clarifies that terrorism is not and should not be “associated with any religion, nationality or civilization.”<sup>62</sup>

However, these core characteristics of terrorist acts do not lead to the identification of a coherent and comprehensive “terrorist groups” category. The United Nations only lists a subset of terrorist groups, notably those associated with Da’esh and Al-Qaida.<sup>63</sup> In light of the limitations inherent in this classification, it is important to reiterate here that this research seeks neither to delegitimize other forms of categorization nor to take international or State categories for granted. Indeed, international and State categories do not necessarily resonate with local categories and contexts. For these reasons, the focus of this study is entirely empirical. Categories such as “terrorist” are empirically grounded on States’ and policymakers’ understanding and classification of certain groups. This allows us to avoid naturalizing political categories, while also recognizing how these categories give rise to specific legal, policy and programme interventions. Children’s association with other NSAGs and criminal groups appears throughout the study as contrasting cases that help us to understand the specificity of these groups as well as to appreciate shared features.

Finally, this study discusses State responses to this phenomenon and children’s experiences of these, particularly with reference to rehabilitation and reintegration processes. These terms

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<sup>59</sup> O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, 243.

<sup>60</sup> However, there is no universal definition of “young adults.” As such, the definition is adapted to the national contexts where the research activities were conducted, “flexibility is essential when seeking to reflect the diverse constructions of youth in a given country ... Flexibility allows to better include traditionally underserved youth and professionals or experts up to 35 years old.” UNESCO, *Meaningfully engaging with youth, Guidance and training for UN staff* (Paris, 2019)

<sup>61</sup> Art 2, International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (December 1999).

<sup>62</sup> Preamble, S/RES/2178 (2014).

<sup>63</sup> See S/RES/2610 paras 1–4.

tend to be used very differently according to their context and target population. For the sake of clarity, the present research defines these terms as follows:<sup>64</sup>

- “Rehabilitation” is used to indicate medical and psychological care and identification of the required legal and social services to be provided to child victims of recruitment and exploitation by terrorist groups to help them recover from physical and psychological harm.<sup>65</sup>
- “Reintegration” refers to the safe process through which a child transitions back into the community, achieves physical and psychological recovery and acquires attitudes and behaviors conducive to his or her assuming a constructive role in society. Such reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the child’s health, self-respect, and dignity.<sup>66</sup>

## 2.2 Data Collection, methodology and limitations

Field research for the STRIVE Juvenile project was carried out from November 2021 to June 2022 in Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria. Information was collected from a variety of stakeholders including representatives of international organizations, researchers, and adults who had been associated with terrorist groups in their childhood. Local research partners, the Habibie Centre, Social Inquiry, and the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, offered their expertise for this task. A predominantly qualitative methodological approach that merged primary and desk-based data collection was adopted. The research was inductive and flexible, taking cues from the field context to identify trends and form theoretical frameworks. This information was complemented and triangulated with a literature review relying on existing robust studies in each case-study country.

During the data collection and analysis, the focus was on identifying control groups, comparing child association with terrorist groups to their involvement with criminal groups and NSAGs not classified as terrorist. This allowed for an understanding of how the groups’ treatment of associated children affects their experiences, as well as of the impact of the “terrorist” label itself. This approach also permitted identification of the overlap between child association with terrorist groups and that with other organizations.

Children’s association with State-aligned armed groups (Nigeria)<sup>67</sup> and criminal groups (Indonesia), as contrasting cases, was addressed in the study and in the course of the data collection and helped to provide a better grasp of the specificity of terrorist groups and to appreciate shared features. In Iraq, the research team decided not to interview individuals associated with groups other than Da’esh due to a number of political and security considerations. To this end the research team chose the Yezidi community associated with Da’esh as a control group to the main research focus, namely children from Sunni communities. Far from creating a methodological limitation,

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<sup>64</sup> UNODC, *Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Victims of Recruitment and Exploitation by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: A Training Manual* (Vienna, 2019).

<sup>65</sup> Adapted from the definition of rehabilitation provided in UNODC, “Justice in Matters involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime: Model Law and Related Commentary” (Vienna, 2009). See p. 58 of the commentary in reference to article 29 (7) (c). It also takes into account the provisions of article 7 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

<sup>66</sup> This definition has been adapted from article 39 and 40 of the CRC taking into account UNICEF, *The Paris Principles*.

<sup>67</sup> A variety of terms are used to define groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). Lately these have been categorized as “community security actors” in a United Nations University report, see: Kato Van Broeckhoven and others, “Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria,” MEAC Findings Report 18 (New York: UNU, 2022).

this choice provided a closer look into how the terrorist label and counter-terrorism efforts have resulted in differentiated representation and policies from both State and non-State actors.

## **Data collection, chronological scope, and triangulation**

Two distinct groups of research participants were interviewed for the field research, with guidelines, guiding questions, and methods of analysis tailored to each group. The first group included young women and men who had been under 18 at the time of their association with terrorist groups, selected and accessed via referrals from civil society actors working with them. The second group consisted of key informants including researchers; representatives of international, national and local humanitarian and development organizations; security and justice actors; local community actors such as religious and community leaders; and members of the families of those associated with the groups. Attempts were made to interview both women and men.

National research partners were engaged, with solid field experience, existing contacts and fluency in the local languages. Interviews were conducted in two distinct phases in each country. The first phase involved interviewing key informants with the objective of obtaining as much information as possible from this less-vulnerable group. Key informants were selected on the basis of their knowledge of and expertise on the subject under study. The second phase focused on interviewing young adults who had been children at the time of their association with terrorist groups. The aim here was not to be comprehensive, but rather to supplement the data collected from key informants with unique insights and perspectives from young people with direct experience of child association. This approach enabled the research teams to gain an understanding of individual experiences, identify overlooked issues, and bridge knowledge gaps.

Interview transcripts were analyzed by the research team using inductive methods, notably thematic content analysis and narrative inquiry. Thematic content analysis is a research method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within data. In this study, the method involved examining the transcripts to identify recurring topics and ideas and group these into overarching themes that capture the essence of children's association with terrorist groups. Using this approach, the team organically identified common themes and patterns, extracting core principles from the diverse contexts and situations the children had faced. This facilitated the merging of theory with empirical insights.

Narrative inquiry, an approach centered on understanding and interpreting individuals' stories or accounts of their experiences, was also applied. Beyond mere facts, this approach delves into the personal and often emotional aspects of narratives, aiming to comprehend the meanings and construction the informant ascribes to his or her experiences. This method was especially valuable when interviewing those formerly associated with terrorist groups. It provided insights into how these young adults both internally and externally represented their childhood experiences. From this analysis, the varied ways in which they discussed their experiences, the moral and symbolic interpretations they derived from their associations, and variations based on age and gender became evident.

One significant limitation of this study concerns the reliability of the narratives collected from individuals formerly associated with these groups. The retrospective nature of their accounts,

coupled with potential reluctance to disclose extreme beliefs or serious violations, raises concerns about accuracy. Moreover, the potential for physical or emotional distress while recounting these experiences cannot be overlooked. This created a risk of collecting incomplete or misleading information. Despite these caveats, the emerging trends align with the key informants' reports and prior research on similar populations in the case-study countries.

Another limitation relates to the sample size and composition. The qualitative findings, while indicative of trends within the locations and communities sampled, cannot be deemed statistically representative of all children's association with groups such as Da'esh and Boko Haram. Furthermore, the experiences of girls associated with these groups are notably underrepresented or absent, as in Indonesia and Iraq respectively, due to factors including access, security, and cultural barriers. Nonetheless, the application of multiple entry points, data triangulation strategies, and a multi-scale methodology enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings, mitigating the risk of circular reasoning.

The research combined analysis of primary data obtained through interviews with a comprehensive review of grey literature and secondary sources. These sources included national laws, governmental and non-governmental reports, academic studies, and, where no other sources were available, news media articles.

All sources on child association with "terrorist" groups and other relevant data and information in the regions under study covering the period 2010 –2022 - and 2023 as they become available – fall within the scope of the research, with less recent sources included where relevant. The relative reliability of different sources was taken into account in the process of weighting and triangulating information, according to whether they were based on empirical research, official data, or other methods or sources.

Data and information from the diverse sources were triangulated to cross-reference, compare, and contrast findings from different methods. Triangulation aimed to validate the information and to approach the research question from varied angles. For instance, details from interviews might align with or differ from data derived from document analysis or statistics. Such discrepancies required a dialogue between methods and contemplation of the significance given to each source and instrument. In instances where triangulating specific data was not feasible due to an absence of alternate sources, this information was still integrated into the analysis. However, confirmation that data from other sources was not attainable was clearly indicated.

During the analysis phase, participatory methods were also applied to validate research findings with stakeholders and relevant experts, including a scientific advisory committee. The research was assessed and validated by key counterparts in each selected country. Detailed documentation of these processes combined with collaborative analysis across the field studies allowed the team to define a series of principles for understanding the phenomenon.

# Indonesian data

In Indonesia, the Habibie Centre, one of the UNODC research partners for this study, focused on children associated with terrorist groups including Negara Islam Indonesia (NII) or Darul Islam Indonesia (DI),<sup>68</sup> Jemaah Islamiyah (JI),<sup>69</sup> Mujahidin Tanah Runtuh (MTR),<sup>70</sup> Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT),<sup>71</sup> Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD),<sup>72</sup> Anshor Daulah Islamiyah (ADI),<sup>73</sup> Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT),<sup>74</sup> Al Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant, also known as Jabhat Al-Nusra (JN),<sup>75</sup> and Da'esh. A total of 70 interviews were conducted with individuals formerly associated with terrorist groups during their childhood and key informants including relatives. The research covered four regions: Jakarta, Solo-Central Java, Medan-North Sumatra, and Poso-Central Sulawesi. As the administrative and political center of Indonesia, Jakarta was chosen for an overview of current counter-terrorism and child protection policies and practices. Solo, Medan, and Poso were selected for their relevance: data from Special Detachment 88 of the National Police shows that around 41% of children alleged to have committed terrorism-related offences between 2010 and 2021 came from these three areas.<sup>76</sup>

## Overview of interviewees in Indonesia

▼ Table 1  
**No. of adults associated as children interviewed (Indonesia)**

Adults associated as children	Jakarta	Solo-Central Java	Medan-North Sumatra	Poso-Central Sulawesi	Total
Men	1	4	3	5	13
Women	1	0	1	0	2

<sup>68</sup> Not listed as a terrorist organization by the United Nations Security Council, see <https://scsanctions.un.org/z9888en-all.html#alqaedaent>.  
<sup>69</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde.092).  
<sup>70</sup> Not listed as a terrorist organization by the United Nations Security Council.  
<sup>71</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde.133).  
<sup>72</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde.164).  
<sup>73</sup> Not listed as a terrorist organization by the United Nations Security Council.  
<sup>74</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde.150).  
<sup>75</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde.137).  
<sup>76</sup> Directorate of Identification and Socialization, Special Detachment 88 (2022). Speech, focus group discussion, May 24, 2022.

▼ Table 2  
**No. of key informants interviewed (Indonesia)**

Key informants	Jakarta	Solo-Central Java	Medan-North Sumatra	Poso-Central Sulawesi	Total
Professionals, e.g. child rights specialist, CSO representatives, security and government actors, media, etc.	14	14	13	10	51
Family members of formerly associated individuals	0	1	0	3	4

## Iraqi data

In Iraq, the UNODC research partner Social Inquiry investigated how and why children became associated with and later disengaged from terrorist groups, focusing on Da’esh.<sup>77</sup> To explore these issues in detail and ensure some level of diversity among the experiences captured, the geographic scope of the research focused on areas significantly impacted by the Da’esh conflict, including the “disputed territories”<sup>78</sup>. The research team conducted interviews in Mosul and Tal Afar districts in Ninewa Governorate; Tikrit, Shirqat, and Tooz districts in Salah al-Din Governorate; and Kirkuk and Hawija districts in Kirkuk Governorate, selected for their existing networks and depth of experience of the pre- and post-Da’esh conflict dynamics. The selection was also influenced by access and security constraints within these governorates which ensured the safety of both the researchers and the research participants. Data was collected from key informants working in Baghdad, the national capital, and in Erbil, the capital of the KRG between May and July 2022. This involved a total of 62 participants: 40 key informants and 22 young adults who had been associated with Da’esh or other armed groups as children. All the interviewees formerly associated with Da’esh belonged to Sunni communities. Information about Yezidi children was extrapolated from interviews with key informants and secondary sources.

<sup>77</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the Security Council ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde.115).

<sup>78</sup> Labelled as such in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution due to their still-undefined administrative status, the borderland areas south of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in the four governorates of Ninewa, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala are inhabited by Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Assyrians, Yezidis, and other ethnic minorities. During the Ba’athist regime these territories were intensely Arabized: in successive waves, Arab settlers from central and southern Iraq replaced and persecuted Kurds and Turkmens, who were forced to flee in large numbers. In post-2003 Iraq, ethnic contention resurfaced. As children’s association with Da’esh and reintegration into society is influenced by a wide range of different factors including ethnicity and community of origin, disputed territories are extremely relevant to this research.

## Overview of Interviewees in Iraq

▼ Table 3

### No. of adults formerly associated as children interviewed (Iraq)

Individuals formerly associated	Ninewa	Salah al-Din	Kirkuk	Total
Associated with Da'esh as children (boys)	4	13	4	<b>21</b>
Associated with other armed actors as children (boys)	0	1	0	<b>1</b>

▼ Table 4

### No. of key informants interviewed (Iraq)

Key informants	Ninewa	Salah al-Din	Kirkuk	Erbil	Baghdad	Total
Professionals, e.g., child rights specialist, CSOs, security and governmental actors, media, etc.	6	2	2	6	14	<b>30</b>
Community representatives and religious leaders	0	2	1	0	0	<b>3</b>
Family members of individuals formerly associated	3	2	2	0	0	<b>7</b>

## Nigerian data

The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR), a UNODC research partner, conducted field research between March and April 2022 in the three north-eastern Nigerian States of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, which have been most affected by terrorism and violent extremism since 2009, particularly from Boko Haram.<sup>79</sup> A total of 92 interviews with key informants and affected people and four focus group discussions were conducted across the three States. The questions mainly focused on pre-identified key factors that drive and enable children's association with terrorist groups. Interviewees included security and child rights professionals; public servants, justice actors in civil society; media (journalists); officials at Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps; children formerly associated and child members of civilian joint task forces, hunter groups and vigilante groups (now over 18 years old), and religious leaders.

### Overview of Interviewees in Nigeria

#### ▼ Table 5

##### No. of adults associated as children interviewed (Nigeria)

Formerly associated individuals	Adamawa	Borno	Yobe	Total
Men	3	10	2	15
Women	8	5	1	14

#### ▼ Table 6

##### No. of key informants interviewed (Nigeria)

Key Informants	Adamawa	Borno	Yobe	Total
Professionals (e.g. child rights specialist, CSOs, security and governmental actors, media, etc.)	11	20	22	53
Community representatives and religious leaders	3	12	6	21
Family members of individuals formerly associated	0	8	1	9
Individuals who were adults at the time of their association with other NSAGs, e.g. civilian joint task forces, hunter groups, vigilante groups	3	3	3	9

<sup>79</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde.138). The splinter Boko Haram faction ISWAP (QDe.162) is also listed by the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee.



## 2.3 About the Case-studies

The three partner countries were selected based on the following criteria: potential for maximizing national ownership; added value; effectiveness and sustainability of the proposed activities; and opportunities for exerting influence at regional and global levels, while also considering how the countries are affected by or at considerable risk from children's association with groups listed by national authorities as terrorist groups.<sup>80</sup>

The countries were also chosen because they share enough similarities and differences to make a comparison propitious for drawing wider conclusions about the nature of the phenomenon in a broad context. Terrorist activity that occurs within Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria and/or is perpetrated by nationals of these countries involves multiple groups which: have been classified by the relevant national governments as "terrorist"; have modus operandi that include child recruitment; and are active beyond national borders. The case of Indonesia, however, is different from those of Nigeria and Iraq for two main reasons. First, unlike the other two countries,<sup>81</sup> child association with terrorist groups in Indonesia does not occur in a setting internationally recognized as affected by armed conflict, and second, the country has been dealing with the consequences of a large flux of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) having left the national territory to join Da'esh in Iraq and Syria, at times accompanied by family members including children.

The objective in developing these case studies is not to make direct comparisons but to draw out key shared characteristics from diverse contexts and to link theory to empirical insights. The study aims to demonstrate differences at national and local levels to challenge the perspective that this is a global or homogenous phenomenon. Mapping the scope, the nature, and the dynamics of child association with terrorist groups in these different countries has generated a unique dataset. The research methodology therefore allows for the collection of meaningful and comparable data that can be used beyond national borders. Comparisons across countries assist with assessing existing approaches to child protection and counter-terrorism, and with understanding whether there is utility in further tailoring them to the needs of children associated with groups categorized as terrorist by the States in which they operate.

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<sup>80</sup> For country eligibility criteria, see Description of the Action - STRIVE Juvenile: Preventing and Responding to Violence Against Children by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups.

<sup>81</sup> The situations in both Iraq and Nigeria have been recognized as non-international armed conflict. See Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), "Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 5 June to 5 July 2014" (Geneva and New York, OHCHR, 2014), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53ce0f0d4.html>; International Criminal Court, Office of the Prosecutor, "Report on Preliminary Examination Activities 2013" (The Hague, International Criminal Court, 2013), paras. 214–218

## 2.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the focus and goal of this study, the research was carried out in a delicate field where ethical and safety issues are of the utmost importance. To address these issues, during research activities both simple data and sensitive data were collected. The latter, as data whose processing could entail greater risk to the respondent, required a greater level of protection by researchers. However, as these two data categories are often blended in the field, all data was treated as sensitive. All necessary procedures were followed to protect the confidentiality of research participants and the privacy of both team members and key informants. The anonymity of interviewees was preserved and precautions were taken during data collection, storage, and sharing to ensure their safety as well as the safety of the members of the research team.

Detailed risk assessments were conducted of the selected research sites and secure, confidential locations for interviewing were identified. Risk was also offset by the inclusion of research teams with substantial research experience at the selected research sites. On a few occasions, when the security situation deteriorated team members had recourse to web-based interviews to carry out the investigation. Despite the use of pseudonyms and other precautions, interviewees who benefit from a certain visibility in the media could be identified from other information that might be published. This possibility was discussed with them and their fully informed consent to go ahead with data gathering was obtained. Information on potential misuse of the published data was included in an information sheet provided to research participants.

Empirical data was collected via semi-structured interviews with both key informants and, where possible, individuals formerly associated with the above-mentioned groups. Engaging with conflict- or violence-affected children as research subjects raises serious concern about the possibility of secondary victimization, increasing their vulnerability vis-à-vis security actors, and exposing them to stigmatization and discrimination in their local communities. Ethical standards have been consistently respected throughout the research; furthermore, the research activities refrained from involving children and engaged only with adults who had been children at the time of their association with terrorist groups.

# 3

## Case study I: Indonesia



# 3. Case study I: Indonesia

## 3.1 Introduction

Over the past decades Indonesia has faced waves of terrorist violence. Since the 2002 Bali bombing,<sup>82</sup> networks of individuals belonging to groups listed as terrorist have drawn the attention of media, academic, and policy circles.<sup>83</sup> Yet it is only during the last few years that the phenomenon of child recruitment by such groups has gained visibility and recognition, with the 2018 Surabaya attack<sup>84</sup> marking a turning point.

The bombings employed entire families, including children used as suicide bombers, and demonstrated the striking extent to which children can be victimized through their association with terrorist groups. In parallel, data emerged concerning hundreds of Indonesian children (or children born abroad to Indonesian parents) linked with the FTF phenomenon. The question of their repatriation, treatment and reintegration has revealed challenges for the government in dealing with their legal status, addressing their experiences of violence, and fostering their peaceful return to society.

Studies focused on child association with terrorist groups in Indonesia are limited<sup>85</sup> and the phenomenon is under-investigated or altogether unresearched. In May 2021, an UNODC technical assessment in Indonesia revealed substantial gaps in data and research on the phenomenon of child association with terrorist groups in the country,<sup>86</sup> especially in relation to the context and drivers of recruitment of children into these groups and their exit patterns; children's experiences within these groups; the perceptions and needs of local communities with respect to children who return from such groups; and the effectiveness of existing rehabilitation and reintegration programmes in relation to children. This lack of data and research constitutes a complex and pressing challenge for the Government of Indonesia and for the professionals tasked with supporting such children.

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<sup>82</sup> BBC News, "The 12 October 2002 Bali Bombing Plot", 11 October 2012.

<sup>83</sup> The WAHID Institution, *Revisiting the Problems of Religious Intolerance, Radicalism and Terrorism in Indonesia: a Snapshot*, 2014.

<sup>84</sup> BBC News, "Surabaya attacks: Family of five bomb Indonesia police headquarters", 14 May 2018.

<sup>85</sup> See, among others, Julie Chernov Hwang and Kirsten E Schulze, "Why They Join: Pathways into Indonesian Jihadist Organizations," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 6 (2018) pp. 911–32; Iffat Idris, "Youth Vulnerability to Violent Extremist Groups in the Indo-Pacific," GSDRC Applied Knowledge Services, September 2018; Sidney Jones, "Inherited Jihadism: Like Father, Like Son," *Australian Financial Review* 4 (2007).

<sup>86</sup> Between 2020 and 2021, UNODC conducted a situation analysis to support implementation of the UNODC Roadmap on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups in Indonesia. The methodology included a desk review and interviews with a range of government officials, national human rights institutions, representatives of civil society organizations and of the international community, including UN entities. The key findings and recommendations of this report were discussed and validated by national counterparts at the STRIVE Juvenile Coordination Meeting held on 25 May 2021.

Over the years the government has devoted growing effort to addressing child association with terrorist groups.<sup>87</sup> This has been pursued through policy revisions and new programmatic interventions at the national level, as well as awareness-raising and advocacy efforts at the regional and global levels. UNODC has supported the government's efforts in this area since 2019. Against this background, the ultimate goal of the STRIVE Juvenile Indonesia case study is to provide relevant evidence that can be used to strengthen protection strategies, policies and measures related to child association with terrorist groups, with a focus on their rehabilitation and reintegration.

## 3.2 Terrorism and child recruitment in Indonesia: a brief historical overview

While the configuration and relative power of terrorist groups has evolved considerably in recent years, their roots can be located within the context of political and sectarian violence affecting Indonesia over the past few decades. After the fall of the New Order regime in 1998, the democratic transition coincided with the emergence of communal conflicts in several parts of Indonesia including West Kalimantan, Poso, the Moluccas, Lombok, Eastern Bali, and West and East Java. While the clashes escalated among faith-based factions on multiple occasions, scholars have cautioned against simplistic interpretation of these conflicts as arising from religious disputes, highlighting instead the complex dynamics between the demographic, economic, and institutional changes that were ongoing at the time.<sup>88</sup>

Significantly, the localized nature of the communal conflicts favored the recruitment of children by several groups that were later designated as terrorist groups by the national government.<sup>89</sup> The 1998–2001 conflict in Poso in Central Sulawesi provides an especially relevant example. Erupting as a form of political contestation within Indonesia's newly established democratic government, "with actors using religious and ethnic sentiments as vehicles for mobilization,"<sup>90</sup> the conflict in Poso can be divided into two periods: the communal conflict between Muslim and Christian communities between 1998 and the end of 2001, and the post-Malino-Agreement period from December 2001 to 2007, characterized by sporadic acts of violence perpetrated by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and similar groups.<sup>91</sup> Over time, the Poso conflict strengthened the relationship between some members of the local communities and insurgent/terrorist groups.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> In March 2020, UNODC, Indonesia and Japan organized a regional event bringing together high-level representatives from Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives and the Philippines to discuss child recruitment and its consequences for children's lives. Indonesia launched the "[Bali Call for Action](#)" at the event. Indonesia continued to lead regional initiatives in this area by co-sponsoring the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Statement on the Treatment of Children Recruited by or Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups. The National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism that Leads to Terrorism (PCVE) 2020–2024 prioritizes programmes for child rehabilitation and reintegration.

<sup>88</sup> See, for instance Jon Goss, "Understanding the 'Maluku Wars': Overview of Sources of Communal Conflict and Prospects for Peace", *Cakalele* 11, 2000; S. Sujarwoto, "Geography and Communal Conflict in Indonesia", *Indonesian Journal of Geography*, 49, no. 1, 2017; Y. Tajima, "The Institutional Basis of Intercommunal Order: Evidence from Indonesia's Democratic Transition", *American Journal of Political Science*, 57 no. 1, 2013, pp. 104–11; Gerry van Klinken, "Communal Conflict and Decentralisation in Indonesia" Occasional Paper no. 7, Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, last revised 3 Apr 2009.

<sup>89</sup> Muhammad Nasrum, "From Communal Conflicts to Terrorism in Poso, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia: A Shifting Terrain," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 11, no. 2 (2016) pp. 83–88.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>91</sup> For the history of the conflict in Poso, see among others Dave McRae, *A Few Poorly Organized Men: Interreligious Violence in Poso, Indonesia* (Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 2013). For an extensive review of JI's role in the radicalization of the Poso conflict see M. Karnavian, "Explaining Islamist Insurgencies: The Case of al-Jamaah al-Islamiyyah and the Radicalisation of the Poso Conflict, 2000–2007" (PhD dissertation, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2013).

<sup>92</sup> M. Karnavian, *Explaining Islamist Insurgencies*, 286–87.

While the groups provided local communities with ideological justification and material support in the form of weapons and ammunition, the communal conflict itself offered insurgent/terrorist groups a conducive environment in which to consolidate their power base.<sup>93</sup>

Today the most prominent terrorist groups in Indonesia are the al-Qaida-affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI),<sup>94</sup> Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT)<sup>95</sup> a JI splinter group, the Da'esh-affiliated group Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)<sup>96</sup> and Darul Islam Indonesia/DII, the underground movement of which JI was originally a splinter group.<sup>97</sup> JI carried out several terrorist attacks in the 2000s, most notably the 2002 Bali bombing that killed 202 people.<sup>98</sup> Other attacks attributed to JI include a hotel bombing in Jakarta in 2003, further bombings in Bali in 2005, and the 2009 bombings of the Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta.<sup>99</sup>

Da'esh itself has made inroads into and expanded its recruitment in the country.<sup>100</sup> In 2016, the bombing of a shopping mall in Jakarta was the first attack in Indonesia for which it claimed responsibility.<sup>101</sup> In May 2018, Da'esh-affiliated inmates launched a riot in a high-security prison facility. There were also several incidents involving the participation of entire families, including the Surabaya bombings. In May 2018, a series of terrorist attacks were carried out by Da'esh-affiliated members in churches and the police headquarters in Surabaya, the second largest city in Indonesia and the capital of East Java province, marking a new phase in terrorist acts in Indonesia: for the first time they were carried out by whole families and included the direct involvement of children.<sup>102</sup> Although a relatively small number of children in Indonesia have been convicted of terrorism-related offences in recent years, the 2018 attacks in Surabaya brought to light the extent to which children can be exploited to carry out terrorist acts, including by family members, and the consequences of violence in their lives.

Significantly for the national context, a large number of Indonesian citizens have travelled to Syria and Iraq to support Da'esh, the Al Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant,<sup>103</sup> and other designated terrorist groups. Children from Indonesia have travelled there alone or with parents and family; some were born abroad. As of July 2020, the National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) stated that there were 546 Indonesian children in Syria and Iraq, 3 in Afghanistan and 3 in the Philippines.<sup>104</sup> By 2020, 180 children who had been linked with the FTF phenomenon had

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<sup>93</sup> Studies warn against seeing the Poso communal conflict as the outcome of sectarian strife between Christian and Muslim groups, and suggest looking into the complex demographic, socioeconomic, and administrative changes that triggered the conflict. See, for example, M. Khairil, *The Transformation of the Symbolic Meaning of Radicalism in Acts of Terrorism Post-Conflict in Poso Central Sulawesi* (Amsterdam, Atlantis Press, 2017, 282–289).

<sup>94</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde. 092).

<sup>95</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde. 133).

<sup>96</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde. 164).

<sup>97</sup> Not listed as a terrorist entity to date.

<sup>98</sup> Counter-Extremism Project, "Indonesia: Extremism and Terrorism", 2020. Available at <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/indonesia>.

<sup>99</sup> Arsla Jawaid, "Indonesia and the Islamic State Threat", *The Diplomat*, 15 March 2017.

<sup>100</sup> M. Karnavian, *Explaining Islamist insurgencies*.

<sup>101</sup> Arsla Jawaid, A. "Indonesia and the Islamic State Threat".

<sup>102</sup> Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), "The Surabaya Bombings and the Future of ISIS in Indonesia," Report no. 51, seashawaii.org, 19 October 2018; US Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2018*, (Indonesia).

<sup>103</sup> Listed as a terrorist organization by the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in accordance with paragraph 13 of resolution 1822 (2008) and subsequent related resolutions (Qde. 137).

<sup>104</sup> Data provided to UNODC by Indonesia's National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) in March 2023.

been repatriated to Indonesia, mostly from Turkey but also from countries in East and Southeast Asia; 5 had died in Syria and Iraq and 22 had returned without formal support from the Indonesian authorities.<sup>105</sup> According to the NGO C-SAVE, 90 per cent of the returned children were aged under 12, and 10 per cent were between 13 and 17 years old.

As child recruitment has become progressively more visible within national borders, this new cross-border dimension has added to the complexity of the phenomenon, notably impacting State responses and rehabilitation and reintegration challenges.

### 3.3 Child association with terrorist groups

#### Pathways to involvement

Most of the young adults interviewed in Indonesia had been in their mid- to late teens when they were introduced to extremist groups operating within and outside the country. The majority had had some exposure to such groups since their early childhood and before an official connection was established. Many of these children from varied socioeconomic backgrounds and family setups had been indoctrinated at home through religious or political dialogue, stories, sermons, and formal education. Their upbringing reflected a prevailing pattern of association, largely influenced by family ideologies. This environment exposed them to a systematic recruitment process that often mirrored their parents' experience of joining a violent extremist circle, forming a family, and perpetuating group ideology.

#### A family matter

In Indonesia the family plays a crucial role in the process of association with terrorist groups. Scholars have coined the terms “multigenerational jihad”<sup>106</sup> and “inherited jihadism,”<sup>107</sup> indicating how many associated children are born into families who are already part of a network of violent extremist groups. The child's upbringing supports certain ideologies, leaders, and organizations. This socialization first occurs within the domestic sphere via religious or political discussions, bedtime stories, sermons and other audio-visual material aiming to communicate specific beliefs, values, and ideas.<sup>108</sup> This process exposes children to a structured and systematic recruitment system that often replicates the pattern their parents experienced: join a Jihadi community, marry, raise children, and socialize the new generations to the groups' ideologies and activities.

The decision to join a group, however, is rarely completely forced or imposed on children by their parents. It is a complex decision, a choice that children often make in consultation with their relatives, who themselves may not always have complied with family expectations. Mohammed

<sup>105</sup> Data provided to UNODC by BNPT in March 2023.

<sup>106</sup> Hwang and Schulze use this term to describe jihadism that continues in a family from generation to generation: J. C. Hwang and K.E. Schulze, “Why they join: Pathways into Indonesian Jihadist Organizations” *Terrorism & Political Violence*, 30, no. 6 (2018), pp. 911-932.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid; Sidney Jones, “Inherited Jihadism: Like Father, Like Son”, Crisis Group, 4 July 2007.

<sup>108</sup> See also M. Milla, N. Faturochman and D. Ancok, “The Impact of Leader-Follower Interactions on the Radicalization of Terrorists: A Case Study of the Bali Bombers”, *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 16, no. 2 (2013), pp. 92-100.

(not his real name),<sup>109</sup> a teenage boy interviewed for this research, was not sure about following his family and leaving Indonesia to join Da'esh in Syria:

” In 2015, our extended family [about 17 people] went to Syria to join Da'esh. Our family sold all our possessions to cover the cost of the journey to Syria. When they left, however, I didn't go, and stayed here. The reason is that I wasn't completely sure about moving to Syria ... After they left, I began to think that my not going along was a grave sin against my mother. For six months I thought about it and decided to follow my mother and family to Syria ... I got help from an uncle who also wanted to go to Syria. He helped me sell all that was left of my family's belongings before my departure. He also helped me to arrange my travel and my stay [in Syria].<sup>110</sup>

### From bedtime stories to schooling: the role of schools and religious study circles

Familial factors almost never stand alone; they are intertwined with other factors such as school and the social environment, peer pressure and social media, and with feelings of hatred, vengeance, and injustice as well as a sense of adventure, love for the community, and other prosocial emotions. Most of the associated individuals interviewed for this research had been taught at educational institutions affiliated to groups designated terrorist including Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), religious study groups (*pengajian*) or through extracurricular activities in public schools.

Groups such as Darul Islam Indonesia (DII), also known as Negara Islam Indonesia (NII), and Jemaah Islamiyah, often infiltrate public schools and intra-school religious organizations such as Rohis (*Rohani Islam*)<sup>111</sup> to screen for prospective recruits, thus using educational institutions as strategic recruitment centers. This way, schools and religious study groups (*pengajian*) are instrumentalized to teach children about values related to the specific ideology of the groups. Riski, a former prominent NII member interviewed for this research, described how he had replicated the way in which he had been approached himself when recruiting new members: “I was in contact with the people from NII when I was a child, and I decided to join the group during Rohis ... With [NII], I understood about anti-Pancasila,<sup>112</sup> anti-democracy and anti-government values, which stayed with me all the way once I was a teenager.”<sup>113</sup>

At first, the teaching is mostly around Islamic law, divinity, and creed. It can also involve a more mundane dimension, such as the prohibition on buying certain products such as beverages or food whose sales are said to be used to finance the war against Muslims. Over time, the material discussed in class begins to touch on issues of politics and the State, and escalates to fierce

<sup>109</sup> All interviewee names in this report are pseudonyms.

<sup>110</sup> Male #1, mid-teens at time of association, North-West Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Rohis is an organization that teaches Islamic morals and attitudes through study clubs and circles, often as extracurricular activities in junior high school and high schools. See Nata Abuddin, *Pembaruan pendidikan Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Prenadamedia Group, 2019).

<sup>112</sup> In August 1982, the New Order government implemented Pancasila as the nation's sole ideology (*azas tunggal*) applied to all social organizations including Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and others. See Sjafruddin Prawiranegara, “Pancasila as the Sole Foundation”, *Indonesia* 38 (October 1984), pp. 74–83; see also Michael Morfit, “Pancasila: The Indonesian State ideology according to the New Order Government”, *Asian Survey* 21, no. 8 (1981), 838–851.

<sup>113</sup> Male #7, elementary schoolchild at time of association, West Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.



criticism of the government and the political system. Lack of school supervision of the study sessions allows group members to infiltrate the class and select new recruits.

The allure of the group and its ideology, however, play out not only against the background of antisocial feeling. For many children, study sessions managed by JI or similar groups provide a sense of community and significance. Umi Hani, interviewed for this study, was born in North Sumatra and raised by a religious single mother. At around 13 years old, she started to criticize the government openly and refused to pay homage to the national flag. She took *bai'at* (pledged allegiance) to NII aged around 14 to 15 in the mid-1990s, and exited when she was 33 years old. She found joining the group easy: "They enter your mind when you have a really limited understanding of what is going on."<sup>114</sup> One of the best memories she had of that period was a strong feeling of Muslim sisterhood: "they teach you that 'your wealth is my wealth, my blood is your blood.' It gives you the feeling that you can truly count on your sisters, that there is no limit to our love for each other."

### Hanging out with friends

Schools and other educational institutions provide a conducive setting for terrorist groups to deliberately exploit children's strong need to belong and for group bonding. The research findings confirm previous studies about the strong influence of peer networks on group association, especially among teenagers.<sup>115</sup> For most of the interviewees formerly associated, whether they stayed in their country or travelled to join foreign groups recruitment was seldom disconnected from friendship, role models, social influence and other dynamics inherent to peer networks.

Across the three research locations – Solo, Poso, and Medan – the frequent interactions and strong bond among friends create a sense of commonality that exerts a powerful influence on children's actions and thoughts, at times even in the face of family opposition. Riski recalls how he would rely on friends and familiar faces to approach children and young adult recruits and encourage them to overcome any initial reticence to engage with a group notorious for its radical ideology and modus operandi.

” If there is no [basic understanding of religion], usually a playmate, people who need money, or people with debt are among the easiest targets. We ask them to chat, take them on a trip or treat them to a meal; it's a sign that the recruitment is going well and easily. <sup>116</sup>

Pressure to comply with or follow in the footsteps of role models is another crucial dimension that emerges from the interviews of those who entered terrorist groups as children. A case in point is the story of Tono, a boy from Medan who was initially exposed to terrorist groups through his friend Syawaluddin,<sup>117</sup> a vendor who owned a food store in Tono's neighborhood. In 2013, when Tono was 14 years old and Syawaludin twice that, they would often hang out chatting, smoking,

<sup>114</sup> Female #19, early teens at time of association, North Sumatra. Interview conducted in March 2022.

<sup>115</sup> Dustin Albert, Jason Chein, and Laurence Steinberg, "The Teenage Brain: Peer Influences on Adolescent Decision Making," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 2 (2013), pp. 114–20; O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

<sup>116</sup> Male #7, elementary schoolchild at time of association, West Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

<sup>117</sup> Male #17, early teens at time of association, North Sumatra. Interview conducted in March 2022.

and discussing issues related to Islam and politics, including the Syrian conflict and Da'esh. Once the conversation touched on jihad, and Syawaluddin showed Tono videos of what was happening in Syria with Da'esh. Tono admitted that he knew nothing about Islam:

” Because his speech was based on religion. I had not understood religion before. I could only read the Quran haltingly, and what he said was true. He directly cited Al Maidah: 44 “Whoever does not adhere to Allah’s law; he is an infidel.” So, I’m an infidel. I felt ashamed. From then on, I became interested in his teachings, including what he cited from surah Al Baqarah: 216, that “*kutiba ‘alaikumul qitaal*” means it is obligatory for you to fight. Is that the meaning of war? I then opened the book about Islam [to find the answer – oh yes! It means I should fight the *taghut* [demon]. So that’s the story – I joined the group.<sup>118</sup>

However, children do not just passively receive and respond to the influence of their peer groups. Interviews with research participants found that boys were able to negotiate the influence exerted by their friends.<sup>119</sup> For example, Tono had planned to participate in an attack on a police facility. However, disagreement arose when the group decided to carry out the attack on a significant religious holiday. Tono said:

” I should have joined them in the attack, but I disagreed with the timing ... I refused to do it. If they had agreed with me at that time, maybe I would have joined the action. So, the attack should have been carried out by four of us. As I disagreed, it involved only three people; one of them died at the site.<sup>120</sup>

Finally, peer dynamics can act as a deterrent to associating with violent extremist groups, although few respondents reported incidents of this. One who did is Kahfi,<sup>121</sup> who was detained in 2017 at the age of 17 due to his association with a terrorist group in Poso.

Several years earlier, Kahfi had been introduced to this group by his close friend Iqbal at what appeared to be an innocuous study session. At the time Kahfi believed that such sessions could deepen his understanding of Islam and agreed to participate. In time, however, both Kahfi and Iqbal discovered that their study group was being facilitated by Anshor Daulah Islamiyah (ADI), a group known to be affiliated to Da'esh. Kahfi, initially hesitant about his involvement, attempted to persuade Iqbal to stop attending the sessions.

However, as time progressed, the ADI anti-government rhetoric and ideology began to resonate with the two young boys. They had both witnessed harassment and abuse of their friends at the hands of the authorities during the communal conflict in Poso. Now, their shared resentment was recognized and valued.

<sup>118</sup> Male #17, early teens at time of association, North Sumatra. Interview conducted in March 2022.

<sup>119</sup> Although similar dynamics presumably occur among young girls, insufficient data was collected to allow meaningful conclusions to be reached on this.

<sup>120</sup> Male #17, early teens at time of association, North Sumatra. Interview conducted in March 2022.

<sup>121</sup> Male #13, mid-teens at time of association, Central Sulawesi. Interview conducted in March 2022.

## Political motives, conflict, and counter-terrorism

The evidence collected shows how terrorist groups recruited new members and expanded their sphere of influence by capitalizing on sociopolitical tensions amplified by local and international conflicts. Significantly, the majority of adults interviewed for this research who had been associated with terrorist groups as children indicated how their role models and view of the world had been deeply affected by events such as the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), the US and its allies’ “War on Terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of 9/11, and the conflict in Syria after the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011.

In the Indonesian context, the conflict in Poso in the early 2000s served as a catalyst of political grievances. A strong sense of injustice and desire for revenge lingered after the end of the conflict, partly due to the unfinished legal settlement of the communal conflicts. Poso interviewees shared the perception that the Muslim community had suffered most from the conflict. Iqbal felt that what he had experienced and witnessed in Poso during his childhood “could encourage other children to do the same later in life.”<sup>122</sup> Adi recounted a similar story. Living with his family near Poso, he did not find it difficult to join JI “because we were used to seeing injustice and violence”:

“ I was very young, 12 years old, and still attending junior high school [at the time of the conflict in Poso]. I lived in the village of X. This village had been hit hard by violence since the beginning of the conflict ... One thing I remember is the death of one of my best friends. He was shot and killed during the conflict. I also saw the corpses of many people from my village and other villages lying at the side of the road. The incident is firmly recorded in my memory, even to this day.<sup>123</sup>

As the conflict escalated, Adi and other children were invited by some religious leaders to be more proactive and join a group, which, they learned only a few years later, was JI:

“ We’d prepare stones and weapons to be used in battle... First we were assisted by the adults, then we became skilled at assembling traditional weapons, from catapults to dum-dums [the traditional Poso rocket] ... We knew that the *Ustadz* [religious masters] who led the recitation were from outside Poso and mostly from Java. I only found out when the Bali bombing incident was widely shown on national TV that the religious leaders preaching in their area were associated with JI.<sup>124</sup>

The feeling of being a victim of injustice extended well beyond the geographical zone and temporal window of the conflict, resonating powerfully in the collective imagination of many of those interviewed. Hatred of the police officers accused of murdering Muslim men and boys did not fade with the cessation of the riots in Poso. Not only did Adi continue to attend regular JI

<sup>122</sup> Male #24, preadolescent at time of association, Central Sulawesi. Interview conducted in March 2022.

<sup>123</sup> Male #9, preadolescent at time of association, Central Sulawesi. Interview conducted in March 2022.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

recitation activities twice a week, but over time he started putting into action what he had learnt during the first stages of the conflict: “I was chosen by the leaders to join the weapons and bomb assembly division. My bomb- and weapon-preparation skills were important; we needed to be ready in case of attack [from Christian groups and the government] ... The Muslims could fight with these weapons.”

Most importantly, the perception of being under attack also resonated outside Poso, in part fuelled by perceptions of the global war against terrorism.<sup>125</sup> This is clear from the words of Ibrahim, a man from Java who pledged allegiance to JI at the time of the communal conflict in Poso, when he was a teenager: “What we were hearing and telling each other was that we were under attack, and that the current government was so bad that it needed to be improved by means of *da’wah*,<sup>126</sup> both in writing and by means of *Jihad Fisabilillah*.”<sup>127</sup>

### Web magazines, chat rooms, and social media platforms

Finally, the evidence collected points to the use, especially by those operating outside the country, of the Internet and social media for recruitment purposes. Videos, messages, and memes circulate through social media, adapted and personalized by a community of boys and girls at ease with information and communications technology from a young age. All adults interviewed for this research who had been associated with (mostly) pro-Da’esh groups, or with Da’esh itself in Iraq or Syria as children, had gained information and knowledge about the groups from the Internet. Nina, a 16-year-old girl when she joined Da’esh in Syria, bringing her entire extended family, reported:

“ I started to feel lonely in the second grade of high school in 2014. My family was too busy with their business [her father was a civil servant]. I spent so much time on the Internet ... I found Diary of Muhajirah, a Facebook page that Da’esh used to spread its propaganda. From there I got to know many people and started to discuss Islamic teachings and a women-friendly country. This was all fake information about Syria as a promising country for Muslims: friendly to women, free education, more job opportunities, and easy access to public protection. But at the time I did not know that ... I ended up having many discussions and wanted to move to Syria.<sup>128</sup>

125 Scholars have pointed out how the fight against militant Islamism both within and outside conflict zones such as Poso has been exacerbated by the US agenda and its global war on terror. See, for example, Jayson Lamchek, “The Dangers of Human Rights-Compliant Counterterrorism: A Critical Review of the Indonesian Approach,” ANU College of Law Research Paper, no. 20.28 (Canberra, Australian National University, 2020); John Thayer Sidel, *The Islamist Threat in Southeast Asia: A Reassessment*, vol. 37 of Policy Studies (Washington, East-West Center, 2007).

126 Da’wa literally means “issuing a summons/invitation” and refers to the practice of encouraging people to live a more pious life in the name of Allah. Our research participants often used the term with its more peaceful connotation as opposed to violent jihad.

127 Male #4, mid-teens at time of association, Central Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

128 Female #2, mid-teens at time of association, West Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

Significantly, Da'esh's online content not only motivates children with the prospect of violence and armed jihad. Nina, for example, describes herself and her family as religiously moderate. Peaceful desires and ideals were often a powerful driver behind the appeal of these groups among the research participants. The propaganda spread on the Internet and social media was that what Da'esh and other groups were fighting for, and in part managing to establish, was, if not a paradise on earth, a very good approximation of it.

However, the data also shows how positive and prosocial motivations are not always easy to disentangle from more antisocial behavior involving violence and a desire for revenge. Some research participants stated that hatred and the idea of engaging in armed combat boosted their intention to join a group. Online information and socialization had a crucial role in amplifying these feelings and motivations. Musa, a boy who joined JI in about 2010 when he was still in his mid-teens, confirmed that a combination of feelings drove his desire to join JI:

” Most of us were young, and young people like something sensational and adventurous. We liked discussing hot topics related to bad governance in Indonesia, Muslim victimization, and surveillance of Muslim activities [on social media]. It ignited our anger and hatred. We felt like a community isolated and surrounded by enemies. That is why we dared to die for Muslims.<sup>129</sup>

## Vulnerability and roles in terrorist groups

### Children's roles in the organizations

Children carry out a variety of functions and roles in both Indonesia-based organizations and foreign groups, ranging from being used for terrorist actions such as suicide attacks and executions to working as porters, cooks, and informants. Although the patterns of child exploitation by these groups are highly complex and context-dependent, certain trends are discernible.

In the early stages of their association with groups operating in Indonesia, children are usually given simple tasks such as preparing food and drink, arranging logistics or distributing propaganda leaflets. Boys also play more active roles such as assembling weapons and explosives. Overall, the study found that Indonesian children are not generally used in fighting. This is a clear difference from groups operating outside Indonesia such as Da'esh in Syria and Iraq, where interviewees reported being required to take on combat positions when they were still children.

129 Male #20, mid-teens at time of association, Central Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

There are of course relevant exceptions; the notorious Surabaya attacks is one of these, but not the only one. According to Musa, a man interviewed for this research who had been associated with JI when he was a child, the group has a justification for this:

” The Prophet Muhammad disapproved of his companions under 12 years old conducting *amaliyah*.<sup>130</sup> Children are the parents’ responsibility, and it is obligatory for parents to raise their children in a righteous manner. But because [JI members] consider that the world is in a state of emergency, they legitimize the inclusion of children in terrorist attacks. Indonesia is in *darurat kufur* [an infidel emergency]. Children are used [to perpetrate attacks] because they look less suspicious than adults.<sup>131</sup>

Boys’ active participation in combat appears to be more common during a conflict. Male interviewees who experienced the Poso Communal Conflict were tasked with collecting stones, wood, bamboo, or other objects that could be used as weapons; some were even given combat roles. Engaging in active violence during childhood can also occur outside armed conflict as part of a new strategy that groups are employing to make their attacks more effective.

The story of Hasan, who was interviewed for this research, is a case in point.<sup>132</sup> In the early years of his association the boy joined NII and took part in liquor raids in a number of places in Java; he then left the group and joined JI, which sent him to another location to receive military training. While still a child, Hasan assembled explosives and planned terrorist attacks on a number of targets including civilians and the authorities. He was arrested just as he was about to carry out his plans. At 17 years old he was sentenced to several years in prison.

However, the majority of our research participants who joined Indonesia-based groups transitioned to combat positions only on attaining adulthood, and some never performed fighting roles during the course of their association. Various factors contribute to determining their roles in the organization. Recruiters consider children’s abilities and qualifications while they are training, with competence at assembling weapons or bombs and physical readiness to carry out attacks seen as desirable.

130 *Amaliyah* is the term that members of jihadi organizations use to for field action. See also IPAC, “The Re-emergence of Jemaah Islamiyah”, Report No. 36 (Jakarta, IPAC, 2017).

131 Male #20, mid-teens at time of association, Central Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

132 Male #7, elementary schoolchild at time of association, West Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

Not surprisingly, given the significance of the role of the peer group in recruitment patterns, both girls and boys are often tasked with finding new members: the new recruits become recruiters themselves. Umi Hani, for example, recalled her experience as both a young recruit and a mentor:

” When I was in high school, [NII] trained us in public speaking and oratory and we were capable enough to teach other fellow students and youths in *pesantren kilat* [religious youth camps] and other settings. My mentor in the NII was Abdi, a young man one or two years older than me ... At that time I also became a mentor ... I had three mentees, I taught them about *aqidah* [faith and conviction] and *fiqh* [knowledge]. But I could only teach them, I did not have the permission to do *bai'at* [pledge of allegiance] to others, including my students.<sup>133</sup>

Musa spelled out the different stages of association:

” The first stage, recruitment, involves attending the open *halaqah* [small study session]. Next, [prospective recruits] attend the second *halaqah*. The recruiter upgrades the topic from only discussing basic knowledge about Islam to more focused topics like politics, Islamic law, the caliphate and the organization. The third step is the *bai'at* [pledge of allegiance]. Finally, after pledging loyalty to the leader or the organization, the members should perform *amaliyah* [field action]. Once we really master the knowledge, its philosophy as well as the military skills, the organization gives us another task: to create another cell. So we need to recruit other children. Of course the organization teaches us how to recruit and indoctrinate. In that regard, our task is to be ideologists or *ustadz* [religious masters] for the new generations who need guidance in Islam. It is like an *estafet* [relay process], in which what we know is imparted to the generation after us in the organization.

Musa's words clarify how recruitment and experience within the group should, at least in principle, proceed through specific phases. Yet the real-life experiences of young recruits seldom follow such clear-cut stages. Data collected shows how pathways into and out of these groups are seldom linear and unidirectional, and the roles children perform within the groups not only change over time but can also overlap. Children who join the group with the explicit goal of covering supporting or logistical roles may, willingly or unwillingly, transition into active combat roles; others, who joined with the intention of engaging in combat, can be asked to step back and wait for the right moment.

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133 Female #19, early teens at time of association, North Sumatra. Interview conducted in March 2022.

The role of recruiter does not necessarily imply that the child has mastered “knowledge [and] philosophy, as well as the military skills”, but can occur simultaneously with the process of indoctrination. Hasan’s words exemplify this complexity well: “Ultimately, I made a *bai’at* to NII. After that, I also started doing *i’dad* (physical preparation), although we were not trained in how to use automatic weapons ... They only taught us self-defense, mountain climbing, swimming, and other physical activities. Meanwhile, I kept recruiting new people. In fact, at that time [he was still a child] I had already started recruiting 10 people to join the NII.”

## Emerging trends in gender-related dynamics

Terrorist groups in Indonesia often target boys, girls, men and women for different roles. Interviewees mostly agreed that the division of roles is traditionally predominantly based on male members in the public sphere and female members in the domestic sphere. Some of our research participants, including women, said that they ‘follow the teachings of jihadist leaders such as Osama Bin Laden, who emphasized that the women’s jihad is supporting the men’s jihad and contributing to generating new fighters.’<sup>134</sup>

In Indonesia, radical Muslim clerics explicitly excluded women from formal membership. Only men could give *bai’at* to the organization; women swore an oath of allegiance only to their husbands.<sup>135</sup> In this way female members are more geared toward domestic roles such as taking care of the family, giving birth, and educating children to become *mujahid* (people who carry out jihad) like their fathers. According to several interviewees, the more children a woman has, the greater the sense of pride it gives her as a jihadist mother. As one research participant put it, “The women are responsible for instilling jihad in their children. This is their job at home. Teaching is the wife’s responsibility.”<sup>136</sup>

The female respondents associated with terrorist groups as children confirmed this perception of women’s roles. Umi Hani, like her husband Musa, joined JI when she was in junior high school at the age of 14 or 15, in the mid-1990s. According to her, “women’s greatest jihad” is carried out at home, educating the children to properly follow the group’s teachings. She said that “... women usually join because of marriage. Women who get married to an extremist will automatically go into extremism. Even if she didn’t have extreme views before, her husband will teach her obedience.”<sup>137</sup>

Umi Hani’s experience is consistent with previous studies that have shown how marriage often plays a crucial role in teenage girls’ decision to join JI and other pro-al-Qaida groups.<sup>138</sup> In some cases parents also play a role by finding their daughter a husband in the group. Association through marriage and kinship seems to be a common feature for both girls and boys, especially within NII and JI, in this way reproducing the group ideology and reinforcing close-knit networks.

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134 Seran de Leede, S. (2018) “Women in Jihad: A Historical Perspective”, Policy Brief (The Hague, Netherlands, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2018).

135 Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), “Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Indonesian Women Extremists,” Report No. 35 (Jakarta, IPAC, 2017), pp. 5-6.

136 Key informant #39, community representative and religious leader. Interview conducted in March 2022.

137 Female #19, early teens at time of association, North Sumatra. Interview conducted in March 2022.

138 N. H. Ismail, “Al Qaeda’s Southeast Asia, Jamaah Islamiyah and Regional Terrorism: Kinship and Family Links”, *Asia Pacific Journal*, 5, no. 1, 2007.



Umi Hani's words give only a partial picture of the roles of girls and women in terrorist groups, however. Data collected shows that girls' and women's roles in the groups go far beyond being mere supporters or progenitors of new generations of fighters. The interpretations of gender roles among group members are not static; they keep changing, and the recent involvement of girls and women in field action in Indonesia has escalated their position to more active involvement in direct *amaliyah*.

In the Indonesian context, the involvement of girl- and boy-children and women in acts of terrorism has received serious attention from the government and researchers since the suicide bombings in Surabaya in May 2018. However, the call for jihad among Da'esh supported groups in Indonesia had already acquired a new sense of urgency in 2016, when two Da'esh-associated women, Dian Yulia Novi and Ika Puspitasari, planned separate suicide attacks.<sup>139</sup> Since then, several other women and girls have been involved in more active roles in combat, stabbing perpetrators, or as suicide bombers.

These attacks indicated a change in how terrorist groups in Indonesia see the role of boys, girls, and women. According to interviewed professionals, two factors seem to have influenced this new trend. First, a paradigm shift in terrorist groups' agenda in Indonesia: the belief that the country is now in a state of *kufr* (unbelief) is widespread among group members, creating a sense of urgency and calls for more extreme measures to enforce Islamic law. This prompted Da'esh and other groups to, among other things, encourage children and women to engage in field action<sup>140</sup> supported by interpretations of religious texts that legitimize the use of children in field combat.<sup>141</sup> Second, involving women, and especially girls, in terrorist acts is a strategic method by which terrorist groups divert suspicion. According to a male former JI militant who joined the group at the age of 17 in the early 1980s, children are generally less likely to be detected by security forces, who focus on adult perpetrators in terrorist groups.<sup>142</sup> Finally, their involvement attracts more attention on the attacks, as exemplified by the Surabaya bombings.

Significantly, in a few cases women and girls have actively contested their confinement to exclusively educational and reproductive roles – a process that has put them in overt opposition to the group. Nina went to Syria at the age of 16 and quickly found that the reality of living under Da'esh was not as she had expected. She learnt that girls and women were mostly used as brides for jihadists, and that a women's jihad was to marry a fighter. She soon received an offer of marriage, which she refused: "So because the dormitory contains widows, singles, and families, if a soldier wants to get married, he just goes there. They don't even ask. They already have data, our family data, age and everything. They just said, 'I want to marry this one.' ... I refused. I don't

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139 In December 2016, the Indonesian authorities arrested Dian Yulia Novi for planning a suicide bomb attack on the presidential palace. Shortly after, Ika Puspitasari was arrested for planning a suicide bomb attack on the resort island of Bali. See Campbell, Charlie, 2017, "ISIS Unveiled: The Story Behind Indonesia's First Female Suicide Bomber", *Time Magazine*, 3 March 2017.

140 With the loss of large chunks of territory in Syria and Iraq and a high percentage of casualties among its ranks, Da'esh began persuading women to physically take part in jihad. As recorded in *Al-Naba Magazine*: "We see today a war against the Islamic State ... Muslim women must fulfill their duty to assist the mujahedeen in combat, in every imaginable way ... They should see themselves as *mujahidas* in the name of Allah, and prepare themselves, to defend religion": see Europol, "Women in Islamic State Propaganda", p. 25, citing *Al-Nabā'* Issue 100, "The Duty of Women [to Wage] Jihad Against the Enemy," (5 October, 2017) 11.

141 For example, a research participant mentioned the story of Usamah bin Zaid and several children who had enlisted in the Battles of Uhud (625 AD) and Khandaq (627 AD). When Usamah fought in the Khandaq war he was only 15 years old. However, his success and valor made him a warlord at the age of 18.

142 Male #25, mid-teens at time of association, North Sumatra. Interview conducted in March 2022.

want to be like that. But sometimes they said, 'You're 17 years old already, and you still want to be with your mother? Where's your *jihad*?'"<sup>143</sup>

Nina's story touches on two crucial elements of girls' and boys' experience: their agency and the coercive environment in which it is exerted. Her experience is perhaps more unique than paradigmatic: a teenage girl's capacity to persuade her entire household to follow her decision to journey to Syria and join Da'esh is striking in a sociocultural environment that tends to position the adult male as the central figure. Yet her story has similarities to the experiences of other people interviewed for this research, challenging conventional ideas about children's vulnerability, dependence, and passivity. At the same time, however, her experience reveals patterns of domination and coercion. Nina faced considerable social pressure to conform to social expectations in Da'esh-controlled territory. As the next section shows, once she realized that the reality of living under Da'esh did not match the group's propaganda, her only viable alternative to being forced to marry was to escape.

## Children's experiences

The evidence collected provides a partial and fragmented understanding of children's experiences in terrorist groups. The stigma and legal consequences linked to their previous association with such groups added to the research respondents' obvious difficulty relating their disturbing recollections. As a result, our comprehension of the phenomenon remains limited. However, working with the available information we can pinpoint broad trends. Two aspects of group association deserve particular attention: both the strong adhesion to the group identity, and the trauma of performing and living through violence generated a bond and sense of community. These apparently conflicting experiences tend to overlap during the period of exploitation.

An important aspect of group association in Indonesia is how it often contributes to fulfilling the need for acceptance and a purpose in life. Many research participants spoke of their experience in the JI, NII, or other groups with a sense of belonging to something bigger. As mentioned, Umi Hani recalled a feeling of "Muslim sisterhood" during her time with the NII.<sup>144</sup> Hasan claimed that "in my group, there is no separation; every time we met we were kind to each other, and this is still true ... I used the family approach [when recruiting]."<sup>145</sup>

This sense of belonging was felt particularly intensely by research participants who had personally experienced the Poso conflict. Many commented that the aftermath of the conflict left them marginalized, enraged, feeling oppressed and neglected, and even lacking meaning in their lives. In such circumstances, terrorist groups emerged as a lifeline for those who had lost relatives and friends. The groups positioned themselves as a substitute for the family, a community into which they could fit and belong, making joining them not only attractive but often the only viable option for developing a sense of self-esteem.

This process described in the interviews mirrors observations from elsewhere; for example among motorcycle gangs and criminal groups in Indonesia,<sup>146</sup> which have the capacity to influence

143 Female #2, mid-teens at time of association, West Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

144 Female #19, early teens at time of association, North Sumatra. Interview conducted in March 2022.

145 Male #7, elementary schoolchild at time of association, West Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

146 Key informant #52, CSO Officer. Interview conducted in March 2022; Key informant #53, academic. Interview conducted in April 2022

children and young adults to internalize certain modes of behavior while helping them to develop self-confidence. Significantly, one way of attaining cohesion around group-centered values and acquiring status and reputation within both motorcycle gangs and terrorist groups in Indonesia is through violence or programmes of desensitization to violence. Research participants agreed that the first phases of their association entailed learning how to conduct *amaliyah*, where armed jihad is encouraged and legitimized, teaching children to see violence as necessary and desirable.

As discussed, this generally involves a structured and systematic process of indoctrination and training via the family, religious study sessions or recitations (*pengajian*) and schools, including *pesantren* [Islamic boarding schools], and often precedes the association and continues after formal recruitment of a child with a pledge of allegiance. It entails a number of stages including attending religious circles, a screening process, and physical preparation (*i'dad*) to prepare new recruits for more active militancy in the group.

Dehumanization of the enemy is crucial in this process. For example, adult respondents associated as children had been trained to see the State authorities and law enforcers as non-human, monsters that must be eliminated. Maulana described how his training as child in a group accustomed him to the performance of violence: "They taught us how bad the government was, that it causes Muslims to suffer. We really believed that our enemy was the government, and that our duty was to carry out jihad ... We saw the security forces and the police as *thogut* [demons] that needed to be killed."<sup>147</sup>

Furthermore, since children have been employed more consistently in field action, they are repeatedly exposed to violence as both witnesses and participants. This is particularly true among those who left the country for combat zones elsewhere. Indonesia leads the Southeast Asian countries in terms of the number of its people who have travelled to Syria and Iraq to support Da'esh, the Al-Nusra Front and other designated terrorist groups.<sup>148</sup> Children from Indonesia travelled alone, with their parents and families,<sup>149</sup> or were born abroad. There is evidence that foreign children now living in displacement camps in Iraq and Syria experience terrible living conditions and are deprived of their liberty as a result of their or their family's association with armed groups.<sup>150</sup> They face insecurity and ongoing violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, mostly against girls and women, and have limited access to healthcare, mental health and psychosocial services, including services to address sexual and gender-based violence, education and nutrition. As described later, while the experience and performance of violence reinforce association with the group, it also accumulates quickly to create the conditions that lead to disengagement.

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147 Male #16, mid-teens at time of association, North Sumatra. Interview conducted in March 2022.

148 UNDP, Ahmad El-Muhammady and Ben Schonveld "Homecoming: the return of foreign terrorist fighters in South-East Asia", Entry and Exit Points: Violent Extremism in Southeast Asia Series, 2020.

149 Ibid; IPAC, "Extricating Indonesian children from ISIS influence abroad", Report No. 72 (Jakarta, IPAC, 2021). The media have widely reported on the experiences of these children. See, for example, Charlotte Krol and George Fuller, "'I am very naïve': Daughter of Indonesian family lured to Raqqa by Islamic State tells of ordeal", *The Telegraph*, 3 August 2017; Quentin Somerville, "Stuck in Syria: Can you forgive your father?", BBC News, 4 February 2020.

150 IPAC, "Extricating Indonesian children from ISIS influence abroad" (Jakarta, IPAC, 2021).

## Exit and disengagement

### Leaving as a process

Children leave for multiple reasons. Most importantly, however, disengagement from terrorist groups is not the result of a singular event<sup>151</sup> but the outcome of multiple events and factors that build up to reach a tipping point. These include, but are not limited to, ideological and cognitive shifts, disillusionment with the group's ideology, the experience and performance of violence and other antisocial behavior, and fear of arrest. Among these, it is possible to isolate a few broad patterns.

The two research respondents who joined Da'esh in Syria or Iraq decided to exit the group because what they had witnessed and experienced did not conform with what they had expected to find when they left Indonesia. They reported leaving because they felt deceived and cheated, with financial and other material promises not kept; frustrated at the group's leadership and disillusioned with its ideology. They also felt that the group would not be able to protect them; on the contrary, it exposed them to even greater physical and emotional danger. Some had even witnessed the death or wounding of friends and family members.<sup>152</sup>

This is clearly exemplified by Mohammed, who decided to leave Da'esh immediately after he had rejoined his family in Syria:

” Finally I was able to meet my mother and family ... Soon after arriving, Da'esh asked me to take part in religious and military training. My mother was angry – she had not wanted me to come. She told me that what Da'esh did was not in line with what they said. They are all liars. From there, I decided not to join the training. I dodged their request to engage in training with the excuse of poor health. In fact, once I was taken to the hospital to prove that I was actually sick. Fortunately at that time I really was sick. I kept avoiding the training. Even my family helped by saying I was sick when Da'esh soldiers came to our house. My mother and family said that what Da'esh did was not in accordance with what is written in the Quran, like they were always asking my sister to marry. In addition, there is no free education and no big salaries for workers. Finally, we began to see that the reality in Raqqa [northern Syria] was not what Da'esh had promised at the beginning ... [From that point onwards] we knew we had to find a way to escape.<sup>153</sup>

151 See also O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, 2018, 74. Interviews with key informants found this process not radically dissimilar from children's disengagement from other criminal groups in Indonesia: Key informant #52, CSO Officer. Interview conducted in March 2022.

152 Male #1, mid-teens at time of association, North-West Java; female #2, mid-teens at time of association, West Java. Interviews conducted in March 2022.

153 Male #1, mid-teens at time of association, North-West Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

While losing faith in the group's ideology and disillusionment with its modus operandi was also common among children who had not left Indonesia, most of them exited and disengaged from the group through contact with State agents. When they felt they were not treated as badly as they had been expecting by the State authorities, this positive experience proved meaningful in sustaining their disengagement.

Long-term association often leads children to observe a profound contradiction between what groups preach and what they do. They begin to question their own involvement in the organization. For many research participants, the tipping point was realizing that much of the group's violence targeted other Muslims. Riski, for example, summed up his decision to leave JI as follows:

“ One of the reasons I exited the group was because I found we ended up criticizing and attacking other Muslims as heretics. But that wasn't all ... After my arrest I realized that most of my fellow members were involved in the group without knowing what they were doing. They knew very little about Islam and the reasons for doing jihad. I also found that my companions were traitors: instead of protecting me [from the authorities], they betrayed me.<sup>154</sup>

Time spent outside the group often facilitates the process of disengagement. There are extreme cases of respondents claiming that time in custody or detention led them to radically challenge their mindset and attitudes toward individuals and institutions they had previously considered apostate.<sup>155</sup> Despite the notable challenges that deprivation of liberty entails for children, including separation from their parents and community, a sense of isolation, and lack of an appropriate protective and educational environment,<sup>156</sup> some interviewees reported experiencing positive consequences from this period of separation from the groups. Musa, for example, refers to his time in prison as an opportunity for reflecting on his ideals and values: “Going to prison for me, right, was like a place for *l'tikaf* [self-reflection], to contemplate the teachings and concentrate on worship ... There we don't have to think about finding food; everything is provided ... The process is more self-purification. Truly, prison is a place for *l'tikaf*.”

154 Male #7, elementary schoolchild at time of association, West Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

155 With the exception of Hasan, all research respondents who were associated with terrorist groups operating in Indonesia were adults at the time of their arrest.

156 International law imposes strict limitations on the use of any form of deprivation of children's liberty (see CRC art. 37) due to the considerable obstacles such measures generate to their rehabilitation and reintegration, and the increased chance of the violation of child rights in such circumstances.

This spiritual change can be prompted by interaction with prisoners of various religious backgrounds and levels of religious understanding. For example, Jaka saw the time he spent in detention and the people he met as pivotal to his disengagement:

” By the time I was taken to the Mobile Brigade Command Headquarters I felt increasingly radical and violent, because I'd stayed with my fellow members. However, after being transferred to prison, I began meeting other inmates with cases other than terrorism. From there I started to get to know various kinds of people from different backgrounds. While in prison I also started preaching, teaching other inmates to read the Quran and pray. I also read a lot of books outside of my group while in prison. My turning point was when I met Mr. Hassan [pseudonym, a fellow inmate]; he really inspired me a lot, especially about patience when living a difficult life, like in prison ... He also taught me *jihad* through *da'wah* [inviting or calling people to embrace Islam], rather than violence.

Disengaging from a terrorist group is often a decision fraught with conflict, and exiting is very difficult. Exit patterns appear to be strongly influenced by whether the group is a national or a cross-border one. For children associated with terrorist groups in Indonesia such as NII and JI, exit generally occurs through contact with the national authorities, while most respondents who had joined Da'esh in Syria had left the group at the first opportunity. Many relied heavily on external facilitators to leave; for example Nina and her family eventually escaped the area under Da'esh control with the help of a smuggler. Upon exiting the territory they were intercepted by security forces and detained for 22 months before being transferred to Erbil in Kurdistan Region of Iraq and interrogated by the Indonesian security authorities, after which they finally returned to Indonesia.

Lastly, since the decision to leave is the outcome of several factors, it is unsurprising that there are also multiple reasons why children do not leave. Two interconnected obstacles are deeply entangled with child association in Indonesia: social pressure and fear of retaliation. Research respondents reported how fear of being targeted by other members delayed their decision to leave for a long time. Umar, for example, referred to this fear as an “inner struggle” as he realized that disengaging from the group could have devastating consequences for his family and friends. On the one hand he understood that there was something wrong with the group, while on the other he felt that it might target him if he left because he “knew all the group's secrets and could leak them to others.”

” What can you do, even if you want to leave? You're already tied up, you know, already in a group ... In the sense that you already know the field and so sometimes it's scary when people enter it. Information is very valuable. Since you know the group, the members, and the agenda, you can be targeted by your own friends.

Although fear of group members' retaliation has also been observed among street gangs and other criminal groups, it is an experience of particular intensity for terrorist group members, for whom disengaging may not only expose them to contempt and retaliation from their own families, but also expose their families to retaliation from both the group and the authorities.

### 3.4 After association: State responses and children's experiences of rehabilitation and reintegration

#### Benchmark for action: the national legal framework

Several legal provisions in Indonesia are relevant to child association with terrorist groups, and some specifically address child recruitment. However, as these provisions are found across various laws and regulations it can be difficult to obtain a comprehensive overview of the children's legal status.

At the international level, Indonesia is party to numerous treaties that enshrine child rights and prohibit child recruitment, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)<sup>157</sup> and its Optional Protocols on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. According to national law, international human rights treaties are automatically binding in Indonesia.<sup>158</sup> Indonesia has also ratified the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, and has signed, ratified or acceded to 11 of the 19 universal Anti-Terrorism Conventions and Protocols.<sup>159</sup>

In national legislation, specific protection of child rights is included in numerous laws. The Indonesian Constitution establishes that: "Each child has the right to live, grow up, and develop as well as the right to protection from violence or discrimination."<sup>160</sup> Relevant provisions are also included in Law No. 35/2014 on Child Protection, which provides special protection for children in emergency situations, in conflict with the law, economically and/or sexually exploited, trafficked, victims of violence, victims of terrorist networks, and victims of stigmatization relating to their parents' status (art. 59 (2)), and criminalizes child recruitment for military and/or other purposes (art. 87).

Law No. 11/2012 on the Juvenile Justice System, which came into force in July 2014, contains specific provisions for the protection of the rights of children alleged to, accused of, or recognized as having committed offences. These provisions remain fully applicable to any child accused

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157 A/RES/44/25 (1989).

158 Article 7 (2), Law No. 39/1999 on Human Rights.

159 UNODC, 'Treaties Database', <https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/v3/sherloc/treaties>, accessed 13th April 2020. Indonesia has signed the Protocol Supplementary to the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft (2010); Convention on the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Relating to International Civil Aviation (2010); Amendment to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (2005); International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism (2005); International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (1999); International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings (1997); Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts of Violence at Airports Serving International Civil Aviation (1988); Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (1980); Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation (1971); Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft (1970); and Convention on Offences and Certain Other Acts Committed on Board Aircraft (1963).

160 Article 28B (2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (last amended 2002), 1945.

of terrorism-related offences in Indonesia. Yet the implementation of this law in the context of terrorism-related offences poses some challenges, including lack of access to diversion; reluctance to use community-based alternatives to imprisonment; and effective coordination between the child protection, security and justice sectors.

National counter-terrorism law has progressively expanded since Indonesia ratified the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Convention on Counter Terrorism in 2012. Law No. 9/2013 concerns the Prevention and Eradication of Criminal Acts of Terrorism Financing. After the Surabaya attacks of 2018, Law No. 15/2003 on Anti-Terrorism was amended by Law No. 5/2018 on the Eradication of Criminal Acts of Terrorism,<sup>161</sup> currently the most important national instrument for counter-terrorism, which defines a victim of terrorism as “someone who suffered physical, mental, and/or economic damage caused by terrorist incident.”<sup>162</sup> This definition includes children who have been subjected to violence and exploitation as a result of their recruitment, and provides them with the right to rehabilitative support.<sup>163</sup> The Law permits prosecution for mere membership of a terrorist group<sup>164</sup> and for the offence of provoking others to conduct violence to cause terrorism.<sup>165</sup>

## **Child recruitment by terrorist groups as a growing government priority**

Much progress has been made in recent years on developing the policy framework for child protection, including in the specific context of counterterrorism. In 2015, the Government of Indonesia developed a National Plan of Action for Child Protection, and in 2016 it launched a National Strategy for the Elimination of Violence against Children (2016–20). This Strategy includes the mandatory or forced recruitment of children in armed conflict as part of the definition of violence on which it relies, but does not specifically refer to children affected by terrorism. A new National Strategy is currently being developed.

In 2019, the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection issued a detailed regulation specifically on children in a counter-terrorism context. The Ministry facilitates policy development and implementation in the areas of health, education, social welfare, child development and child participation, and serves as a coordinating body that monitors and evaluates the implementation and protection of children’s rights. However, it does not participate directly in service delivery, nor is it structured or mandated to do so, that role falling under the mandate of the Ministry of Social Affairs. Regulation No. 7/2019 sets out Guidelines for Child Protection from Radicalism and Criminal Acts of Terrorism and is accompanied by an Action Plan 2019–2024. Article 1 provides the following definition of radicalism: “Radicalism means wanting to change the social and political system totally and drastically by putting aside existing values and norms, by teaching intolerance, fanaticism, exclusion, or anarchism.” The Regulation defines children as victims when they have “suffered physical, mental and/or economic losses caused by the Criminal Act of Terrorism.”

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161 Government of the Republic of Indonesia, Amendment of the Law Concerning the Eradication of Criminal Acts of Terrorism (Law No. 5/2018). available at [https://www.greengazette.id/documents/lembaran-negara-92-2018\\_20180622-LNI-00092](https://www.greengazette.id/documents/lembaran-negara-92-2018_20180622-LNI-00092)

162 The Habibie Center, Counter-Terrorism Policy Brief Series, Edition 2, 2018.

163 Law No. 5/2018 on the Eradication of Criminal Acts of Terrorism, articles 35 (b) and 36.

164 Article 12A of Law No. 5/1018.

165 Article 13A of Law No. 5/1018.



Counter-terrorism strategies are increasingly focusing on children, notably under the leadership of Indonesia's National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT). Established in 2010, BNPT has a broad mandate and plays a vital role in prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration, and justice responses. Importantly, it coordinates and oversees anti-terrorism units including the National Police Detachment 88,<sup>166</sup> the National Intelligence Agency, the military's antiterrorism units, and the Anti-Terrorism Desk.

The 2018 Anti-Terrorism Law<sup>167</sup> further mandated BNPT to formulate national counter-terrorism policy, coordinate counter-terrorism-related law enforcement, and implement national awareness of counter-terrorism strategies and deradicalization campaigns. BNPT led the development of the new National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism that Leads to Terrorism 2020–2024 (RAN-PE), released as Presidential Regulation No. 7 in 2021. The RAN-PE includes plans for work across three pillars:

- 1** Pillar one, prevention and law enforcement;
- 2** Pillar Two, witness and victim protection and strengthening the national legislative framework; and
- 3** Pillar Three, international partnerships and cooperation.

Children feature most prominently in the draft RAN-PE under Pillar One, which includes direct reference to the need for further research in order to understand children's perceptions and experiences and improve the effectiveness of prevention strategies. Children also feature under Pillar One in the Focus Area on De-radicalization in Prison, which contains provisions for reviewing training for detention officers and developing specialized assessment instruments. Another important policy area for the BNPT is its work on the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters.

Over recent years, the Government of Indonesia has also increasingly engaged in advocacy for recognition of these children's situation as a priority. Most notably, in March 2020 Indonesia adopted the Bali Call for Action, a political declaration that endorses the UNODC Roadmap on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups<sup>168</sup> and commits States to translating it into action at the national level. Importantly, in line with international provisions, the declaration recognizes that all children associated with these groups are primarily victims, whose rehabilitation and reintegration should be prioritized.<sup>169</sup> In September 2020, the Indonesian government supported the adoption of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Statement on the Treatment of Children Recruited by or Associated with Terrorist Groups,<sup>170</sup> which strongly condemns child recruitment and exploitation as serious forms of violence and recognizes that children in such situations are potential victims of terrorism.

<sup>166</sup> Detachment 88 (*Detasemen Khusus 88*, also known as Delta 88, or Densus 88), is a Special Forces counter-terrorism squad in the police force. It was created in 2003 after the Bali bombings and has received support from the US and Australia.

<sup>167</sup> Law No. 5/2018 on the Eradication of Criminal Acts of Terrorism

<sup>168</sup> UNODC Roadmap on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups (Vienna, UNODC, 2019).

<sup>169</sup> Available at [https://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal\\_justice/endVAC/The\\_Bali\\_Call\\_for\\_Action.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/endVAC/The_Bali_Call_for_Action.pdf).

<sup>170</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Statement on the Treatment of Children Recruited by or Associated with Terrorist Groups.

BNPT cooperates on the implementation of child rehabilitation and reintegration measures with the Ministry of Social Affairs, which is responsible for all social services and interventions for children and their families, including children in need of special protection such as child victims, witnesses of crime, and alleged offenders. At the national level, the role of the Ministry of Social Affairs is primarily regulatory, and it retains responsibility for developing policy and monitoring implementation. Decentralization gave district-level government responsibility for the provision and delivery of social services through their Social Affairs offices. Provision is centered around the Handayani Centre (*Balai Rehabilitasi Sosial Anak yang Memerlukan Perlindungan Khusus/ BRSAMPK*) in Jakarta.

Despite these efforts and the growing focus on rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives, most children connected with terrorism on national soil who are above the minimum age of criminal responsibility are prosecuted and sentenced to detention, the responsibility for their rehabilitation and reintegration lying with the Directorate General of Corrections. This over-reliance on deprivation of liberty can notably impact such children's reintegration journeys and return to their communities. Furthermore, there are challenges to effective coordination between the sectors responsible for their reintegration, including probation officers, the security sector, and the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Finally, Indonesia also has a thriving civil society and the government has cooperated with many organizations with experience in counter-terrorism, including C-SAVE, the Institute for International Peace Building (YPP), Indonesia Muslim Crisis Center, the Habibie Center and Empatiku Foundation, to foster the children's rehabilitation and reintegration process.

## **Rehabilitation and reintegration from the perspective of children**

Despite the growing emphasis on supporting children's rehabilitation and reintegration, these processes are still fraught with complexity. If child association is a multi-causal phenomenon, the prospects for full rehabilitation and reintegration also depend on multiple factors.

This research finds that social barriers have a clear impact on the success of rehabilitation and reintegration. Formerly associated individuals interviewed for this study have difficulty reintegrating into civilian life as both individuals and members of specific communities in the face of considerable stigmatization and discrimination from the authorities, the media, and broader society. Ibrahim clearly evoked this when reflecting on the conditions of his reintegration: "In my opinion, terrorist groups in Indonesia will continue to grow if the government takes arbitrary action against Muslims. This can be fertile ground for these groups to recruit."<sup>171</sup> The case of Adi in Poso is another clear example of how discrimination and stigmatization encroached on his trajectories into and out of the group. Although he set up a restaurant and claimed "to be done with the group," he harbored resentment against the way he felt the authorities and the government treated him, his family, and his community: "What I did was wrong ... but it was also what my father did before me. He was involved in a rebel group in X ... I found many similarities to my grandfather ... I discussed war strategy a lot with him. We both agree that the way Muslims are treated in Poso is not fair."<sup>172</sup>

171 Male #4, mid-teens at time of association, Central Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

172 Male #9, preadolescent at time of association, Central Sulawesi. Interview conducted in March 2022.

Several interviewees who had been associated with terrorist groups as children said that they were stigmatized during their reintegration. They claimed that the community in which they lived labelled them “terrorists” and did not want them in the neighborhood. Others reported that societal prejudice is fuelled by the media, which depicts them as evil terrorists and publishes their personal details.<sup>173</sup> Reflecting on his experience after disengaging from the group, Anto described how “there is still a negative perception [of me and my family] ... Plus the media’s approach; in the beginning they act normally in the interview, but they add something to the written narrative, telling people I’m still a threat, radical. The content of the news piece is good, but some bits have been added, and unfortunately people focus on that misleading information.”

Riski echoed this feeling of being misrepresented and treated unfairly:

” After returning to the community we are still often stigmatized, such as being labelled terrorists by those around us. In fact, we are often rejected from our daily life by our neighbors. They are afraid that there are terrorists near their places. In addition, the media also often writes articles based on our interviews that are very offensive, using terrorist labels that make us look like ruthless killers. We still face these challenges, apart from still struggling to try and earn money.

Significantly, instances of positive treatment by State authorities and support with reintegration helped research respondents not to feel marginalized, and this was pivotal to their rehabilitation and reintegration process. Maulana, for example, was surprised that the authorities were not as bad as he expected.

” Densus is more respectful and treats people more humanely than I expected ... I can send a text message to the Detachment Head and get a response, although there is a gap of two to three days. I also received funding for the construction of a chicken coop. Also the heads of the Polda [Regional Police Force] and Polres [Indonesian National Police] are kind ... For example during the Covid-19 pandemic we received food assistance from the Resort Police, Regional Police, Densus, and BNPT. It is impossible for me to make them my enemies when the officers invite me to be their friend.<sup>174</sup>

However, the prospect of reintegration is not only jeopardized by external factors such as societal stigmatization; inner pressure to conform with the group’s values and ideology can also threaten children’s reintegration. As discussed in the previous section, the process of disengaging from terrorist groups has been found to be highly dependent on the strength of an individual’s ties within the group. This perspective is also fruitful for assessing the likelihood of full reintegration

173 The research findings are supported by recent studies that have found that the derogatory use by the State, the media, and Indonesian society of labels such as “terrorist” and “former terrorist” for both detainees or individuals who have undergone deradicalization or disengagement programs is a serious obstacle to their reintegration. See Ilyas Mohammed, “Critical Reflections on De-radicalisation in Indonesia,” *Otoritas: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan* 10, no. 1 (2020), pp. 43–57.

174 Male #16, mid-teens at time of association, North Sumatra. Interview conducted in March 2022.

after disengagement. Professionals working in this area indicate that child disengagement from terrorist groups and their prospects for successful social reintegration tend to be more complex for those recruited by DI and JI than for those leaving groups supporting Da'esh.

The risk of re-exposure appears to be greater among those associated with JI because this group enjoys substantially more community support in Indonesia. The tight-knit social fabric of DI and JI networks, often based on close friendship and family ties, makes disengaging and reintegration akin to betraying your own family. Amran is case in point; a JI activist with bomb-making skills, he was arrested and tried in 2005 for his involvement in a terrorist attack. After serving almost five years in prison, he rejoined his community and was arrested again a few years later, on charges of harboring a fugitive.

Finally, although not enough evidence was collected for a meaningful conclusion on how gender affects the process of reintegration, it is plausible that for boys and young men the experience of stigmatization and discrimination is compounded by more punitive approaches, as they experience arrest and long periods in detention more frequently. As set out above, in Indonesia gender stereotypes tend to reinforce the belief that girls and women are passive and fundamentally brainwashed by their husbands and fathers, and are therefore less accountable for their actions.

Nina, for example, recalled that “in Indonesia [when we returned from Syria] my father and my two uncles were placed in temporary detention, but all the women and children were freed after when the investigation ended.” This does not mean that the women and children never faced stigmatization, however: “After returning home, my family and I tried to re-establish a life. We started by finding a job, accommodation, and school. But we experienced several difficulties, such as rejection by neighbors and problems obtaining school certificates. We have had to move three times since being repatriated from Syria.”

Besides government incentives to assist social reintegration, psychosocial support and trauma-informed care are other crucial components of the reintegration and rehabilitation process. Children may be at risk of mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and increased aggression and hostility, especially following their return from combat zones. Nina recalls how one of her most lingering traumatic recollections is “the memory of numerous activities and objects related to violence, such as bombs and tanks.”<sup>175</sup> Interviewees reported how a small percentage of children struggled to function day-to-day, including children who may have had pre-existing mental health conditions or had had particularly traumatic experiences. Even children who do not report especially traumatic experiences need to learn to cope with the consequences of the violence and stigma experienced within the groups and upon exit. Without specialized mental health care, the impact of violence is likely to be overlooked and underestimated and these children may be vulnerable to secondary victimization, abuse and various forms of exploitation, including re-recruitment by terrorist groups. They may lack the strength necessary to successfully engage in the complex transition of exiting the group and re-engaging with society that is essential to the reintegration process.

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175 Female #2, mid-teens at time of association, West Java. Interview conducted in March 2022.

The lingering socioeconomic, structural, and psychological stressors that many children and young adults experience upon leaving a group are conducive to their re-recruitment into the same group or a different criminal organization. For example, when Riski was arrested and sentenced to six years imprisonment for his militancy in NII, this did not lead to his disengagement. After three years in prison, he escaped to rejoin the group. He was caught again and sentenced to further years in prison. As mentioned, his disengagement and subsequent reintegration into the community occurred only when a combination of factors caused him to fundamentally rethink his association with the group.

Individual expectations are an important dimension of reintegration. Many of the research respondents had joined a terrorist group in search of a meaningful and dignified life. For many, the realization that the group could not offer what they were expecting led to disillusionment, disengagement, and exit, not necessarily in that order. This study found that the same factors that are conducive to association and then disengagement can facilitate (or prevent) reintegration. In other words: those who reintegrate successfully are often those who are capable of finding social and vocational fulfilment in their civilian lives that can address lingering feelings of worthlessness and disempowerment.

In this context, financial incentives for formerly associated individuals may play a role in the success of social reintegration. Some of the research respondents benefited from the government's provision of business capital assistance for former terrorism convicts in line with its entrepreneurship development program to facilitate reintegration. Mahfud, for example, set up a service business after being arrested for his association with JI in Poso as a child. He saw the business capital provided by the Poso Police as functional to his reintegration, allowing him to "become a successful entrepreneur."<sup>176</sup>

The opportunity to continue education for those who had been associated with terrorist groups as children is another incentive. Another research participant benefited from this when Special Detachment 88 offered him the chance to continue his education at a *pesantren* as well as some financial support to start a business.

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176 Male #14, early teens at time of association, Central Sulawesi. Interview conducted in March 2022.

# 4

## Case study II: Iraq



# 4. Case study II: Iraq

## 4.1 Introduction

**B**etween 2015 and 2019, the UN verified 2,114 grave violations against children in Iraq, the majority of which were committed by Da'esh, and by other parties to the conflict.<sup>177</sup> Da'esh is listed for recruiting and using children, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction, and attacks on schools and hospitals. The group deliberately targeted, recruited, and exploited children and young adults as part of its strategy: this includes establishing its “Cubs of the Caliphate”, an organized programme to train children, primarily boys<sup>178</sup>, of various ethno-religious backgrounds in both Iraq and Syria.<sup>179</sup> Because Da'esh had State-building aims including eventually overthrowing the government, and indeed was able to occupy territory and rule over populations and territories for a period of time, its use of children served not only a strategic operational function in the immediate term but also as a basis on which to secure future generations of loyal fighters and citizens.<sup>180</sup>

As Iraq has been gravely affected by targeted child recruitment and exploitation in the context of terrorism, it has also been the location of research into this phenomenon, although to date most of the studies and reporting cited here explore the experiences of different groups of children separately in displacement camps or in detention. Such challenging contexts may influence what individuals feel comfortable about sharing and limit holistic understanding of the needs of all children associated with terrorist groups in the country.

Little is known about children once associated with Da'esh who have returned to their communities or are living outside camps in other communities. Knowledge about this group is especially important, given the Government of Iraq's current priorities and actions in response to the aftermath of the Da'esh conflict. First, it is intent on ensuring the return of families displaced by the Da'esh conflict to their places of origin, including through the closure of nearly all internal displacement camps on federal territory in 2020. The closures, which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, affected particularly vulnerable families and children, including those with perceived Da'esh associations who may still not have the required security clearance or civil documentation to return home safely, appropriate community structures in place to ensure their safe reintegration, or even homes to return to.<sup>181</sup> Second, there has been incremental progress towards ending and

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177 S/2019/984, para. 23.

178 In line with the policy of the Government of Iraq, the term ‘gender’ is not used in the Iraq case study.

179 Revkin, “I Am Nothing Without a Weapon”, p. 109; Raya Jalabi, “Cubs of the Caliphate: Rehabilitating Islamic State's Child Fighters”, *Reuters*, 8 March 2018; Nabih Bulos, “These Children Escaped from ISIS Captivity, but There is No Joy in Their Return Home”, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March 2019.

180 Siobhan O'Neil, “Trajectories of Children into and out of Non-State Armed Groups”, in O'Neil and van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, p. 46.

181 Samya Kullab, “Camp Closures Force Iraqi Families Back to Shattered Homes”, *CTV News*, 16 December 2020; Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Inadequate Plans for Camp Closures”, 3 June 2021.

preventing child recruitment into Popular Mobilization Units (PMU);<sup>182</sup> harmonizing existing laws in line with the CRC and other international treaties to which the country is a party;<sup>183</sup> implementing reparation for Da'esh victims, including children;<sup>184</sup> and improving specialized services for children in contact with the law.<sup>185</sup> Third, the government has initiated the repatriation of some 30,000 Iraqi nationals from Syria, a significant proportion of whom are children associated with Da'esh who have faced significant and prolonged exposure to conflict, violence, and extremely harsh living conditions, which continue to date.<sup>186</sup>

In this context it is critically important to have a clear understanding of the challenges to protecting children that arise from their association with Da'esh, specifically in terms of building evidence on their trajectories into and out of the terrorist group. This also requires addressing gaps in the literature with respect to how they experience life on return to their home communities and in internal displacement camps elsewhere in Iraq, and identifying current law and policy responses. Such understanding can help to illuminate ways in which these challenges can be addressed by strategies and measures responding to children's recruitment and exploitation. While the term "children" is often used, the sample under study consists only of young men who were associated with Da'esh during their childhood. This case study furnishes fresh perspectives from 22 such young men, who, now adults, reflect on their lives, especially in areas impacted by Da'esh conflicts. It also includes the views of professionals in this field. This study does not address previously associated girls or women, whose experiences with this group could be vastly different.

## 4.2 Terrorism and child recruitment in Iraq: a brief historical overview

Violence carried out by terrorist groups swept through Iraq primarily in the wake of the US-led invasion of the country in 2003 and under the negotiated post-regime-change political order. In particular, the full-scale dismantling of existing government institutions and security apparatus in 2003 and 2004 led to tens of thousands of skilled public-sector workers, soldiers, and security officers suddenly losing their jobs, status, and income.<sup>187</sup> This created an administrative and security vacuum that impeded cross-communal cohesion and reconciliation.<sup>188</sup> Rifts formed between those supporting the new political order and those fighting against it, not only among but also within ethno-religious communities.

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182 S/2022/46, para. 43. The PMU were established following the religious edict issued by the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in June 2014 and played a role in combatting Da'esh. Since then, the Government of Iraq has taken steps to regularize and restructure these units from a loose amalgam of non-State armed groups to a unitary organization operating under State control. In 2016 they were formally declared an independent military formation and part of the Iraqi armed forces, and they currently maintain a presence in many Da'esh conflict-affected governorates. See Mara Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework Joint Scoping Exercise for Iraq" (Baghdad: March 2022), 62-3.

183 S/2022/46, para. 45.

184 Ceasefire, *The Yazidi Survivors' Law: A Step Towards Reparations for the ISIS Conflict* (London: Ceasefire, 2021).

185 S/2022/46, para. 47.

186 International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (IOM), "Working to Set an Example on the Global Stage: Iraq, UN and International Community Discuss Way Forward on Return of Iraqis from Syria's A-Hol", UN Press Release, 11 April 2022.

187 Nadia Siddiqui and Khogir W. Mohammed, *Movements Before Mechanisms: Community Grievances and Windows of Opportunity for Restorative Justice in a Transitional Justice Context* (Erbil: Social Inquiry, 2022), p. 16.

188 Shamiran Mako, "Subverting Peace: The Origins and Legacies of de-Ba'athification in Iraq", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 4 (2021), p. 477.



The lack of a stable and secure environment contributed to the ensuing violence, divisions, and conflict, including the emergence and ascendancy of Al-Qaida in Iraq.<sup>189</sup> Victims of the physical and structural violence, exclusion, and rights violations since 2003 often had little recourse to meaningful accountability or redress for these harms. Da'esh was formed from the remnants of Al-Qaida in Iraq and Syria in 2013 and 2014, initially drawing on these grievances.

Given that approximately 60 per cent of Iraq's population is under the age of 25,<sup>190</sup> a significant proportion were born or came of age following the US-led invasion of the country in 2003.<sup>191</sup> Their childhood and adolescence unfolded amid the rise of violence and institution of corresponding counter-terrorism laws post-2003, the emergence of Da'esh in 2013–2014 and its defeat in conflict three years later, and the instability that continues in the aftermath. Children in certain regions of Iraq have direct experience of such violence in general, and of abduction or recruitment and exploitation by the terrorist groups perpetrating it.<sup>192</sup>

This is especially true in relation to children's association with Da'esh. The group showed a unique capacity to occupy and hold territory and for three years it ruled over large swathes of the northern and central parts of the country, perpetrating grave violations against civilian men and women across age, ethno-religious, and geographic lines. This enabled the militants to control not only the means of violence but also the local economy. This combination of physical and economic coercion provided crucial advantages for recruitment tactics.<sup>193</sup> In such settings, non-State armed groups tend to tap into existing familial and social networks, offering material incentives, and utilizing public space and institutions such as mosques and schools to access children.<sup>194</sup>

Children's pathways into and out of Da'esh were determined by their ethno-religious identity. For those in Yazidi and Shia Turkmen communities, association with Da'esh was a direct result of the group's genocidal strategy against these populations connected to its overarching State-building efforts,<sup>195</sup> and these children were forced into the group through abduction and capture.<sup>196</sup> Numerous interlinked individual and collective factors contributed to the recruitment of children of other communities to the group. Such association took place within a wider socioeconomic context in which child recruitment, child labor, and child marriage are rooted, sectarianism has shaped the broader political, security, and social landscape, economic conditions and access to schooling are unequal, and Internet access and exposure is increasing.<sup>197</sup>

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189 Siddiqui and Mohammed, *Movements Before Mechanisms*, p. 17.

190 United Nations Children's Fund and United Nations Human Settlements Programme, *Iraq Key Facts*, 2018. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/2246/file/IRQ-KuwaitReportFactSheet-February2018.pdf.pdf>.

191 International Crisis Group (ICG), "Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's 'Generation 2000'", Middle East Report No. 169 (Brussels: ICG, 2016).

192 This is not to say that child recruitment in Iraq occurred only in the post-2003 period. Child military units were also organized under the previous regime; see Peter Singer, "Facing Saddam's Child Soldiers", Brookings Institution, 14 January 2003; Refworld, *Child Soldiers Global Report 2001 – Iraq*, 2001.

193 Revkin, "I Am Nothing Without a Weapon", p. 115.

194 Ibid, p. 115; Asaad Almohammad, "ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment", ICCT Research Paper, 19 February 2018, p. 6.

195 Amnesty International, *Legacy of Terror: Yazidi Child Survivors of ISIS*, Index No. MDE 14/2759/2020, Amnesty International, 30 July 2020, p. 13.

196 Ibid, pp. 13–15; Jalabi, "Cubs of the Caliphate"; Bulos, "These Children Escaped from ISIS Captivity".

197 Revkin, "I Am Nothing Without a Weapon", pp. 123–28.

Some of the young adults interviewed attribute the original success of Da'esh's recruitment to the lack of sufficient services available to the population at the time, including sufficient livelihood opportunities.<sup>198</sup> They felt that a better education, less poverty, and more parental oversight would have increased their awareness of the group's tactics and manipulation and could have prevented their association with it.

Ideology and religion did not appear to drive recruitment at the outset, even among groups of children who experienced less coercive recruitment methods.<sup>199</sup> Their constant exposure to propaganda in Da'esh-held territory in the country, particularly as Da'esh sought to limit access to external sources of information through Internet blockages and travel bans, and the effects of living among committed adult Da'esh members may have been factors in children's potential reframing of their motivation after the fact.<sup>200</sup>

## 4.3 Child association with Terrorist Groups

### Pathways to involvement

The young men interviewed in Iraq for this study were boys between the ages of 12 and 17 when Da'esh took control of their communities in 2014. While some had dropped out of school to work full-time, most were attending middle or high school and also worked to support their families. Others found jobs during school breaks to contribute to their household finances, earn money for themselves, or to have something to do. The sample presents a relatively diverse picture of adolescent boyhood in Iraq across different socioeconomic conditions and family compositions. The onus on boys being the breadwinners in their households depended on what other support networks the family had.

#### The impact of lived experiences of violence

Some participants reported having to leave their childhood behind, even if they wished for things their peers had. This is clear, for example, in the words of a young man who was 16 when he first joined the group: "I did not have that many dreams after the shock of my father's death ... when I was still young. My brothers and I took responsibility for the family and the costs of living".<sup>201</sup> Others with stabler family circumstances had more typical experiences of early to late male adolescence: they worked in the school holidays if they wanted to and had free time to do what they wished: "I was in school before Da'esh came to [X city]. During the holidays I would work with some of my relatives downtown just to kill time, not for the money. I wanted to complete my schooling and perhaps attend a good university".<sup>202</sup> Residents in Da'esh-affected areas noted

198 Male #13, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq; Male #14, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq; Male #12, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interviews conducted in June 2022.

199 Revkin, "I Am Nothing Without a Weapon", p. 124; Human Rights Watch, "Everyone Must Confess": Abuses Against Children Suspected of ISIS Affiliation in Iraq", 16 March, 2019, p. 10.

200 Revkin, "I Am Nothing Without a Weapon", p. 124.

201 Male #13, mid-teen mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

202 Male #16, early teens at time of association, Northern Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

that the poor and the young were particularly at risk, but that Da'esh recruited at every class level, both boys and men, girls and women.<sup>203</sup>

The participants' knowledge of and interest in Da'esh prior to the group's arrival in their communities varied, though the boys followed roughly the same patterns of news and social media consumption. A small minority had no interest in or knowledge of the group or of the surrounding conflict until Da'esh arrived in their areas:

” I was watching a television report by one of the Arabic channels about [Da'esh]. Curiosity prompted me to go onto the Internet and watch their actions, including raids, executions, sniping, and others. I said “Why all this injustice, arbitrariness, and tyranny? Is it for sabotage, for revenge, or to bring justice?” This question remained in my mind and I later asked one of my relatives, who was older than me, to answer it. He told me that [Da'esh] wanted to establish an Islamic State that guaranteed rights for all.<sup>204</sup>

For others, especially those who had heard of Da'esh's activities before the group was named or emerged from Al-Qaida, the group had immediate appeal and connected to broader political grievances:

” We used to hear about Da'esh and considered it a strong organization that could stand up to the government, which dealt with our governorate with racism, taking control of all the public goods and leaving us poor. Da'esh punished people who did not adhere to the correct behavior ... We had a positive view of them, and we believed that they were the only hope to rid us of sectarian rule. Before [the summer of] 2014, I knew some friends in the governorate but I did not know the name Da'esh, just that it was an armed group of a religious nature ... all their meetings were private and with those who were like them. At the time I was hoping to meet them, and my eyes were following them.<sup>205</sup>

After the occupation of Iraq and the fall of the regime [in 2003], my father became involved in the armed resistance to the occupying forces and then turned to Al-Qaida with a big group of his friends. Sometimes I would sit with them and hear what was going on, about the operations they were carrying out and the threat of death to those who dealt with or were suspected of dealing with the occupation... My vision of Da'esh was that it was our savior from the occupation, and that its members alone could liberate Iraq because of their ferocity and courage.<sup>206</sup>

203 Sanad for Peacebuilding and Social Inquiry, “Ideas are More Dangerous than Deeds: Street-level Perspectives of Violent Extremism in Ninewa Governorate”, October 2018, pp. 22-24.

204 Male #4, early teen at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

205 Male #8, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

206 Male #3, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

Some interviewees had more modest aspirations, seeing association with the group as a way out a life of difficulty, an equally attractive alternative to becoming an officer in the Iraqi Army but with fewer barriers to entry.

The difficult circumstances and unsafe surroundings of these boys need to be acknowledged. Young men interviewed referred to their knowledge of the bombings, targeted killings, kidnappings, and threats around them as they grew up: “[District X] was unsafe for many years before Da’esh, and we all knew terrorist groups like Al-Qaida and ... other militias”.<sup>207</sup> They also perceived danger to their community in “the others [who], if they are able, will eradicate us with the help of Sunni politicians”.<sup>208</sup>

Many of the geographical areas covered in this study were sites of mass protest in 2012 and 2013 about the perceived mistreatment of the Sunni population. The government subsequently repressed these demonstrations. “Before the fall of [District X] there were protests against the government and many people were killed ... Then people were talking about [Da’esh] and how it could save [their community] from ... oppression.”<sup>209</sup>

Significantly, 6 of the 22 formerly associated research participants had directly experienced violence, including the death or severe injury of their fathers, as well as their own or their fathers’ arrest and/or imprisonment in the years and months leading up to Da’esh’s appearance in their communities.

### Propaganda through occupation: A decisive factor

It should be noted that none of the boys were associated before the group entered their area and took control of the territory. However, their experiences before Da’esh’s arrival and initial perceptions of the group influenced recruitment trajectories, some being already primed to join and others less so. Some participants connected with Da’esh more directly by engaging with the propaganda campaigns the group conducted in public squares, mosques, and schools. Some sought to attract Da’esh members’ attention in a roundabout manner, while others directly approached the group to learn more or volunteered straightaway, the latter approach more common among boys for whom Da’esh had already had a relatively strong appeal prior to their arrival. For example, a young man who was in his mid-teens when he joined recounted his first contact with the group: “After Da’esh arrived in [X city] and took control, they noticed the way I dressed, treated myself, and attended mosque regularly, and the sincerity of my speech and how I talked about salvation from the state of oppression. One [Da’esh member] invited me [to join him] sitting in the mosque with a group of young followers. We sat down and he was telling them about heroism in the past ... I asked him what was required of me if I wanted to be with the brothers.”<sup>210</sup>

Others reported being coaxed, for example by Da’esh members in institutions that the group had taken over. In one instance this happened when Da’esh shut down schools and instituted

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207 Male #21, mid-teens at time of association, Northern Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

208 Male #5, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

209 Male #18, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

210 Male #8, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

their own curricula on re-opening them.<sup>211</sup> It also banned certain activities, such as football, and required men and boys to attend the mosque instead: “[Da’esh] forced all the [boys] in the village to go to the mosque with their fathers and made them stay for religious teaching. I used to attend the mosque every day with the other boys from the village. One day they told me that they had chosen me and three others for military training and to join the group.”<sup>212</sup>

## Exploiting family and peer networks

Some recruitment occurred from within boys’ existing friendship and family networks, usually from cousins, boys and men who planned to join the group themselves or had already done so. This process was systematic and consistent, involving promises of relatively easy financial gain, power and authority among others, by people whom the participants liked and trusted. Furthermore, the timing of Da’esh’s arrival, in the summer, may have worked to the group’s advantage in some cases, as boys were not in school and had more access to friends and relatives.

” Once the district fell to Da’esh, one of my friends kept coming to me, insistently asking me to volunteer with him. He said it was an opportunity to improve my living situation instead of working for a low daily wage at the car wash, which is tiring; moving to a comfortable and well-paid job that gives you position and power. Because of my strong friendship with him, the idea appealed to me, and I said to myself ‘I have nothing more to lose than I have already lost.’<sup>213</sup>

My recruitment was in the early days of the fall of the city, after I left my studies at the insistence of one of my cousins. He started explaining the necessity of joining the Cubs of the Caliphate to me, and that everything [I’d] heard about [Da’esh] was different from the reality. The videos on the Internet are to frighten certain segments [of the population] and are inaccurate. [Da’esh] will provide you with everything you need, from food, clothing, a salary, and full care to a position in which you can intimidate people and make them walk to your command. In the end he told me ‘Live the experience, and if you don’t like it you can quit.’<sup>214</sup>

It turned out later that my friend had also been recruited and had been sent to convince me bit by bit so that the idea would not shock me and make me reject it. But their use of my family’s poverty [as an argument] completely convinced me of the value of the temptation they offered, which was quick wealth and authority granted by [Da’esh].<sup>215</sup>

211 Schools and the education system have been crucial in Da’esh’s recruitment and training of children, given the group’s State-building aspirations. See Olivier Arvisais and Mathieu Guidère, “Education in Conflict: How Islamic State Established Its Curriculum”, *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020), pp. 498–515; Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, “The Children of Islamic State”, (London, Quilliam, 2016).

212 Male #20, pre-teen at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

213 Male #4, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

214 Male #10, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

215 Male #7, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

Once these boys had agreed to join the group through friends or family, they followed the same pathway as those who had joined through direct contact with Da'esh members outside their networks: direct communication with the Da'esh member responsible for training them. Several participants, even some of those recruited by relatives, joined Da'esh despite their parents' objections or without telling them. One young man recruited as a teenager recounted how he had sprung his decision on his family and imposed his will over that of his father: "I met strong opposition from my family, but I did not listen to what they said. My father, who was complaining about his poor health, could not stop me."<sup>216</sup>

The experience of intergenerational conflict found among the interviewees reflects broader trends in child recruitment as a means by which boys, especially adolescents, can stake out their independence from their parents. The security context also impacted parents' ability to protect their sons: many were unable to prevent or reverse their recruitment because it would be dangerous for the rest of the family: "My father was upset, but he realized that the rule is that each family should have a member in the group."<sup>217</sup>

This wider pattern is also typical of a recruitment tactic used across Syria and Iraq, involving separating and isolating children from their existing support structures to make them solely reliant on the group and more easily manipulable.<sup>218</sup> This is complicated, however, by the fact that Da'esh also used existing social and support networks to bring people, and particularly boys, into the group. As detailed in subsequent sections, boys interviewed for this research did seem to maintain connections with their parents or caregivers, even if the latter disapproved of their association with Da'esh.

## A variety of factors

Most of the boys from poorer families reported that financial incentives and a desire for power were some of their reasons for joining. But in the context of ongoing insecurity, these motivations also attracted boys from better-off families. Financial security was a motivating factor for nearly all the young men interviewed. While participants from different backgrounds also mentioned political and religious reasons, not everyone in the sample who had experienced violence and loss before 2014 gave revenge as a rationale.

Most importantly, however, no respondent joined Da'esh for a single reason. They reported a confluence of factors including economic gain, power, religion, a desire for what they saw as a more moral life, justice and change, fear, protection for their families, and revenge. For example "I joined for several reasons, including improving my financial situation after the promises we'd heard from the organization, taking revenge on those who killed my father, being influenced by the organization's views, and the desire to live in a State that achieves justice and equity."<sup>219</sup>

Some recognized in retrospect that they had joined without sufficient knowledge of the consequences or losses they would incur for themselves and their families and friends. Given their age, the wider socioeconomic and political contexts, and the different pressures that contributed

216 Male #1, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

217 Male #18, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

218 Revkin, "I Am Nothing Without a Weapon", pp. 113–17.

219 Male #13, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

to bringing them into the group, even though these boys exercised some agency it is difficult to contend that their decisions were entirely voluntary and made freely. A boy who had been aged 17 when he first joined the group explained: “I cannot say that I was forced, nor that I went to [Da’esh] voluntarily, and it is not possible now to define the feelings that prompted me to join them, but my love for the military and the ability to show some prestige in our teenage characters were undeniable motivations to join”.<sup>220</sup>

The above quote echoes many other boys’ retrospective reflections on their decision to enter the group: “Of course, the material factor was the main reason for joining; I had reached a state of despair about the security, economic, and even social conditions [in the district] ... not knowing what the future holds. This included [sectarian] practices ... that created hatred among the different groups in the district”.<sup>221</sup>

These relatively nuanced perspectives align broadly with how key informant interviewees described the motivations behind boys’ association with Da’esh. The conditions they had grown up in, their previous losses, and their need and desire to be seen as powerful or have control over others and their own future were all key drivers in their association.

## **Vulnerability and roles in terrorist groups**

Across the interviewees and the geographical areas of inquiry there was a relatively similar progression in their roles within Da’esh, with the risk to their personal safety increasing over time as the groups cracked down harder on the population they controlled and military operations, including air strikes, began in order to retake these areas. Once within Da’esh, participants reported receiving religious and ideological lessons and indoctrination as well as military and weapons training with light or heavy weaponry. They were then assigned to groups depending on “the physical nature of each one of us,”<sup>222</sup> reporting to a corresponding commander.

Some indicated that these assignments were physically and mentally taxing. Specifically, initial activities included the recruitment of their peers and intelligence-gathering among the community. They moved on to serve as guards of buildings or territory, manning checkpoints, inspecting cars and trucks carrying goods to collect taxes, and preventing people from trying to leave, among other tasks. They also patrolled neighborhoods and villages as a show of force, monitoring them and punishing any infractions of the dress code or other prohibited behavior. Others participated in distributing goods. One participant was taken to the front line as support for a larger team: “The situation overall was very bad with the battles and bombing every day. The worst was seeing all these dead bodies from both sides after every attack and bombing. [Da’esh commanders] would make those of us of lower rank bury the bodies of the Da’esh fighters and burn the bodies of the security forces.”<sup>223</sup>

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220 Male #2, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

221 Male #14, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

222 Male #3, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

223 Male #18, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

A small number of participants remembered carrying out these duties in the group with little or no difficulty. Several, however, reflected on noticing negative changes in their behavior and demeanor caused by their roles within the group. The power and authority they wielded at checkpoints and in the community more broadly led to physical abuse and theft:

” In the beginning, I used to treat people kindly because I knew some of them, and some of them were relatives and some others were good to me and my family. But after some time, I began dealing with [people] by looking down on them and issuing strict orders. Especially if I felt that people were ignoring my orders. I could hold them accountable and punish anyone with the weapon I was carrying and with charges against them. One of my biggest problems was my psychological struggle after I started punishing people and getting addicted to it. I saw that people recognized me, even when I was wearing a mask.<sup>224</sup>

Sometimes we punished people for very petty matters, or we imposed penalties that were much greater than [the act warranted]. Sometimes we demanded a ransom, and we decided how much money we would demand based on what we wanted. So we invented some violations and imposed a specific penalty and made the person choose between punishment or payment. We used this method with people we were sure had money.<sup>225</sup>

As a result of the position I was given, over time I developed an aggressive tendency that I had not expected. This affected my decisions, which were quick and painful for people who were forced to abide by Islamic law and violated the rules by smoking or delaying going to prayer. I did this knowing that many of those involved in [Da’esh] were smoking and were not committed to praying.<sup>226</sup>

There was a clear trend of increasing disillusionment<sup>227</sup> with Da’esh among many of the interviewees on realizing the disparity between senior members’ teachings and their behavior: “[Commanders] were ordering us to listen and obey and punish offenders, while we saw their unspeakable cruelty. They selected the provisions of Sharia [law] according to whatever suited their desires.”<sup>228</sup> These included minor conduct violations, such as alcohol and drug use and not praying regularly. But many reported commanders perpetrating grave violations such as beatings

224 Male #1, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

225 Male #2, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

226 Male #7, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

227 Disillusionment was also reported in connection with an opposing armed faction actor in the Da’esh conflict when the respondent was in his mid-teens: “At first things seemed perfect and served the people. But it quickly turned into robbery, the theft of homes, and the displacement ... [of] families... what I witnessed was theft and extortion, such as ‘Either you give me [something or an amount of money] or I tell [the group leaders] you are from Da’esh.’ Male #11, mid-teens at time of association with opposing armed actor in the Da’esh conflict, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

228 Male #1, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.



and the execution of other Da'esh members, extortion, and robbery from civilians, sexual abuse of younger boys among their ranks, rape and sexual violence against women and girls, forcing younger boys to participate in physically difficult tasks and combat, and the public execution of civilians. Two participants reported witnessing civilian executions, which had a significant negative effect on them:

” All that [extortion and drug use] could have been justified if [Da'esh] didn't carry out the repeated executions of innocents in public squares. The scene was very frightening, frustrating, and criminal.<sup>229</sup>

[Being in Da'esh] was a very difficult experience and it really tired me, physically and psychologically, because once I saw the killing of apostates by Da'esh in the market and it affected me a lot. I had not seen such scenes before, except on YouTube.<sup>230</sup>

Several participants reported suffering physical violence from their commanders, for not carrying out their duties properly, as a means of collective punishment, or while being investigated, beaten, or held in Da'esh detention for a variety of infractions. The severity of their punishment was mitigated for some by the intervention of other, more senior Da'esh members, in some cases a relative or acquaintance of the participant's parents. These connections also eventually helped some participants to exit the group.

Beyond this, interviewees did not refer specifically to how friendship or familial networks evolved once within Da'esh. Rather, some noted that despite the violent nature of the group, certain members were “kind-hearted”<sup>231</sup> and had a “high level of religiosity”,<sup>232</sup> and would provide advice and counsel, although they said it was difficult to raise concerns even with these individuals, given the group's organizational structure and culture:

” Even in these terrorist groups there are purified individuals who do not accept any deviant acts or unjustified attacks on others, or theft. I heard serious complaints from some of them about such acts but did not dare to ask any of them because I didn't know [what their] reaction to what I was going to tell them [would be].<sup>233</sup>

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229 Male #8, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

230 Male #6, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

231 Male #9, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

232 Male #17, early teens at time of association, Northern Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

233 Male #1, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

This is not to say there was no cooperation among group members. Participants received help while carrying out physically demanding logistical tasks and were occasionally given time off from their duties. However, despite these instances of camaraderie and collaboration, they shared mostly negative and painful recollections of their time with Da'esh, with many explicitly stating that there had been no positive side to their time with the group at all.<sup>234</sup>

” After all the practices I saw inside [Da'esh], I do not think it is an experience I am proud of, or even that I can find any kind of positivity in it.<sup>235</sup>

If we talk about the positives, there is nothing in my opinion. This organization consists of people who have arrived at a degree of brutality and tyranny. Once you work with them, you are forced to be like them. In the past, killing was based on identity and sect. Now even members of [Da'esh's] sect are subject to being killed. I do not think there was one positive thing in the period I spent with them.<sup>236</sup>

It was not a positive experience at all, because of what I saw of violence and injustice against people whose only fault was that they were government employees.<sup>237</sup>

I don't think the experience with an organization based on violence and bloodshed was positive at all.<sup>238</sup>

I don't think it was a positive experience from joining to leaving, because most of the work we did and the way the organization deals with its opponents is based on violence and extremism.<sup>239</sup>

I had no positive experience during that time at all. It was the darkest time of my life.<sup>240</sup>

These responses may reflect hindsight, as the participants have grown up and have had to deal with the consequences of their association. They may also underscore the harsh conditions and hypocrisy they experienced as members of the group and the group's wider action against their communities. All these experiences together created “psychological despair,”<sup>241</sup> and many reported thinking about leaving the group relatively early on. Most did not leave immediately, primarily out of fear that as deserters, they or their family would be executed, a concern that was common among those interviewed, “I was always thinking about finding a way to leave, but I was afraid that I would get captured and they would kill my family”.<sup>242</sup> Others stayed because they still had some belief in the group or did not have the time to figure out how to leave safely, given their workload.

234 Participants may not have felt it safe or prudent to detail positive aspects of their involvement with Da'esh in the current socio-political climate.

235 Male #4, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

236 Male #10, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

237 Male #6, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

238 Male #13, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

239 Male #14, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

240 Male #20, pre-teen at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

241 Male #6, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

242 Male #18, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

## Exit patterns

Most of those interviewed exited Da'esh before the security forces fully retook their areas. Military operations were under way in some cases, but territorial control was still being fought for. The common trend was to take advantage of any opportunity that arose to leave undetected or with some kind of tacit permission. This was easier for some than for others, given their individual circumstances and family networks: "I left the group because of the way the community saw me and for fear of the future, especially after the violations that Da'esh had committed ... My friend who had helped me join had a relative among the leaders and persuaded my commander to agree to me leaving, as my mother is disabled and needed care."<sup>243</sup>

Most of the other participants sought to leave Da'esh amid the disorders, as military operations intensified over time. This meant not only leaving Da'esh but also fleeing the area altogether. Although some had initially joined Da'esh without their parents' knowledge or approval, most relied heavily on parents and relatives to facilitate their escape via internal "smugglers", many of whom were Da'esh members themselves: "One day ... I was hit by a bullet. My condition worsened. I was ordered to go to be treated outside [my city] and my family came with me. I stayed in the hospital, and then my relative asked if I could be taken to his house for care. With the help of a smuggler, my family and I managed to get to another city and stay there."<sup>244</sup> This type of network often involved support and advice from relatives or friends who had been displaced earlier on in the conflict. All of this highlights how intertwined Da'esh members were with people within their own households and extended families and communities who were not part of the group. The participants primarily fled with their families, parents, or at least their mothers, and siblings.

The journey following escape was expensive and harrowing, often taking many days. Participants recalled having to drive without lights at night along unpaved back roads, travelling on foot for parts of the journey, "full of fear of being discovered or being shot by one of the two forces, Da'esh or the security forces".<sup>245</sup> Initial relief soon gave way to economic and social hardship, including fear of being arrested or reported. Participants and their families kept a low profile, relying in some cases on aid from international organizations but in most cases on support from their family network.

A critical factor for most who left Da'esh and fled from their place of origin into internal displacement was the accompaniment of their families. This may in part have been a strategic decision to avoid detection as they crossed to safety; security forces would see a teenage boy crossing a checkpoint alone, particularly out of Da'esh-held territory, as suspicious and a potential threat. They also wanted to get their families to safety for fear of reprisals because their child had escaped from the group. At the same time, parents and caregivers did not leave without their sons, perhaps because they considered them too young to make their own way alone.

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243 Male #15, early teens at time of association, Northern Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

244 Male #8, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

245 Male #3, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

## 4.4 After association: State responses and children's experiences of rehabilitation and reintegration

### Benchmark for action: the national legal framework

A number of relevant international and national legal frameworks impact upon State responses to children associated with Da'esh.

Iraq ratified the CRC in 1994 and acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (the "Optional Protocol") in 2008.<sup>246</sup> It also ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1971.<sup>247</sup> This is relevant to children and families with perceived Da'esh associations, as it provides for the recognition of an individual before the law, including their right to birth registration and nationality, recognition of freedom of movement and freedom to choose their residence, and recognition of the right to liberty and security, specifically not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention.<sup>248</sup> The right to a nationality, a legal identity and civil documentation is also enshrined in various bodies of Iraqi law including Iraq's Constitution of 2005, Civil Status Law No. 65 of 1972, Civil Status System Law No. 32 of 1974, and the Iraq Nationality Act No. 26 of 2006.<sup>249</sup> Iraq's Constitution of 2005 enshrines the free movement of people and goods across regions and governorates.<sup>250</sup>

Despite this, national legislation on children's rights is not comprehensive.<sup>251</sup> The Social Protection Law No. 11 of 2014 is the main legal basis for the country's social protection system and includes provisions for child dependents, orphans, and juveniles<sup>252</sup> sentenced to more than a year in prison.<sup>253</sup> More specific reference to rehabilitation and reintegration support for conflict-affected children, including those involved in armed conflict, are found in the Yezidi Female Survivor's Law No. 8 of 2021 (colloquially known as the reparations law), which applies to Yezidi, Turkmen, Christian, and Shabak women and girls subjected to sexual violence by Da'esh, Yezidi child survivors (boys and girls) who were under the age of 18 when they were abducted by the group, and Yezidi, Turkmen, Christian, and Shabak survivors, including men and boys, of mass killings and extermination perpetrated by Da'esh in their area.<sup>254</sup>

With respect to criminal justice legislation, Iraq's Juvenile Welfare Act No. 76 of 1983 applies to all individuals under the age of 18 at the time of committing a criminal offence.<sup>255</sup> It stipulates the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Federal Iraq as 9 and in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as

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246 United Nations, CRC; HRW, "*Everyone Must Confess*", pp. 42–3.

247 Mara Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework Joint Scoping Exercise for Iraq", (Baghdad: UNAMI, 2022), 30–2;

248 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", pp. 30–2.

249 Ibid.

250 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", p. 30.

251 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", p. 35.

252 In the context of the Iraqi juvenile justice system's sentencing and procedures, the term "children" refers to "juveniles" above the age of criminal responsibility (9)

253 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", p. 36; Iraq, Social Protection Law No. 11 (2014), unofficial translation available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c755aa47.html>.

254 Ceasefire, "The Yezidi Survivors' Law", pp. 1–2.

255 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", pp. 34–5; Human Rights Watch, "*Everyone Must Confess*", pp. 47–8.

11, both significantly lower than international standards.<sup>256</sup> The law states that any child arrested is to be transferred to the custody of the juvenile police, who must present the child before a Juvenile Court judge.

No child below the age of 14 is to be held in detention, and those over 14 are to be held only if accused of a felony carrying the death penalty. In this latter case, the Juvenile Court should sentence the child to a youth rehabilitation school for not less than 5 and no more than 15 years. The law also provides for aftercare upon their release via a dedicated Department of Aftercare, though this is not fully implemented due to insufficient resources, capacity, and mechanisms for the provision of such care.<sup>257</sup> While the law allows for the conditional discharge of juvenile offenders in principle, this option is not available for those charged with offences related to national security, including terrorism.<sup>258</sup>

Adults and children above the age of criminal responsibility who have been associated with Da'esh are charged under the Federal Government of Iraq's Anti-Terrorism Law No. 13 of 2005 or the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) Anti-Terrorism Law No. 3 of 2006, depending on where the alleged offence occurred. Both laws include broad definitions of terrorism, and neither distinguishes between adults and children.<sup>259</sup> These broad definitions contribute to subjective interpretation of the law and excessive discretion in their application.<sup>260</sup> Consequently "membership of" or "association with" Daesh have been widely utilized as grounds for convicting individuals under Article 4 of the Federal Law<sup>261</sup> and Article 3 (7) of the KRG Law. Throughout counter-terrorism hearing observations conducted by UNAMI between May 2018 and October 2019<sup>262</sup> there was a significant focus on allegations of "membership" of Da'esh leading to a prevalent application of Article 4. The courts did not require specific evidence of a terrorist act for conviction; the primary focus was on proving association or membership, with minimal evaluation of the evidence by the judges involved.<sup>263</sup> Adults and children alike have been investigated and prosecuted for alleged association and other terrorism-related offences since 2015 under this legislation.<sup>264</sup> A new draft anti-terrorism law that may address some of the gaps mentioned above was submitted to the Iraqi Parliament in the fourth quarter of 2022.

Iraq's General Amnesty Law No. 27 of 2016 sought to rectify some of the considerable shortfalls in the legislation by granting amnesty to those convicted of association with Da'esh or other terrorist groups who could demonstrate that they had joined the group against their will and had

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256 OHCHR and UNAMI, "Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Iraq: Trials under the Anti-Terrorism Laws and Implications for Justice, Accountability and Social Cohesion in the Aftermath of ISIL", Baghdad, January 2020, p. 4.

257 IOM and UNICEF, "Assessment of the Reintegration Experiences of Children in Contact with the Law in Iraq", (Baghdad: IOM and UNICEF, 2014).

258 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", p. 35.

259 OHCHR and UNAMI, "Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Iraq", pp. 4-5.

260 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", p. 42.

261 Article 4(1): Anyone who has committed, as a main perpetrator or a participant, any of the terrorist acts stated in the second & third articles of this law, will be sentenced to death. A person who incites, plans, finances, or assists terrorists to commit the crimes stated in this law shall face the same penalty as the main perpetrator; and Article (2): Anyone who intentionally covers up any terrorist act or harbors a terrorist with the purpose of concealment, shall be sentenced to life imprisonment.

262 OHCHR and UNAMI, "Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Iraq", p. 10.

263 Ibid; Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", p. 43.

264 OHCHR and UNAMI, "Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Iraq". For an update on this trend, see also OHCHR and UNAMI, "Update on Accountability in Iraq: Limited Progress Towards Justice for Human Rights Violations and Abuses by 'Unidentified Armed Elements'", OHCHR Country Report (2022).

not committed serious crimes while a member.<sup>265</sup> The law also explicitly grants the right to judicial review in the case of individuals convicted based on confession obtained by coercion. The law was amended in November 2017, in response to a political backlash, to exclude crimes stipulated in the Federal Anti-Terrorism Law committed after 10 June 2014 to ensure that pardons would not be extended to those convicted in relation to Da'esh.<sup>266</sup>

While there is little specific legislation on the reintegration of either adults or children associated with terrorist groups into their communities, customary or tribal processes are used for this purpose, although here too matters are complicated by differing understandings of what membership or association means for each affected community and group.<sup>267</sup> Nonetheless, some tribal groups have used two forms of disavowal processes to enable the return of families who have some perceived association with Da'esh and exile alleged perpetrators.<sup>268</sup> One form, *bara'a*, is more collective and involves the banishment of named male tribe members from a clan, while the other, *tabri'yya*, is more individualized and involves direct relatives disavowing a male tribe member and pledging to sever all ties with him. Those who perform these disavowals can come back into the fold, while the tribe rescinds all protection to those cast out. These processes may be effective in some cases; they are not based on formal law, and are often confused with *ikhbar*, a legal process currently utilized primarily under the Anti-Terrorism Laws in which an individual informs the State through the courts of a relative's affiliation to Da'esh. This is not a disavowal mechanism but rather a way of reporting a relative.

In another customary process relevant to the return of individuals, including children, associated with Da'esh, *kafala* or sponsorship is often required by government authorities, tribal leaders, and communities.<sup>269</sup> Regulated by Iraq's Code of Criminal Procedure, it can take different forms with varying degrees of interaction with State security and legal actors.<sup>270</sup> In general, however, in this process individuals seek the sponsorship of a local tribal leader, security official, or other local leader, or more recently a male relative, who serves as their guarantor and can attest to the community that they have renounced all past connections to Da'esh and do not pose a threat.

## Iraq's efforts to address child association with terrorist groups

Halting child recruitment now and in the future requires, as one professional working with associated children put it, "a maximalist approach to legislative prevention",<sup>271</sup> meaning a prevention plan tailored to different groups as appropriate and adding laws, revising laws, and implementing international conventions.<sup>272</sup>

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265 Mara Revkin, "Iraq Case Study. After the Islamic State: Balancing Accountability and Reconciliation in Iraq", in Mark Freeman and others, eds., *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism* (Tokyo/Barcelona: Institute for Integrated Transition and UNU Centre for Policy Research, 2018), p. 21.

266 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", p. 44.

267 Melisande Genat, *Tribal Justice Mechanisms and Durable Solutions for Families with a Perceived Affiliation to ISIS* (Baghdad: IOM, 2020), pp. 12-3.

268 Ibid, p. 14.

269 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", 39-40.

270 Ibid.

271 Key informant #2, International NGO Program manager. Interview conducted in May 2022.

272 Key informant #11, UN staff member. Interview conducted in June 2022.

This has begun to happen in recent years with the adoption in 2017 of the Iraqi National Child Protection Policy, which prioritizes the establishment of a legislative and child-rights framework with a focus on preventing child recruitment and use, ensuring their release, and supporting children affected by conflict.<sup>273</sup> It specifically states that abused or exploited children should receive the support and care they need to promote their well-being and facilitate their reintegration into their communities through services that meet international standards and are in line with best practices.<sup>274</sup> Measures that prioritize prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration have also been adopted in the context of counter-terrorism efforts. The 2019 Iraqi National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism emphasizes a holistic approach focusing on addressing the root causes of violent extremism through a combination of security, social, economic, educational, and legal interventions. Rehabilitation and reintegration also play a crucial role in the Strategy, which foresees tailored interventions, education, vocational training, and psychosocial and socioeconomic support to help individuals, particularly children, transition back into society. While still in the initial stages of implementation, the Strategy holds significant potential for the fight against violent extremism.

In June 2021 a bill on child protection that criminalizes the act of involving children in armed conflict was submitted to the Council of Representatives of Iraq for its first reading after its endorsement by the Council of Ministers of Iraq.<sup>275</sup> During the same period, the draft Child Rights Act for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which also criminalizes the recruitment or conscription of children into military or paramilitary services or armed groups in combat or support roles, was finalized and validated for submission to the Council of Ministers of the KRG for endorsement and subsequent submission to the Parliament of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.<sup>276</sup> A Child Protection Policy for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, that specifies services and capacities for the protection of children from violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect is awaiting the endorsement of the Council of Ministers.<sup>277</sup> In addition, the Federal Government is seeking to reform its social protection program<sup>278</sup> and to further a prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration plan for the repatriation of Iraqi nationals from Syria.<sup>279</sup> Each of these efforts involves coordination not only with the relevant government ministries, departments, and lawmakers but also with UN agencies and external partners. To date, task forces have been established for each of these to ensure compliance with international standards and obligations.

In terms of existing legislation, the initial implementation of elements of the Yezidi Female Survivor's Law of 2021, which in part specifically pertains to child rehabilitation and armed conflict, is a critical positive development. The adoption of this law in the first instance is a major step forward in addressing the legacy of Da'esh's violations against Iraq's religious minority communities. Its provisions entail administering services to Yezidi women and girl survivors of sexual violence, including compensation and reparation. These include a monthly salary, health and psychosocial centers, access to education, public employment, collective and symbolic

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273 S/2019/984, para. 85.

274 S/2022/46, para. 45.

275 Ibid.

276 Ibid.

277 Ibid.

278 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", p. 36.

279 See IOM and International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), "Roundtables on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration", (Baghdad, 2022)

measures that contribute to acknowledging the truth of what happened and dignifying survivors and supporting their recovery, and lastly, guarantees of non-repetition.<sup>280</sup> However, the law does not address the status of children born as a result of rape by Da'esh members. The Directorate-General for Survivors' Affairs, established under this legislation, opened its application process for reparations in September 2021 and distributed debit cards to access these funds to a first group of applicants in March 2023.<sup>281</sup> Full implementation of the provisions under this law may serve as a guide for the types of services, support, and recognition other children associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups need for their rehabilitation and reintegration process, and may also serve to inform preventative policies, services, and care.<sup>282</sup> These measures complement ongoing efforts aiming to support the recovery of areas affected by the conflict more broadly; for instance in 2015 the Iraqi government established the Fund for the Reconstruction of Areas Affected by Terrorist Operations with a view to coordinating reconstruction efforts in areas liberated from Da'esh control throughout Iraq. Between 2016 and 2021 the Fund contributed to thousands of projects.

Innovations in customary processes to help facilitate the return of individuals and families with perceived Da'esh affiliation have also emerged in the wake of the conflict in the form of local peace agreements negotiated and signed by tribal leaders and other stakeholders including government officials and security actors.<sup>283</sup> This is critically needed because the tribal and formal legal processes for this purpose described earlier raise serious protection concerns for those who participate in them.

While these processes continue, local peace agreements are also gaining ground. Between 2015 and 2021, stakeholders brokered eleven such agreements in communities across Ninewa, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, and Anbar governorates. Recent analysis of these agreements indicates that they do help to foster safe returns regardless of whether those still displaced or the wider community participated in their negotiation; however, the sustainability of this return and reintegration and its acceptance may depend on greater participation by women, youth, civil society, and the displaced to balance all parties' needs, and independent monitoring of their implementation.<sup>284</sup> Finally, while there is some evidence that international involvement (e.g., donor governments, UN agencies, and international NGOs) in the development of such agreements helps make them more inclusive,<sup>285</sup> these processes remain complex and opaque, and may be vulnerable to co-optation.<sup>286</sup>

These various efforts remain relatively recent and their impact can be fragmented, complicated by the challenges of reaching the entire population in need of support in a post-conflict context. Nonetheless, they are strongly indicative of the growing recognition across the government and

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280 Ceasefire, "The Yezidi Survivors' Law", pp. 2-3.

281 United Nations Iraq, "On 2nd Anniversary of YSL: Yezidi Survivors See First Benefits of Landmark Reparations Law", Press Release, 2 March 2023.

282 Key informant #12, UN staff member. Interview conducted 23 June 2022.

283 Jacqueline Parry and Olga Aymerich, "Local Peace Agreements and the Return of IDPs with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq", Policy Research Working Paper 9961, World Bank Group e-Library, 18 February 2022; IOM and Peace Paradigms Organization, *Local Peace Processes Toolkit* (Baghdad, 2022).

284 Parry and Aymerich, "Local Peace Agreements."

285 Jessica Watkins and Mustafa Hasan, "Post-ISIL Reconciliation in Iraq and the Local Anatomy of National Grievances: The Case of Yathrib", *Peacebuilding* 10, no. 3, 2021.

286 Parry and Aymerich, "Local Peace Agreements."



society that rehabilitation and reintegration are critically needed now and that detention alone is not a solution for dealing with children associated with Da'esh. This holds true not only for children returning home but also for those in displacement, wherever they may be.

” A shift is happening in communities and the Iraqi government, realizing it is not about now and putting everyone in detention. It is about what happens after.<sup>287</sup>

This is what is most important at this stage, how to facilitate the reintegration of [children and families].<sup>288</sup>

## Children's journeys of rehabilitation and reintegration

### Children arrested and detained for terrorism-related offenses

While the treatment of boys detained for terrorism-related offences has undergone notable changes over the past years, their situation continues to be a matter for concern in terms of their experiences, the support available to them for rehabilitation and reintegration, and the way in which they are seen in their communities.

Interviewees reported being arrested with insufficient evidence of criminal activity, often during military operations to retake Da'esh territory or having been denounced to the authorities by neighbors, relatives or friends, leading to their inclusion on “wanted” lists.<sup>289</sup> Certain communities appear to be especially affected by these methods.<sup>290</sup> One professional working with these children also described recurrent abuse and ill-treatment of the children during investigations,<sup>291</sup> confirming previous reports.<sup>292</sup> Others highlighted how the lack of specific provisions separating children from adults and recognizing children's victimization in the existing anti-terrorism laws have contributed to children being sentenced to years in prison, often solely based on charges of “association”.<sup>293</sup> United Nations data show that the only charge against over 50 per cent of adult and children's cases handed prison sentences of over 18 months for terrorism-related offences was membership of Da'esh.<sup>294</sup>

However, key informant interviewees described notable changes in the handling of these cases over the past years. According to those whose work relates to detention, harsh sentences were more common in 2016–2017 at the height of military operations against Da'esh, and since 2019 and especially 2020 judges have been handing down lesser sentences, even including

287 Key informant #11, UN staff member. Interview conducted in June 2022.

288 Key informant #26, Local NGO Head. Interview conducted in June 2022.

289 Key informant #6, international non-governmental organization (INGO) program manager; Key informant #11, UN staff member. Interviews conducted in June 2022.

290 Key informant #12, UN staff member. Interview conducted in June 2022.

291 Key informant #6, INGO program manager. Interview conducted in June 2022.

292 See (A/73/907-S/2019/509); Human Rights Watch, “Everyone Must Confess”, pp. 17–19 and 23–26; Human Rights Watch, “Extreme measures: Abuses against children detained as national security threats”, July 2016.

293 Focus group discussion with Baghdad officials, July 2022; Key informant #1, KRG official, interview conducted in May 2022; Human Rights Watch, “Flawed justice: Accountability for ISIS crimes in Iraq”, 2017.

294 UNAMI and UNHCR, “Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Iraq”, p. 10.

conditional release schemes.<sup>295</sup> In 2020, a panel of judges applied the amended Amnesty Law (although technically it should not apply to terrorism-related cases) to some cases involving child association with Da'esh, releasing the defendants.<sup>296</sup> This may indicate recognition of the need to avoid overreliance on detention for these children, and will facilitate their reintegration and rehabilitation.

Children from Federal Iraq who have served a sentence for a terrorism-related offence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and have been given their clearance papers encounter double jeopardy on release: if they enter Federal Iraq they can be arrested and tried again. Federal authorities and security forces do not recognize release papers from Kurdish institutions because their respective counter-terrorism laws are not fully aligned.<sup>297</sup> Children from outside the KRI are not allowed to stay in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq after being released, leaving them in limbo<sup>298</sup> in displacement camps. The way in which communities at large perceive these children can also be affected. One professional, for example, noted that because the Federal authorities do not recognize release papers from Kurdish institutions, neither do most communities.<sup>299</sup> In 2020 a panel of judges ruled to vacate some cases of arrest and double jeopardy in relation to children, but it is unclear whether this precedent will continue to be implemented.<sup>300</sup>

On their release, children that the authorities and security forces believe have links to Da'esh must clear an additional hurdle: they need security clearance, which can entail a difficult and lengthy process.<sup>301</sup> Obtaining this is often a precondition for access to identity and civil documentation, although practices and regulations often vary within and between governorates,<sup>302</sup> and affects access to other services. Even in situations where security clearance is granted, children and families are likely to need to travel to their places of origin to be issued the documents they need, a journey that many do not deem safe, fearing revenge or retaliation.<sup>303</sup> There are also indications that families in these situations, and especially women without husbands, may be particularly at risk of abuse and exploitation when pursuing security clearance and documentation. Several interviewees, including two key civil society informants and the mother of a son who had been associated as a boy, reported that they had been expected to pay for help with the clearance and documentation process with sex.<sup>304</sup>

The experiences of four participants arrested as children who served three- to five-year prison terms in federal juvenile facilities illustrate the impact of these challenges on their journeys to rehabilitation and reintegration. They reported that they had been arrested due to their names being on a wanted list or because somebody in their community had denounced them. Two claimed that they had initially suffered ill-treatment at the hands of security forces, but conditions improved after they were sentenced and transferred to federal detention facilities.

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295 Focus group discussion with Baghdad officials, July 2022.

296 Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Step toward justice for ISIS child suspects: Improved trials should be replicated", 13 December 2020.

297 Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework", pp. 42-3.

298 Key informant #12, UN staff member. Interview conducted in June 2022.

299 Key informant #3b, UN staff member. Interview conducted in May 2022.

300 Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Step Toward Justice for ISIS Child Suspects".

301 Saieh, *Barriers from Birth*, p. 3.

302 Protection Cluster Iraq and UNHCR, "Right to Identity and Civil Documentation", Protection Analysis Report, 31 October 2021, 7.

303 Key informant #6, INGO program manager. Interview conducted in June 2022.

304 Key informant #21, parent of child associated with Da'esh; Key informant #25, local expert, interviews conducted in July 2022; Key informant #26, local NGO head. Interview conducted in June 2022.

Some described continued scrutiny by security forces after their release even though they had federal release papers. Others were still afraid of re-arrest if they tried to replace their civil documentation. They remain on wanted lists, which hinders their freedom of movement within Iraq and prevents them accessing civil documentation for themselves and any dependents. Most had moved from their more rural places of origin into bigger cities nearby to avoid the scrutiny of their community: a study has shown that urban areas are easier to disappear into than rural ones.<sup>305</sup>

” I was arrested by [the security forces] and I was taken first to [governorate] and then [governorate] for trial. I was sentenced to three years in prison because I couldn't deny my association with the group, but meanwhile there was no evidence of my being involved in killings, harming people, or fighting against security forces ... While detained I was abused and beaten by [security forces] and it was a very difficult two months for me, but when I got my sentence and was moved to the juvenile prison it was much easier compared to before. After prison I came back to [home district] to my family, and the stigmatization of my involvement with Da'esh was still there even after I was released, especially from the security forces, who still pay us visits every now and then. My situation now is much better ... My only problem is that I still get stopped at checkpoints because my name is still on wanted lists, and they always give me a hard time even though I have my release papers ... I avoid travelling as much as possible for now but I'm thinking about the future, because I have a child now and will need to travel and visit government offices for whatever documents are needed for my child and his future.<sup>306</sup>

I was sentenced to three and a half years in prison. After I was released, I went to [city] and stayed there for a couple of months because I was afraid to go back to [home district]. I moved back to [home district city] where I live now with my family but not to our home village ... for my family it is safer to stay in [home district city] where not many people know us and the services are better. The difficult part for me is that I have lost my national ID and I don't have a passport. I avoid going to the Civil Affairs Directorate because they might give me a hard time and even get me arrested again.<sup>307</sup>

Another important obstacle these children face in their rehabilitation and reintegration journey is stigmatization within their communities. The treatment of children in the justice system who have been charged and sentenced for association can contribute to their rejection rather than fostering a feeling of accountability and justice having been served. Representative analysis of Mosul residents' views of Da'esh crimes and penal sanctions, for example, finds that the population wants the sanctions differentiated depending on the level of Da'esh support and the severity of the crimes committed.<sup>308</sup> Furthermore, many victims' communities consider that most of the existing proceedings do not fulfill their need for justice because they do not allow witness

305 Olga Aymerich, "Community Resilience and the Return of Iraqi IDPs with Perceived Affiliation to the Islamic State", *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 39, 2020, p. 558.

306 Male #19, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

307 Male #20, pre-teen at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

308 Revkin, "After the Islamic State", pp. 1-39.

testimonies.<sup>309</sup> These feelings are compounded by the limited access to accountability and redress options available to victims of Da'esh in all communities. As a result, children in detention fear that their sentencing will mark them for life in their communities.<sup>310</sup>

By not prioritizing serious crimes and prosecuting mostly on the basis of association, authorities may limit the possibility of justice being served for the full range of crimes committed by Da'esh perpetrators.<sup>311</sup> This in turn may reinforce a sense of collective blame and suspicion within and between communities, especially in the absence of more inclusive and accessible accountability and redress mechanisms. In 2020, some Federal and Kurdish judicial authorities sought to institute courts to try international crimes committed by Da'esh members.<sup>312</sup>

## Returning to the communities amid security concerns

The lived experiences of rehabilitation and reintegration of the young men associated with Da'esh as children reveal several challenges that undermine their prospects for rehabilitation and reintegration.

First, obtaining formal identity documents, necessary for accessing public services and enjoying freedom of movement, is problematic for a significant proportion of children, both boys and girls, across geographies and ethno-religious identities. Their documents may have been confiscated by Da'esh, been lost while fleeing, confiscated by security forces on suspicion of Da'esh association, or issued by Da'esh while it controlled the territory. The Government of Iraq does not recognize these documents and so will not replace them.<sup>313</sup> Securing new or replacement documentation is an onerous process taking up to six months if all the paperwork is in order,<sup>314</sup> and seeking to expedite the process or “game the system” can be particularly expensive.<sup>315</sup> Iraqi women whose husbands and/or the fathers of their children are dead or missing are subject to a comprehensive and lengthy process to prove the circumstances of the death and their marriage when applying for documents for their children. Children born to Da'esh members or under Da'esh control must prove their relationship to their parents, which often requires a DNA test in the absence of both parents' documents. This process aims to ensure that individuals associated with Da'esh can successfully reintegrate into their communities and to safeguard public security.

Rejection and the feeling of being targeted continue to affect the trajectories of participants after their exit from Da'esh. Even those who have not been detained can be investigated or brought in for questioning. For many, the intervention of tribal leaders contributed to easing the social stigma to an extent: “We returned under the sponsorship of the sheikh of our clan. I tried to find a job again, but they told me to wait for a while until things calm down, to take the feelings of the victims into account.”<sup>316</sup> Another interviewee described how “after the liberation [of my area]

309 EOD and SOD, “A Position Statement on the Trials and Execution of IS Suspects without the Involvement of Victims”, press release, 16 July 2019.

310 HRW, “Everyone Must Confess”, pp. 38–40.

311 OHCHR and UNAMI, “Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Iraq: Legal Conditions and Procedural Safeguards to Prevent Torture and Ill-treatment”, [EN/AR/KU] 3 August 2021, p. 10.

312 Revkin, “Report of the UN Global Framework”, pp. 51–3.

313 Alexandra Saieh, “Barriers from Birth: Undocumented Children in Iraq Sentenced to a Life on the Margins”, Norwegian Refugee Council, 2019, 8.

314 Ibid, 20.

315 Key informant #4, academic. Interview conducted in May 2022.

316 Male #4, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

and due to my family's relationship with the [local] tribal sheikhs, they mediated on my family's behalf and brought us back home under their supervision after we pledged not to rejoin or return to violent extremist ideology. We kept going back and forth between [the displacement location and home] anyway, for fear of retaliation from the victims' families and because of work."<sup>317</sup>

The majority resolve to live away from their home communities, separated from immediate family, or to travel back and forth between locations. They do not feel safe, even if they have permission to return, concerned about the stigmatization their families may face or the possibility of reprisals, or because they have clearance to be in one area but not another. Their families may also change their neighborhood or location to avoid harassment. Another factor that influences the perception on arrival in the displacement location is how long participants stayed in their original locations prior to being retaken from Da'esh. The sooner they managed to escape the better: those who were displaced later are seen by default as Da'esh supporters, if not outright members of the group.

” In the beginning when I got out no one knew that I had been with [Da'esh]. The public sympathized with me and helped me. When civilians from [my area] managed to escape too and settled in the same place as me and learned I was there, I was reported to the security forces and interrogated more than once. They took my identification document until they made sure that I was safe ... that I had not been involved in taking the blood of any civilian or individual. In addition, I left at a time considered early by the security forces [in the displacement location]. But the security forces in my home city still have my name on the blacklist and I have not been able to return until this moment. I am currently in a city other than mine. On top of this there are pressures on my family and I hope to get out of this one day. My family left their house and went to another neighborhood.<sup>318</sup>

The ability to resume community life, whether in the place of origin or elsewhere, appears to depend on tribal and family networks. Nearly all of those interviewed are currently working, predominantly in daily wage jobs. Some are engaged, married, or starting families, while others remain single. Most had not returned to school since their association with Da'esh, but indicated that they would be interested in completing their education given the opportunity.

Overall, their current goals are to find lucrative work in Iraq or abroad to support themselves and their families, or start a family, and “live in peace like a normal person.”<sup>319</sup> One participant hoped to be able to work with civil society organizations, using his experience to promote peace and tolerance in the community. For some, these aspirations are more modest than those they held as boys, when many wished to become officers in the Iraqi Army.

Whether a child is perceived as a security threat and thus stigmatized is also influenced by two notable factors: whether they are boys or girls and their ethnic origin. Even in the case of children seen as victims there still seems to be a perception that girls have been victimized more than boys, rather than recognition of the differing and overlapping experiences of violence and sexual violence

317 Male #3, early-teen at time of association, Central Iraq, interview conducted in June 2022.

318 Male #1, mid-teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in June 2022.

319 Male #16, early teens at time of association, Central Iraq. Interview conducted in July 2022.

both may have had. This is linked to the assumption that girls and women were either recruited by force or became associated with Da'esh indirectly through male relatives who had joined the group.<sup>320</sup> The implication is that boys have more agency and are more culpable than girls and women. This perspective derives from stereotypical assumptions about girls and may hide the needs of boys of all ethno-religious communities as victims of violence, and in some cases sexual violence, during their association with Da'esh, in turn limiting their access to the appropriate services.

In the Iraqi context, differences in how children associated with Da'esh are represented and the ways they are recruited are also connected to their ethno-religious identity. Yezidi children and those from other ethno-religious minority communities are seen as outright victims, in part because they were abducted by force. These children are now included in Iraq's reparations law for Yezidi and other ethno-religious minority communities subjected to the genocidal violence of Da'esh, indicating recognition of the unique form of victimization they experienced: "Children were used for their own genocide. This creates an additional layer of complexity and ambiguous grief as children were used against their own. Families want them back and take them back, but they also view them as traitors, and this creates ongoing trauma."<sup>321</sup>

These children were generally welcomed back by their communities, but they returned to families living in dire conditions in internal displacement, further compounding the difficulty of accessing the limited resources available to support their rehabilitation and reintegration. While the reparations law foresees the provision of extensive services, including physical and mental health support, Kurdish language courses, formal and informal education, vocational and life-skills training, and support with obtaining civil documentation,<sup>322</sup> there are still notable gaps in its implementation.

Caregivers have raised concerns about the lack of specialized rehabilitation services for these children, especially for boys who have been exploited in armed combat. Specifically, they highlight the difficulty of connecting with such returned boys and young men, in some cases expressing fear for their own safety and that of their other children.<sup>323</sup> This pattern also appears to apply to Shia Turkmen boys who are returned to their families, predominantly in Nineveh Governorate.<sup>324</sup>

Sunni children, primarily boys, are often considered perpetrators of, or at least complicit in, the harm Da'esh caused. Key informant interviews with professionals dealing with these cases, particularly judicial actors in both Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, reflect their understanding of the complex and interrelated reasons that led children from these communities to associate with Da'esh, which include not only economic factors, difficult home lives, relatives and friends joining, or fear, but also feelings of subjugation and marginalization.

Finally, participants highlighted the recent progress made in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, underscoring the need for further structured and comprehensive programmes. In the post-conflict context, it is difficult to ensure that everyone who needs support receives it. Children

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320 Key informant #12, UN staff member. Interview conducted in June 2022. Most officials and local authorities interviewed thought that women and girls are very rarely associated with Da'esh.

321 Key informant #2, INGO program manager. Interview conducted in May 2022.

322 Amnesty International, *Legacy of Terror*, pp. 18–35.

323 Beatrice Tesconi, "Consultations for Reparations: Enhancing Victims' Participation Toward the Development of a Comprehensive Reparations Policy", Commission for Investigating and Gathering Evidence, August 2020, pp. 13–14.

324 Bulos, "These Children Escaped from ISIS Captivity".

associated with Da'esh who receive care do so "if we happen to find them."<sup>325</sup> What is clear is that "the programmes provided for rehabilitation and reintegration are few compared to the size of the population of [Da'esh]. If programming was appropriately available, it would reduce the social barriers between affected families."<sup>326</sup>

The lack of comprehensive and formal approaches may create risks even for customary processes that seem to yield positive outcomes at the community level: what appears to work at present both socially and politically to enable the children's return has the potential to single individuals out or put them at risk later, particularly if community grievances remain unaddressed.<sup>327</sup>

Thus State presence, policy, supported programming, and cross-sectoral coordination are imperative for the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of children associated with Da'esh and to support the wider community. Government safety nets, if available, and improvements in the implementation of the law are the most sustainable and necessary ways of ensuring children and young adults' rehabilitation and reintegration.<sup>328</sup> In particular, "solid and well-organized programmes from the government focusing on raising awareness and imposing laws and regulations on everyone [are critical because] there are tribal leaders and security officials now who go against the law and prevent reintegration."<sup>329</sup> An overarching set of child-sensitive and protective policies and legislation could serve as a guide for implementing more localized reintegration policies and services and ensuring that the relevant authorities and entities act in accordance with the law, as decentralized approaches are found to operate for longer, be more cost-effective, and reach larger numbers of children.<sup>330</sup> They may also serve as a guide for broader policies and services addressing the continuing interconnected grievances in the wider communities in which these children and young adults are continuing to grow up.

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325 Key informant #2, INGO program manager. Interview conducted in May 2022.

326 Key informant #18, National NGO head of office. Interview conducted June 2022.

327 Key informant #3a, UN staff member. Interview conducted in May 2022.

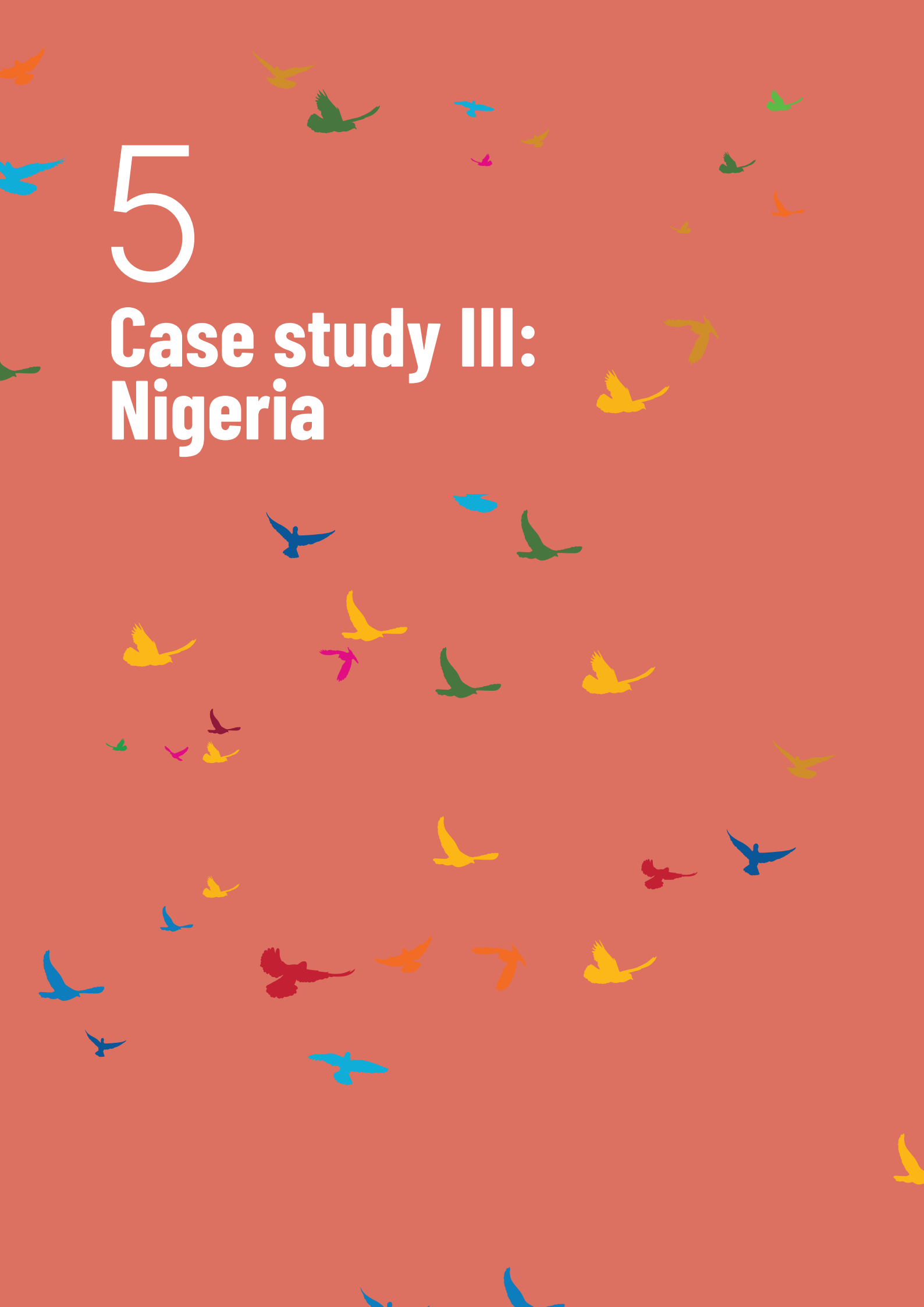
328 Ibid.

329 Key informant #26, local NGO head. Interview conducted in June 2022.

330 IOM and ICCT, "Roundtables on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration", p. 15.

# 5

## Case study III: Nigeria





# 5. Case study III: Nigeria

## 5.1 Introduction

Children have been at the blunt end of the violence accompanying the Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal Jihad (hereafter referred to as Boko Haram) conflict. Estimates indicate that Boko Haram factions, including Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), recruited around 8,000 children in north-east Nigeria between 2009 and 2016 alone,<sup>331</sup> and the UN verifies that Boko Haram recruited and used 1,385 children in 2017–2019.<sup>332</sup> The lack of data means that both numbers are likely to be far higher in reality.

Both boys and girls have been subjected to extreme levels of violence including torture, sexual abuse, and sexual violence. A study by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) paints a dire picture of the violence suffered by children at one of Boko Haram's training camps, referred to as Darul Quran, where around 200 boys died from starvation in 2016.<sup>333</sup> Children have been not only the target of violence but also exploited as perpetrators in direct hostilities: in combat roles, used for planting explosive devices, setting fire to houses, hospitals, schools, and other public-service buildings, and "suicide" bombings. A 2016 report finds that between January 2014 and June 2016, one in every four "suicide" bombers was a child.<sup>334</sup>

Recent research and policy reports have shed light on the extent to which Boko Haram pursues child recruitment and relies heavily on the exploitation of children in the pursuit of its strategies.<sup>335</sup> They also reveal how children continue to be victimized after exiting the groups, met with rejection and stigmatization and perceived as a security threat. However, there are clear knowledge gaps regarding this phenomenon. Difficult and incomplete access to information obscure the full picture of child recruitment and its evolution over time, as the organization of the group has changed and generated different factions. In addition, the ongoing conflict in the north-east has complicated the collection and analysis of evidence on approaches conducive to the rehabilitation and reintegration of these children and the obstacles they experience in practice.

This lack of data is a complex and pressing challenge for the Federal Government of Nigeria, and particularly for the States of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe in the north-east of the country. Preventing child recruitment by terrorist groups and promoting the rehabilitation and reintegration of children formerly associated with them is a high priority for not only the States directly affected but also the federal government. Against this background, the ultimate goal of this case study

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331 S/2017/304, paras. 29 and 30.

332 S/2020/652, para 22.

333 Malik Samuel and Oluwole Ojewale, "Children on the Battlefield: ISWAP's Latest Recruits", ISS Today, 10 March 2022.

334 S/2017/304.

335 Matfess, Hilary, Graeme Blair & Chad Hazlett. "Beset on all Sides: Children and the Landscape of Conflict in Northeast Nigeria", in O'Neill and van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*; Oluwasola Obisesan, "The Roaming Threats: The Security Dimension of Almajiris' Mobility in Nigeria and its Implications for Africa's Regional Security", *Security and Defence Quarterly* 34 (2021); Freedom C. Onuoha, "Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?", Special Report 348, United States Institute of Peace, June 2014.

is to contribute to strengthening protection strategies, policies and mechanisms related to child association with Boko Haram in Nigeria.

The objectives are in line with the stipulations of the federal government's National Security Strategy, which makes children and youth security a core part of its peace-building, security, and development.<sup>336</sup> It is also in line with priority component 1 of the Policy Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, which "recognizes the value of research, local knowledge and expertise" and encourages "researchers and academic faculties to engage more with security agencies to improve the quality of data, conduct more field studies in conflict areas to guide policy formulation, implementation and strategic approach to preventing and countering violent extremism".<sup>337</sup> The Framework also seeks to "break the chain of recruitment and ensure that children are protected from the consequences of violent extremism" and "build children's resilience to identify and counter extremist propaganda".<sup>338</sup>

## 5.2 Terrorism and child recruitment in Nigeria: a brief historical overview

The recent history of Islamist militancy in north-east Nigeria can be traced back to the Maitatsine movement led by Muhammadu Marwa, which challenged the Nigerian State in the early 1980s and promoted a vision of Islamic governance and hostility towards Western education and culture.<sup>339</sup> Inspired in part by this example, Boko Haram was founded by Mohammed Yusuf in 2002 to promote a similar vision of a Salafist polity.<sup>340</sup> After an escalating series of violent clashes with the authorities across north-eastern States, which were ultimately put down by the Nigerian security forces, Yusuf was detained in the Borno State capital of Maiduguri in 2009, and died in police custody.<sup>341</sup>

Surviving group members retreated into the bush and re-emerged under a new leader, Abubakar Shekau, to pursue a prolonged and violent campaign against the Nigerian State.<sup>342</sup> The group set out to terrorize the population of the north-east, engaging the Nigerian security forces in guerrilla warfare and carrying out a series of high-profile atrocities targeting the civilian population.<sup>343</sup> As the conflict spread, the group began recruiting using monetary inducements, intimidation, peer and family pressure, and overt force. Against this backdrop of intensifying violence, the Nigerian Government enacted the 2011 Terrorism (Prevention) Act, and in 2013 defined Boko Haram as a terrorist organization.<sup>344</sup> In May 2014 Boko Haram was added to the UN Security Council's Al-Qaida

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336 Federal Republic of Nigeria, "National Security Strategy", 2014

337 See Federal Republic of Nigeria, "Policy Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Combating Terrorism", August 2017, p. 16.

338 Ibid, p. 18.

339 Wisdom Oghosa Iyekekpola, "Boko Haram: Understanding the Context", *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 12 (2016): pp. 2211–28; J Tochukwu Omenma, Ifeanyi Chukwu M. Abada, and Z. Onyinyechi Omenma, "Boko Haram Insurgency: A Decade of Dynamic Evolution and Struggle for a Caliphate", *Security Journal* 33, no. 3 (2020): pp. 376–400; Andrew Walker, "What Is Boko Haram?" Special Report 308, United States Institute of Peace, June 2012.

340 Walker, "What Is Boko Haram?"

341 Ibid.

342 Ibid.

343 Ibid; see also Niamh Punton et al., "Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin", MEAC Findings Report 22, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), December 2022.

344 Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (London: Hurst, 2015); Andrew Walker, *"Eat the Heart of the Infidel": The Harrowing of Nigeria and the Rise of Boko Haram*, (London: Hurst, 2016). The Terrorism Prevention Act 2011, amended in 2013, was subsequently replaced by the Terrorism Prevention and Prohibition Act 2022 (TPPA).

Sanctions Committee list of individuals and entities subject to the targeted financial sanctions and arms embargo set out in Security Council Resolution 2083 (2012)<sup>345</sup> for “participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf of, or in support of” Al-Qaida and the Organization of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>346</sup>

In March 2015, Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to Da’esh and the group became Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The following year, however, the Da’esh leadership chose to appoint Mohammed Yusuf’s son Abu Musab al-Barnawi as leader of ISWAP in Shekau’s place, which split the organization. Two factions emerged, with Barnawi leading ISWAP and Shekau leading Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’Awati wal-Jihad (JAS).<sup>347</sup> After the split, ISWAP left the Sambisa Forest in Borno State, moved to the Lake Chad Basin region, and mobilized jihadists in the region to join the group.

A third faction, Bakura, emerged in 2019.<sup>348</sup> Named after its leader Ibrahim Bakura, the group maintains close ties with JAS and is active in the border areas of the Lake Chad Basin region. The intensity of competition between the two main factions, JAS and ISWAP, grew over the years, culminating in ISWAP fighters killing Shekau in May 2021 during an assault on his stronghold in Sambisa forest. While JAS seems to have gone into a steep decline following Shekau’s death, with mass defections from its ranks to government-held territory, ISWAP initially benefited from the evolving context by integrating former JAS operatives into its ranks and expanding its area of operations in north-eastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region.<sup>349</sup>

Boko Haram’s reliance on child recruitment has drawn considerable media attention over the past decade, with the notorious abduction of 276 girls from a government secondary school in the town of Chibok in Borno State in 2014 attracting particular condemnation from around the world<sup>350</sup> and contributing to the emergence of the group as a globally acknowledged terrorist organization.<sup>351</sup> Yet despite the group’s high-profile exploitation of children, information on children’s trajectories into the group and their experiences within the group are under-researched.

The group’s recruitment strategies range from abduction and physical threats to deception and socioeconomic incentives. Literature related to violent extremism finds that emotions such as revenge, hatred and anger toward another group, a need to belong, a desire for a sense of self-worth, and peer influence can play a significant role in encouraging some children to associate with non-State armed groups.<sup>352</sup> This appears to be the case with Boko Haram.

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345 S/RES/2083 (2012)

346 United Nations Security Council, “Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee adds Boko Haram to its sanctions list”, Press Release, May 22 2014.

347 Omenma J. Tochukwu, Ifeanyi-chukwu M. Abada and Onyinyechi Z. Omenma, “Boko Haram Insurgency: A Decade of Dynamic Evolution and Struggle for a Caliphate,” *Security Journal*, 33, no. 3 (2020), pp. 376–400.

348 Ibid.

349 Babatope Matthew Ajiboye, “Boko Haram: Shekau’s Demise – Halcyon or Nadir for Sub-Saharan Africa’s Fight Against Terrorism?”, *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, no. 41 (2022).

350 D. Searcey, “Why the Chibok Girls returned by Boko Haram are still not entirely free”, *The Independent*, 1 May 2018.

351 Emeka Okereke, “From Obscurity to Global Visibility: Periscoping Abubakar Shekau”, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 6, no. 10 (2014), p 17.

352 Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett, “Beset on All Sides”.

Studies have now begun to challenge previously held beliefs about the motivations behind children's decisions to join groups such as Boko Haram. These newer perspectives downplay the role of religious zeal, instead highlighting political, social, and economic frustrations as key factors in recruitment trajectories.<sup>353</sup> A recent UNDP report, for example, frames these dynamics under the concept of a "break of the social contract". This theoretical framework underscores the systemic societal failures that lead to disenfranchisement and poverty, conditions that make the arguments proposed by Boko Haram's propaganda particularly appealing to such vulnerable populations, including children. The group's narrative predominantly features rejection of the Nigerian State, positioning itself as a viable alternative for those who feel let down by the prevailing political and economic systems. Such messaging, which cleverly exploits the "break of the social contract", resonates deeply with those who feel marginalized and dispossessed in society, and in turn plays a crucial role in the group's recruitment strategies.<sup>354</sup>

Overall, however, the nature of association with Boko Haram seems to be personal to each individual, multi-causal, and non-linear. While several factors may render children vulnerable to recruitment, no specific combination of factors is always conducive to association.

Children within JAS and ISWAP are assigned a variety of roles including scouting, spying, sabotage, and acting as decoys and couriers at military checkpoints. Children are also involved at the front line, carrying supplies for the fighting faction, finding or acquiring ammunition and equipment, making trails or finding routes, manning checkpoints, and acting as bodyguards or guards at strategic sites. They can also be used as human shields, fighters, and "suicide" bombers.

Whether or not children engage in violent roles, violence pervades much of their experience in the group. Their association with Boko Haram often involves hazardous labor, enforced drug addiction, and even severe pain and injury. Both girls and boys are victims of sexual violence. Studies have documented the numerous atrocities that children are forced to witness and commit, such as the murder or abduction of family members, lashings, canings, and amputations inflicted as punishment, and the execution of captives by stoning, shooting, and decapitation.<sup>355</sup> Boko Haram has severely punished and frequently executed both civilians and fighters who have tried to flee the group. The long-term physical and psychosocial consequences of living with this quotidian violence and abuse can be devastating for these children.

Girls and young women who return with children born as a result of forced marriage or sexual exploitation or violence in the group, and their children especially face marginalization, discrimination and rejection by their communities because of the sociocultural implications of sexual violence.<sup>356</sup> Such children are simultaneously perceived by communities as having inherited the violent traits of their fathers and by Boko Haram as potential future fighters.

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353 Ibid.

354 UNDP, "Journey to Extremism in Africa".

355 Lere Amusan and Ufuoma Patience Ejoke, "The Psychological Trauma Inflicted by Boko Haram Insurgency in the North Eastern Nigeria", *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 36, 2017, pp. 52–59; UNICEF and International Alert, "Bad Blood: Perceptions of Children Born of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Women and Girls Associated with Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria", February 2016.

356 In 2022 a Special Independent Investigative Panel was established under the auspices of the Nigerian Human Rights Commission to investigate the allegations of women returning from Boko-Haram-held territory that they had suffered forced termination of their pregnancies, as well as other reports of violence. See also Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses*, (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

## 5.3 Child association with terrorist groups

### Pathways to involvement

#### Abductions, use of force, and threats as the most prevalent recruitment strategy

Children's pathways into and out of Boko Haram are complex and diverse, as with other non-State armed groups operating in Nigeria such as the CJTF.<sup>357</sup> However, there is considerable evidence that Boko Haram relies extensively on more coercive forms of recruitment such as child abduction and physical threat. Children have been abducted from many different locations across the north-east by means such as kidnapping, drugging, threats, and intimidation. Recruitment patterns have evolved over the years toward a more coercive approach, concomitantly with the spiralling of violence between the group and the Nigerian Government.<sup>358</sup>

The majority of interviewees for this study who were formerly associated with Boko Haram claimed to have been recruited by force.<sup>359</sup> One young woman, associated as a child, declared that “the insurgents came to our town on a Sunday and started shooting. They came to our house and took me and nine other children with them. Some of the children were older, and they took both girls and boys”. She was aged about 13 when she was abducted and married to a group member, and now has a son.<sup>360</sup> Children were recruited regardless of age, religion, or ethnicity.

Aisha, a Christian girl in her mid-teens at the time of her recruitment, recalled being abducted from her home in Adamawa State:

” Boko Haram came house to house gathering children. They took around 30 children and the boys were separated from the girls, but the majority of the children were girls. The armed group brought us at night into the forest. We were transported in a big vehicle. In the morning we saw ourselves in the forest and we started crying and screaming, and the armed group kept insulting us and calling us infidels.<sup>361</sup>

Many children are reported to have joined the group in response to threats of violence against their family. Interviews with professionals working in Borno and Yobe States also suggest that some family members may have been complicit in coercive mechanisms, for example selling their children to Boko Haram. This has to be understood in a context of economic despair and overall coercion by Boko Haram in which an entire family's survival is at risk, and neutrality may not be an option in territory controlled by the group, as also in Da'esh-controlled territory in Iraq, described above.

357 Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett, “Beset on All Sides”; Zoe Marks, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, and Rebecca Littman, “Understanding Receptivity to Returning Former Boko Haram Associates Through a Gender Lens”, MEAC Findings Report 30, UNIDIR, May 2023; UNDP, “Journey to Extremism in Africa”.

358 Daniel E Agbiboa, “Peace at Daggers Drawn? Boko Haram and the State of Emergency in Nigeria”, in Lorenzo Zucca, ed., *Religious Rights* (Abingdon, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Routledge, 2017), pp. 415–41.

359 For example Male #1, mid-teens at time of association, Borno; Male #9, mid-teens at time of association, Borno; Female #17, early teens at time of association, Adamawa; Female #20, mid-teens at time of association, Adamawa; and Male #28, mid-teens at time of association, Yobe. Interviews conducted in April 2022.

360 Female #17, early teens at time of association, Adamawa. Interview conducted in April 2022.

361 Female #23, mid-teens at time of association, Adamawa. Interview conducted in April 2022.

Another common method of recruiting children is deception, usually accompanied by false promises and the distribution of food. A young woman who was persuaded to join Boko Haram as a girl described how she had received an offer of marriage from a member of the group but when she got into the bush, he married her to someone else. Another young woman from Adamawa State reported that the group would come into her community and distribute stock cubes, sugar, and salt. One day, when she went to collect these items, she was abducted: “When they were distributing these items for free it attracted many of us to the location. The day I was abducted, we came to receive the food items, they divided us into single and married women [and girls]”. At first, they were told that they would soon be released, but then they were taken to a town in Borno State and later to Sambisa Forest, where they were forcibly married to different commanders within four months.<sup>362</sup>

### Incentives for joining

While it is nearly impossible to set agency apart from coercion in children’s trajectories into Boko Haram, it is important to consider why joining the group, albeit under duress, may for some be a response to need. A child’s decision to join Boko Haram should be analyzed in the structural context of the protracted precarity, uncertainty and vulnerability generated by the insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria.<sup>363</sup> Not only does the situation create socioeconomic instability, it can also deprive many families of their adult breadwinners, leaving children as the household heads. Entire families often rely on earnings from child labor because the parents have been killed or incapacitated.

Boko Haram is able to entice these vulnerable people through religious preaching, deception, monetary inducement and incentives such as business support and/or basic amenities including food, medicine, clothing, etc. Joining the group is a coping mechanism that provides both material benefit and social status.<sup>364</sup> Furthermore, unable to meet the costs associated with marriage and other rites of passage that traditionally secure the transition into adulthood in their communities, teenagers and young adults remain children in the eyes of their peers, and have little or no hope of changing their situation in the future.<sup>365</sup> Entering Boko Haram is an opportunity to assert a degree of agency and control over their destiny.

It is hard to disentangle material benefits from the social incentives that drive some children’s decision to join the group. Social marginalization, perceived injustice and a desire for revenge on the State and its security forces are commonly reported as motivations among children who join Boko Haram, and should not be underestimated.<sup>366</sup> This research confirms the findings of other studies that Boko Haram, including both the Bakura and ISWAP factions, capitalizes on the rejection of the Nigerian State in local communities that have experienced State repression,

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362 Female #16, mid-teens at time of association, Adamawa. Interview conducted in April 2022.

363 Olaniyi Evans and Ikechukwu Kelikume, “The Impact of Poverty, Unemployment, Inequality, Corruption and Poor Governance on Niger Delta Militancy, Boko Haram Terrorism and Fulani Herdsmen Attacks in Nigeria”, *International Journal of Management, Economics and Social Sciences* 8, no. 2 (2019), pp. 58–80. Unemployment, Inequality, Corruption and Poor Governance on Niger Delta Militancy, Boko Haram Terrorism and Fulani Herdsmen Attacks in Nigeria, *International Journal of Management, Economics and Social Sciences* (IJMESS)

364 UNDP, “Journey to Extremism in Africa”.

365 See also Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett, “Beset on All Sides”; MEAC, “Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin”.

366 UNDP, “Journey to Extremism in Africa”.

neglect, and violence.<sup>367</sup> This way, the group has been able to exploit the very counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency measures intended to curb its reach.

Many violent extremist groups, including Al-Qaida, AQIM and Da'esh employ the tactic of provoking State reprisals against the local civilian population with the aim of further polarizing society. Perceived or actual abuse suffered by civilians at the hands of the authorities in the context of counter-terrorism operations can drive recruitment and create lasting grievances, even among children. As a key informant from Nigeria's National Judicial Institute observed:

” Security should be ensured by the government but what happens is often the other way round: the counter-terrorist policies and practices implemented by the government expose children to serious risks. These policies are creating a monster. The children find themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea; by joining Boko Haram, what they are trying to obtain is security for themselves.<sup>368</sup>

These dynamics emerge clearly in the story of Moussa, who joined Boko Haram in his late teens:

” I was living in Maiduguri with my family ... but we then moved out because of Boko Haram's activities. My father took me to [X location] because he did not want me to join the group. There I started a small business. Boko Haram people would pass by and hang around my business and have certain kinds of conversations. When my father saw this, we moved [again and] started a small business there too. [There] I was later captured by the military and taken to the barracks ... They thought I was with them, but it was not true. I escaped once. I was recaptured and taken back. I was beaten. But this time I spent only two days in the barracks when Boko Haram attacked the barracks. I escaped with them and joined the group because I did not want to return to the barracks.<sup>369</sup>

This study finds that recruitment is often driven by children's attempts to protect their family, friends, or society. Prosocial sentiments such as love, friendship and other social and kinship networks can also contribute to their decision to join the group. For example, Fatima was only 13 years old when she joined Boko Haram “for love”, she recalled:

” Before joining I saw Boko Haram as a decent group because they started their activities with Islamic preaching. I liked what they preached. My boyfriend used to preach to me; he also promised to marry me if I joined Boko Haram. One day I followed him to the bush and joined Boko Haram.<sup>370</sup>

367 Ibid; Agbibo, “Peace at Daggers Drawn?”; Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett, “Beset on All Sides”; Temitope B. Oriola and Olanbi Akinola, “Ideational Dimensions of the Boko Haram Phenomenon”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 8 (2018), pp. 595–618.

368 Key informant #93, National Judicial Institute. Interview conducted in February 2022.

369 Male #9, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

370 Female #13, early teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

## Gender and recruitment patterns

The research findings also shed light on how gender affects recruitment trajectories. A few interviewees commented that some boys saw joining Boko Haram as an adventure or a test of their masculinity. Some suggested that girls are often used to lure boys, especially those whose prospects for marriage are poor for social or economic reasons, into Boko Haram.<sup>371</sup>

” We are talking about a context when young men would not normally be able to even approach girls. Instead, they find themselves in a situation where they can pick not one but several girls.<sup>372</sup>

A number of interviewees said that boys tended to decide to join Boko Haram, while girls were most often abducted.<sup>373</sup> This perception is underpinned by two widely held assumptions, the first being that boys generally have more agency and are more inclined to violence,<sup>374</sup> a view contradicted by the wealth of testimonies collected for this and other studies from boys who had been abducted and forcibly recruited.<sup>375</sup> The second assumption is that girls lack any type of agency and therefore can only be recruited by abduction. However, a few of the young female respondents formerly associated with Boko Haram cited positive feelings such as love or belief in a just cause as their reason for joining the group.

Assessment of the potential allure of Boko Haram for young prospective recruits should include its appeal as an alternative to traditional society. In the eyes of children of both sexes the group appears to provide an opportunity to break the bounds of custom and acquire social status and power that would not normally be accessible to them in a traditional community.<sup>376</sup> For girls particularly, the possibility of marriage to a group member offers the prospect of improving their social position.<sup>377</sup> Daniia, for example, was a child when she joined the group. She confirmed that she had encouraged other younger girls to join the group:

” Many people helped me when I was in the bush, including my sister-in-law. My husband was an Amir [commander], I had servants too ... Due to my preaching, many [including girls] decided to join the group.<sup>378</sup>

However, abduction and other overtly coercive methods remain Boko Haram’s preferred strategy for recruiting both boys and girls.<sup>379</sup>

371 See also Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses*, African Arguments Series, (London, Bloomsbury, 2017).

372 Key informant #93, National Judicial Institute. Interview conducted in February 2022.

373 Key informant #5, Former Borno State Commander, CJTF. Interview conducted in March 2022.

374 Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett, “Beset on All Sides.”

375 Ibid.

376 Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram*.

377 Female #14, mid-teens at time of association, Borno; Female #12, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interviews conducted in April 2022.

378 Female #14, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

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## Children as a sought-after resource

Boko Haram targets children for a variety of reasons. There is no clear profile for the type of child who might become associated, as recruitment cuts across ethnic and religious lines. Similarly, the group's reasons for recruiting children are multifaceted, including the tactical advantages of using children for combat and non-combat operation, and their supposedly greater malleability and expendability. Children can be controlled easily with not only physical coercion but also material incentives. They also engage in risk-taking behaviour easily, as they have not yet developed full consciousness of their mortality and the consequences of their own actions, especially when motivated by emotions such as grievance and the desire for revenge.

Children are also sometimes recruited to boost the group's visibility. According to an interviewee from the Nigeria Police Force, the sight of young children carrying deadly weapons and undergoing some level of military-style training is designed to capture the world's attention and focus it on the group's activities. Da'esh pursued a similar strategy by promoting its "Cubs of the Caliphate" on the world stage.<sup>380</sup> Research participants explained that children are also recruited to ensure the longevity and continuity of the group's ideology and military strength using girls and young women to produce a new generation of fighters. Children are also seen as cheaper than adults to feed and retain.

Finally, there are both differences and similarities between the JAS and ISWAP's recruitment patterns. According to most expert respondents, JAS has been more responsible for indiscriminate use of violence and the mass abduction of girls and women particularly, for use as sex slaves, domestic servants, and at times for "suicide" missions. ISWAP, on the other hand, has often worked more closely with local communities, providing security and other societal benefits such as the administration of impartial justice and economic opportunities. For example, it is reported to have given loans to truck drivers for transporting crops.<sup>381</sup> ISWAP is following a well-worn path towards increased legitimacy by courting the approval and support of the broader rural community. As one interviewee put it, "They win the hearts of the community members. They enjoy acceptance from the community by taking over the institution of the government".<sup>382</sup> However, despite this "hearts and minds" approach, ISWAP is still widely reported to resort to coercive recruitment to gain more recruits.<sup>383</sup>

## Children's vulnerability and roles in terrorist groups

### Roles

Children are typically assigned multiple roles during their association with Boko Haram, sometimes simultaneously. While some interviewees were of the view that children seldom participate in combat and other violent activities, most stated that children, and especially boys, are exploited to participate in almost all aspects of the group's activities including the killing, robbery, rape,

380 Heba Malik, "Isis is defeated. What becomes of the 'Cubs of the Caliphate' in Iraq?", Atlantic Council, August 19 2021.

381 Focus group #13, members of civil society in Borno. Interview conducted in February 2022.

382 Focus group #13, members of civil society in Borno. Interview conducted in February 2022.

383 Key informant #8, employed in the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Special Education. Interview conducted in February 2022.

and kidnapping of civilians. Umar, a young man from Maiduguri who joined Boko Haram as a child without overt coercion, said that he had participated in several operations:

” My friend took me with him in his car to Chad, where we were taught how to operate a firearm. After two days, I had learnt how to shoot ... I participated in their operations. I participated in attacks in [X location], [Y location], and other places ... They were deadly. They were killing little children and pregnant women. They were burning crops.

Habeeba, in her mid-teens when she was kidnapped by Boko Haram, confirmed this:

” [Boko Haram members] capture even very little children and force them to become one of them. If these children are able to escape, they are lucky; if not, they automatically become their slaves, and in time they are trained to do all the things that these Boko Haram members do. Especially the boys; they usually involve them in all their activities.<sup>384</sup>

Boys are generally tasked with teaching, assembling arms and acting as spies, couriers, porters, combatants, and even human shields. Some serve as *hisbah* (local religious police and guardians of morality), others participate in cattle-rustling or specialize in stealing grains and crops and bringing them to the camp. Girls are typically charged with cooking, fetching water and firewood, cleaning, and farming, and are used as sex slaves and even as “suicide” bombers.

Despite the common gendered division of roles there is also some overlap between what boys and girls do in the group. According to researchers at the National Judicial Institute, the narrative that “‘boys are spies, girls are brides’ is false. There is not always a clear difference in what female and male children do in Boko Haram”.<sup>385</sup> This was confirmed in interviews with young women associated with Boko Haram as girls. Daniia, for example, recalled how her role in the group was not just that of housewife or sex slave: “I was a housewife in the group - I cooked, cleaned, did laundry and other domestic stuff ... [However] I was also trained to go to nearby communities and preach to the young and the elderly and tell them that Boko Haram is a legitimate Islamic society”.<sup>386</sup>

Significantly, some Nigerian professionals reported differences between JAS and ISWAP, with the former embracing the use of women and girls for “suicide” bombing, while the latter favored relegating girls to domestic and reproductive roles. Other practitioners interviewed for this research were either unsure or dismissive about differences between the roles assigned to children under JAS and ISWAP. In 2019, a study by the International Crisis Group reported that ISWAP opposed kidnapping, forced marriage for girls, and the forced recruitment of boys – all tactics employed by JAS under Shekau’s leadership.<sup>387</sup> While ISWAP has attempted to establish

384 Female #29, mid-teens at time of association, Yobe. Interview conducted in April 2022.

385 Key informant #93, National Judicial Institute. Interview conducted in February 2022.

386 Female #14, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

387 ICG, “Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province”, Report No. 273, Africa, 16 May 2019.

a less antagonistic relationship with local communities, there is still plenty of evidence that individual ISWAP commanders have resorted to violent training methods and the use of children as fighters when they see it as advantageous.<sup>388</sup>

The modalities of recruitment affect child recruits' initial experience in the group. Many of the children, especially boys, who were forcibly recruited reported having undergone a period of indoctrination, whose length varied depending on a number of factors ranging from the children's responsiveness to the group's diktats, to how urgently they were needed for field operations. Some children who joined Boko Haram without overt coercion avoided the indoctrination phase altogether.<sup>389</sup> All, however, seem to have undergone military training during the first phase of their association with the group. Yusuf, a young man kidnapped from his village in Borno State, recalled his early life in the group:

” Boko Haram kidnaps children no matter the age. If the child is a boy, they don't care about ethnicity, religion or social status. If the boy has strength, ability, and zeal, he is a potential target for recruitment. When they kidnap children, they first of all indoctrinate them. They put them in a secluded place, the boys separated from the girls. There is a *Mallam* [Islamic teacher] whose responsibility it is to teach them and also train them. The children are also trained how to handle guns. When they finish these trainings, they are issued guns and they start participating in attacks on communities and other operations.<sup>390</sup>

Some professionals interviewed suggested that military training is given more weight and importance than spiritual indoctrination in early group membership. An investigator from the Joint Intelligence Centre (JIC) in Borno recounted his first contact with children taken to the JIC facility:

” Children taken to the Centre are brought after military raids. We have children from 0 to 17 years old ... They have no education, no Islamic knowledge ... The indoctrination does not really work in this way. They barely know how to pray, and even then, I wonder how they pray, since most do not even know how to recite the *Surah al-Fath*. For their leaders, they are just soldiers. What they get to know is knowledge about weapons, how to make a bomb, how to shoot.<sup>391</sup>

Professionals working in this area and formerly associated young adults generally concur that group members rise through the ranks fastest by engaging in violence: “You grow in rank as you

388 ISWAP reportedly released a video on 17 January 2020 featuring a child soldier executing a Christian student from the University of Maiduguri in Borno State. See Zenn, J. “Chronicling the Boko Haram Decade in Nigeria (2010–2020): Distinguishing Factions through Videographic Analysis”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 31, no. 6 (2020), p. 1279. On 21 January 2022, ISWAP released a video showing a child soldier executing two military officers; see T. Obiezu, “Video of Child Militants Executing Nigerian Soldiers Raises Concerns,” *Voice of Africa*, 21 January 2022. A 2022 ISS study revealed that about 200 boys graduated from Darul Quran, an ISWAP-controlled training camp for children, in February 2022. This development is of concern, because while Boko Haram has been limited in terms of recruitment and numbers of foreign fighters, ISWAP seems to have a far wider potential reach, operating not only in Nigeria but across the entire Lake Chad Basin. See Malek Samuel and Oluwale Ojewale, “Children on the Battlefield: ISWAP's Latest Recruits”, *ISS Today*, 10 March 2022.

389 See also Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett, “Beset on All Sides”.

390 Male #8, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

391 Key informant #94, Joint Intelligence Centre (JIC). Interview conducted in February 2022.

do the damage”.<sup>392</sup> Yusuf, for example, explained how “after [children] have been with the group for a while they are assessed – those that can carry firearms become fighters, while the others run errands and perform other tasks. Some rise through the ranks by performing a duty such as killing their own parents. This is how some of them become *amirs* [commanders]”.<sup>393</sup> Some interviewees even suggested that this process could also serve as an incentive for socially and otherwise disadvantaged boys to join Boko Haram, since all that was required to advance was a willingness to engage in violence. This dysfunctional “meritocratic” logic could be seen by current and prospective members as a way of levelling the playing field, enabling them to rise to the top in spite of their disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Children’s experiences

A child’s experience within Boko Haram is overwhelmingly traumatic. Regardless of their role, children are subjected to extreme levels of violence and multiple types of physical and mental abuse. Lacking shelter, food, clean water, and adequate sanitation and hygiene, they are exposed to life-threatening environmental hardship. Many witnessed or participated in the maiming or killing of other individuals, including friends and family members. A number of recent studies have shown how the majority of these children develop PTSD and/or drug withdrawal symptoms during or soon after their disengagement from the group.<sup>394</sup> Sexual violence and abuse, especially against but not limited to girls and women, has been widely reported across the research respondents.<sup>395</sup>

Overall, both professionals familiar with the situation, formerly associated young adults, and members of their families spoke of the experience of association with the group in terms of a loss of innocence. The sort of atrocities that children are called to witness, experience, and even perform have an especially profound impact at a critical point in their emotional and cognitive development.<sup>396</sup> Academic research into child development has demonstrated how a child’s exposure to severe forms of violence and exploitation can substantially increase the likelihood of developing serious psychological issues in later life and contribute to poor cognitive development.<sup>397</sup> Habeeba, for example, succinctly summarized this experience: “The activities we see and get involved with when we are with the terrorists change us and our ways of thinking and behavior”.<sup>398</sup>

This loss of innocence also negatively shapes how the children are perceived by both government authorities and their local communities. As an interviewee from the Department of Women and Children at the National Human Rights Commission in Abuja observed, “the problem is that most

392 Key informant #25, community representative. Interview conducted in April 2022.

393 Male #8, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

394 Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett, “Beset on All Sides”. For a broader analysis of drug trafficking and use by Boko Haram and its effects on children’s rehabilitation and reintegration, see Antonio Sampaio, “Conflict Economies and Urban Systems in the Lake Chad Region”, Global initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, November 2022, p. 22; S. Huvé and others, “Preventing Recruitment and Ensuring Effective Reintegration Efforts: Evidence from Across the Lake Chad Basin to Inform Policy and Practice”, MEAC Lake Chad Basin Case Study Report, 1 November 2022, p. 41.

395 International Alert, “Bad Blood”.

396 Amusan and Ejoke, “The Psychological Trauma Inflicted by Boko Haram Insurgency”.

397 Michael Rutter, “Protective Factors in Children’s Responses to Stress and Disadvantage”, *Annals of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore* 8, no. 3 (1979), pp 324–38. It should be noted, however, that while many young men in their late teens or early twenties suffer from similar social, emotional, and cognitive disruptions, after exiting a terrorist group children generally “receive less legal leniency and often less [rehabilitation and reintegration] programmatic support, while shouldering greater responsibilities and expectations”. O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, 242.

398 Female #29, mid-teens at time of association, Yobe. Interview conducted in April 2022.

people [in Nigeria] do not perceive the children as victims but only as perpetrators who have lost their innocence through their association with the group. Even if their recruitment was coerced, what they think is ‘you stayed with them, you have become like them’.<sup>399</sup> This characterization of them as deviant is pervasive, and was reiterated over the course of many of the interviews individuals working in the security and government sectors. A Nigeria Police Force officer, for example, stated in an interview that “once [children] are recruited, it is too late. Kids see what Boko Haram is doing. Eventually children end up learning the same bad habits of their captors; they become like them. They are bad boys who often take drugs”.<sup>400</sup>

Several research participants emphasized the hardship and abuse particularly suffered by girls in Boko Haram, including but not limited to rape, forced marriage, and sexual violence. A young woman abducted at the age of nine described her years in the bush as “living like animals”.<sup>401</sup> Another reported that after being abducted and taken to Sambisa forest, she slept under a tree for four months.<sup>402</sup> Habeeba reflected on the specific vulnerability of girls compared to boys in her testimony:

” [T]hey usually involve [the boys] in all their activities. But we, the girls, suffer most, because most of the time they force us to have sex with them. Secondly, there is never enough food for us. You see that our suffering is double. They force us to have sex with them, and then they deny us sufficient food to eat.

One interviewee shared their belief that girls were less exposed to sexual exploitation if they were “married” to fighters.<sup>403</sup> However, although being married might result in a degree of protection for girls and young women, it does not involve the formal rituals and legal obligations customarily associated with matrimony in Nigeria, and should not be equated with absence of violence. For many of the young female group members “marriage” simply became another form of violent sexual abuse and exploitation. One recounted how her “husband” would lend her out for the day to be sexually abused and raped by other members of the group, including boys.<sup>404</sup> Other female respondents in this study reported being married without their consent, an experience which they found severely traumatic on both a physical and an emotional level. These serious forms of violence are not only routine but also integral to the group’s tactics.

Many boys also underwent traumatic experiences during their association with Boko Haram. Like their female counterparts, they often suffered from a severe shortage of food and water, sometimes having to eat wild grasses to survive.<sup>405</sup> They were overworked, suffered chronic fatigue from their harsh life in the bush, and lacked access to health care. For those pressed into frontline service, combat-related trauma further heightened their vulnerability, and if injured during field operations they had very little access to medical treatment, resulting in death or lasting physical disabilities.

399 Key informant #95, Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development. Interview conducted in February 2022.

400 Key informant #96, member of Nigerian Police Force staff. Interview conducted in February 2022.

401 Female #15, elementary schoolchild at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

402 Female #16, mid-teens at time of association, Adamawa. Interview conducted in April 2022.

403 Key informant #61, Honorable Commissioner at the Ministry of Home Affairs. Interview conducted in April 2022.

404 Female #15, elementary schoolchild at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

405 Key informant #4, community representative and religious leader. Interview conducted in March 2022.

Boys' and young adults' reluctance to speak openly of some of the violence they endured, especially that of a sexual nature, can obscure the full picture of the abuse they suffered. That said, careful scrutiny of first-person accounts often reveals hints of under-reported experiences, and there are persistent indications that some boys were repeatedly subjected to sexual assault.<sup>406</sup> Many young men who fought at the front line as children and lived deep in the forest were deprived of family and social ties, making them feel lonely and isolated. Several professionals familiar with this context reported evidence of widespread drug consumption in Boko Haram's ranks, which is also a common feature of other armed groups. An interviewee for this research from the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency stated that drugs play a critical role:

” About 90 per cent of Boko Haram use drugs, especially Tramadol, EXOL, Diazepam, and cannabis ... If you remove drugs from Boko Haram, about 70 per cent of the threat will go. They themselves said that “without drugs, we couldn't survive.”<sup>407</sup>

Given the extreme levels of violence and hardship to which children are exposed, it is not surprising that Boko Haram employs a variety of coercive methods to prevent them from leaving the group, such as threatening the families of group members seeking to exit or publicly executing those who have been recaptured on trying to escape. However, Boko Haram also offers more positive material inducement to remain. While most research participants recalled suffering almost constant hunger and a shortage of basic commodities of any sort, some reported having more food, money and material goods than before they joined the group. One young man who had joined as a boy without overt coercion narrated how his first commander always took care of him: “One day, I told him that I wanted to get married. The *Amir* gave me 500,000 Naira [approximately 1,000 USD], a motorcycle and a house”. The boy took three wives during his association with Boko Haram, a highly desirable social accomplishment for boys from his background, who typically lack the cash and wedding dowry required to fulfil the onerous obligations placed upon grooms: “We were free to do as we pleased in the bush, and we had all that we had not had before.”<sup>408</sup>

It would be misleading, however, to characterize children's occasional positive experiences within the group as merely related to the fulfilment of material needs. Participation in group activities cannot be disentangled from many teenagers' and young people's desire to belong to a social group, their need for social recognition, and other prosocial motives that experts have identified as fundamental needs, especially among adolescents.<sup>409</sup> Some participants referred to their experience in the group as being part of something bigger, and the value of serving a cause greater than themselves: “I joined the group because I was persuaded by a friend. I told him that I wanted to be fighting for a good cause. He then took me to the bush, and I joined Boko Haram.”<sup>410</sup>

406 Key informant #33, professional; Key informant #41, former principal of Government College Maiduguri; Key informant #7, community representative and religious leader. Interviews conducted in March 2022.

407 Key informant #46, law enforcement officer. Interview conducted in April 2022.

408 Female #12, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

409 Marilyn B. Brewer, “The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love and Outgroup Hate?”, *Journal of Social Issues*, 55, no. 3 (1999), pp. 429–44.

410 Male #2, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

The modality of recruitment is not always indicative of an individual's experience within the group. Mohammed was abducted from his village in Borno State when he was 14 years old:

” I was taken from my *mallam's* place in his village. I always wanted to become a scholar of Islamic studies ... After they took me, Boko Haram preached to us. I was young and I believed everything I was told. I really believed that what the group was doing was good. They made me study Islam for years, then combat training, and then I started going on operations. All the while we all believed that what we were doing was the right thing, that we were fighting for Islam.<sup>411</sup>

Boko Haram's capacity to fulfill certain of children's needs should not overshadow the far more pervasive harmful and abusive aspects of their association with the group. Studies have demonstrated how enacting violence is a way of achieving cohesion around community-centered values and the internalization of certain modes of behavior.<sup>412</sup> Boko Haram uses corporal punishment, including public lashings and, according to some accounts, stoning for a number of transgressions, and children are not only exposed to extreme violence but are sometimes also involved in its execution. A young woman who had been associated as a girl narrated how boys and girls as young as three years old were taken in the evenings to an open space that they referred to as the "gallery" to watch executions: "The idea was to harden us, transform us into something else".<sup>413</sup> Their time in the group can ultimately serve to transform a child's social orientation, and interviewed experts working with some of these children indicated that they do not generally seek to re-establish contact with old friends after leaving the group, as they feel too psychologically disconnected from their former peers.<sup>414</sup>

## Children's exit: A difficult process

### Why they disengage and how they exit

Children leave Boko Haram for a combination of reasons, including the hardship of living in the bush and the numerous traumatic experiences to which they have been subjected. Fatima, for example, said that she was appalled by Boko Haram's actions, and this ultimately led her to want to leave the group: "They were torturing and killing people in front of me; I watched them rape women and even young girls. What they were doing could not be the right thing".<sup>415</sup> Disillusionment with the group's ideology and broken promises are widely reported factors in the decision to disengage from the group. As one expert from the multi-agency Joint Investigation Centre (JIC) in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, put it, "almost all of them would leave if they had the opportunity, even those who are commanders. They join the group because they want freedom but they realize that they will not have freedom, and that their life is much harder than they had expected".<sup>416</sup>

411 Male #11, early teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

412 Brewer, "The Psychology of Prejudice"; Naomi Ellemers, "The Group Self", *Science* 336, no. 6083 (2012), pp. 848–52.

413 Female #14, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

414 Key informant #71, Director at the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs. Interview conducted in April 2022.

415 Female #13, early teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

416 Key informant #94, member of staff, Joint Intelligence Centre (JIC). Interview conducted in February 2022.

There is evidence that the government's counter-narrative efforts can help to push some members of Boko Haram to exit. Mohammed, a young man kidnapped from his village in Yobe State when he was in his mid-teens, recommended that the "government should continue throwing leaflets into the camps of Boko Haram, because access to those messages emboldens those who are considering exiting, including children. The messages counter the impression created by Boko Haram that those who surrender will not be treated well".<sup>417</sup>

Even children who entered the group by choice and forged social bonds there can be determined to disengage from it. Umar, who fought first for JAS and then for ISWAP, described his exit process in similar terms to both Fatima and Mohammed:

“ I joined Boko Haram with a friend. [Then] we left Shekau's group [JAS] because of what they were doing – we then joined ISWAP. But we realized that they were not any different from Boko Haram [JAS] ... We heard that the government was asking fighters to surrender, and that nothing (bad) would happen to them if they did. We seized the opportunity to escape and surrender. [At that time] I was a captain in the group. I had ten firearms under my control. The group began to suspect that I wanted to leave and took away my weapons. Unknown to them, I had one firearm that they did not know about. One afternoon they sent someone to my house to kill me. I shot the man and ran away. I hid somewhere until the military rescued me and took me to [X location].<sup>418</sup>

Whatever the individual reasons each former associate gave for disengaging, they all agreed that leaving the group was not an easy process, and for some it took several years. There is great risk to life in being caught trying to leave. Boko Haram camps are typically located in wild and remote locations such as the Sambisa Forest, far from government control, so traversing the distances involved to exit Boko Haram territory safely is not easy. As a result, since exiting is dangerous and complex, the decision to disengage from Boko Haram does not necessarily result in leaving the group.

Most interviewees were either intercepted by the authorities during military operations or recovered during rescue missions, although some had been abandoned by their comrades because they were slowing them down due to their lack of stamina or infirmity. A few interviewees managed to leave on their own. Fatima was one such person:

“ When the young men go out for operations they take drugs, and when they get back they are so tired that they pass out and do not wake up until the afternoon. One day, in the middle of the night, I took a bottle of water and a cutlass. My plan was to tell anyone that stopped me that I was going to the farm. I walked until 5.30 a.m. before I arrived at a nearby community.<sup>419</sup>

417 Male #28, mid-teens at time of association, Yobe. Interview conducted in April 2022.

418 Male #9, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

419 Female #13, early teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.



Another young woman who had been abducted at the age of 15 seized her opportunity when there was division in her camp:

” The fight within Boko Haram gave people the chance to plan their escape, and I met a man who showed us the way out of the forest. My husband at the time had already been killed, so I escaped with my baby and surrendered to the military. My family was contacted, and my elder brother came to pick me up from the camp where the military was keeping us.<sup>420</sup>

Girls might find leaving Boko Haram easier than boys, because the daily tasks of collecting firewood and water and other housekeeping chores provide them with opportunities to move around independently beyond the immediate surroundings of the group. Indeed, one young man reported trying to escape from his unit disguised as a woman.<sup>421</sup>

Exiting the group can be a collective decision. A young man from Yobe State kidnapped in his mid-teens described the mass exit in which he took part:

” I thought about escaping ... Many people wish to escape. However, they were doubtful or afraid; in most cases it takes a long time. Time is needed to build the confidence and trust of people with common minds and intention. After a long time and a period of discussing and forming a common purpose among a small group, people can decide to leave secretly on the agreed date and time. For instance in my own case, my matron [teacher] in the bush approached me to know whether I had thought of escaping. I told her that I wanted to escape, and she put me in contact with some other people who also wanted to escape. One Saturday at about 4:00 am, 33 of us left the camp and trekked for two days before being rescued by the military.<sup>422</sup>

## Deterrents to leaving the group

Besides JAS and ISWAP's harsh punishment regimes, instituted to prevent people from trying to leave, another major deterrent is that many children do not know where to go if they leave the group. Boko Haram commanders often tell children that their village no longer exists because the group has razed it to the ground. Many fear that their family will not want them back, distrusting them for what they have done, or harboring ill-feeling against them because they have been involved in violence against their own relatives.<sup>423</sup> This is a sentiment that Boko Haram commanders often seek to exploit, and indeed such fears may well be justified.

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420 Female #20, mid-teens at time of association, Adamawa. Interview conducted in April 2022.

421 Male #1, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

422 Male #27, mid-teens at time of association, Yobe. Interview conducted in April 2022.

423 Key informant #94, member of staff, Joint Intelligence Centre (JIC). Interview conducted in February 2022.

Families can fear the taint of association with a Boko Haram member and the intense social stigmatization it could generate in their community or the adverse attention it could attract from the authorities. Nonetheless, there is also some cause to hope that opportunities exist for reconciliation and the reintegration of former child associates into their original locations. A community leader from northern Borno, speaking on behalf of his community, told the research team that “parents of children formerly associated with Boko Haram are generally open to assisting with reintegration, they want to be reunited with their children even after their association with Boko Haram. This is normal: even if your child is a snake, he is still your own child – [parents] will not run away from them, and they cannot turn them away”.

Another major obstacle to escape attempts are the positive prosocial bonds such as friendship, love, social status, and the sense of belonging that children may have formed with other members of the group. Interviews with professionals suggest that children and particularly girls also may not want to leave because they have family in the bush. Interviewees reported several stories of this kind. For example one young man who had been abducted aged 14 left, but his wife refused to leave because her parents were still in the bush,<sup>424</sup> and a 19-year-old young woman who had attempted to escape multiple times had her son taken from her to deter her from leaving but eventually escaped, leaving the boy behind.<sup>425</sup> Positive incentives and prosocial factors therefore play a greater role in preventing full disengagement than is usually accounted for in the relevant literature.

All this notwithstanding, for many children the allure of Boko Haram is short-lived, especially against the background of the severe hardship and violence endured during their association. The research participants generally concurred that the large majority of children in Boko Haram wish to leave the group not long after recruitment, and more would leave if they could. But exiting remains a dangerous and complex process.

## 5.4 After association: State responses and children’s experiences of rehabilitation and reintegration

### Benchmark for action: National legal framework

The Nigerian Government has taken critical legislative steps at the international, regional, and national levels to prevent children’s participation in armed conflict and criminal activity and to respond to the needs of children formerly involved in armed conflict and terrorist organizations.

Nigeria is a signatory to the international treaties prohibiting serious forms of violence against children, including specific references to child recruitment,<sup>426</sup> and ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 2001. The African Charter requires State Parties to

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424 Key informant #23, family member of formerly associated individuals. Interview conducted in April 2022.

425 Key informant #14, family member of formerly associated individuals. Interview conducted in April 2022.

426 These include the CRC and its Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict; ILO, C182, Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention 1999; United Nations, Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998; and United Nations, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, Treaty Series, vol. 2237, p. 319; Doc. A/55/383, 25 December 2003.

take all feasible measures to ensure the protection and care of children affected by armed conflict, and to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to prevent them being recruited to participate in hostilities.<sup>427</sup> Article 4 of the Revised Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Treaty of 1993 guarantees the fundamental principles of human rights, including children's rights.<sup>428</sup>

Nigeria has also signed, ratified or acceded to 16 of the 19 International Conventions and Protocols pertaining to counter-terrorism.<sup>429</sup> At the national level, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria includes a broad prohibition of violence against children, stating that "children, young persons and the age [sic] are protected against any exploitation whatsoever, and against moral and material neglect".<sup>430</sup>

The most important and comprehensive legal instrument for the protection of children's rights in Nigeria is the National Human Rights Commission Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003, which provides extensive protection for children, including in armed conflict.<sup>431</sup> The CRA is a federal law that is only directly applicable in Federal Capital Territory. It applies in the rest of Nigeria only once State legislatures enact it as State law.

The entirety of the CRA is relevant to the situation of children associated with Boko Haram. Key provisions in the context of the recruitment and exploitation of children include Section 26, which criminalizes the use or involvement of a child in criminal activities; Section 27, which criminalizes the abduction, removal and transfer of a child from lawful custody; Section 28, which prohibits and criminalizes forced and exploitative child labor; Section 30, which criminalizes child trafficking; and Section 34, which prohibits children's direct involvement in any military operation or hostilities. The CRA also includes specific provisions on the administration of juvenile justice, attributing the jurisdiction over any proceedings relating to children to Family Courts at State level (Sections 149–162). However, since terrorism is a federal crime prosecuted in the Federal High Court, and Family Courts operate at the State level, this has led to a jurisdictional impasse over the issue of where a child accused of participation in terrorist acts should be tried. So far, no child has been prosecuted for a terrorist offence at the federal level.

The CRA's ability to provide a relevant instrument for the protection of child rights was initially impeded by the reluctance of some States, especially in the north of the country, to adopt this legislation. However, this has changed over the past two years with the passage of the Borno State Child Rights Act in 2021 and the Yobe and Adamawa Child Protection Acts in 2022, which integrate the main provisions of the CRA into State law in the three main States in which Boko

427 African Union, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 11 July 1990, article 22.

428 ECOWAS, ECOWAS Child Policy and Strategic Plan of Action 2019–2030.

429 See, inter alia, Convention on Offences and Certain Other Acts Committed On Board Aircraft (1963), 14 September 1963, United Nations Treaty Series vol 704 219; Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft (1970), 16 December 1970, United Nations Treaty Series vol 860 105; Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation (1971), 23 September 1971, United Nations Treaty Series 974 177; Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts of Violence at Airports Serving International Civil Aviation, supplementary to the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation (1988), 24 February 1988, United Nations Treaty Series vol 1589; International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings (1997), 15 December 1997, United Nations Treaty Series 2149 256.

430 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Section 17 (3) (f).

431 Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette, Child Right's Act (2003).

Haram has been active. This is an historical advance, denoting renewed commitment to the full realization of children’s rights. However, full implementation of this new legislation, among the many other pressing demands on State resources arising from the multifaceted challenges posed by Boko Haram’s ongoing insurgency, continues to be challenging.

With specific regard to counter-terrorism, the most relevant national legal instrument is the recent Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act of 2022 (TPPA), which replaces the 2011 Terrorism Prevention Act (TPA) and the 2013 Terrorism Prevention (Amendment) Act (TPAA). The TPA 2011, as amended in 2013, remains applicable to offences committed before May 2022. Notably, Section 18 of the TPPA (2022) provides for the criminalization of terrorist recruitment, as did the TPA 2011 as amended (although not explicitly with reference to children):

” A person who knowingly agrees to recruit or recruits a person to be a member of a terrorist group, or to participate in the commission of an act of terrorism, commits an offence, and is liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term of at least 20 years and up to a maximum of life imprisonment.

None of this legislation contains any specific reference to children’s association with terrorist groups or acts of terrorism. However, perpetrators of violence against children and specifically recruitment and associated violation could be held accountable under the provisions of the CRA and TPPA mentioned above.

Attempts to include specific language in the TPPA in relation to both the situation of children exploited by terrorist organizations and the use of sexual and gender-based violence in the context of terrorist action did not survive the National Assembly’s legislative review process, despite significant support from the House of Representatives.

## **Nigeria’s efforts to address child association with terrorist groups**

Several institutions play a leading role in counter-terrorism. The Office of the National Security Adviser is mandated to coordinate all security and law enforcement agencies with respect to the enforcement of the TPPA through the aegis of the National Counter-Terrorism Centre, which reports directly to the National Security Adviser. The Federal Attorney General is responsible for ensuring effective implementation and administration of the Act and effective prosecution of terrorism-related cases. As outlined above, the Federal High Court alone has the jurisdiction to try terrorism offences.

The Nigerian government, led by the Office of the National Security Adviser, has also developed several integrated whole of government National Action Plans, notably the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST), adopted in 2014 and revised in 2016. Under the NACTEST the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and corresponding State ministries are the key coordinators and service providers for child victims of terrorism. In 2017, the Nigerian government launched the Policy Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE). It was developed to expand the non-military aspects of preventing and countering violent extremism through the elaboration of a complementary soft

approach based on a whole of government and whole of society approach. The Action Plan places particular emphasis on the importance of engaging communities and building resilience as a key component of preventing and countering violent extremism.

The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development is the lead government agency for child protection at both the State and the federal level. In 2017, the Child Protection Sub-Sector, co-led by the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and UNICEF,<sup>432</sup> was established as a key forum for the coordination of child protection in response to emergencies in the north-east. It brings together relevant government ministries and agencies, national NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies and other actors with technical and operational relevance in relation to child protection. It works under the umbrella of the Protection Sector, led by UNHCR and the National Human Rights Commission.

Over the years the situation of children associated with terrorist groups has begun to be addressed through specific policies and programmes. The recognition of education as a key protective factor in reducing recruitment rates has been a crucial development in this direction. The Safe Schools Initiative, launched in Nigeria at the World Economic Forum for Africa in May 2014 after the Chibok schoolgirls' abduction, is particularly significant in this regard. It is an intergovernmental and political commitment to protect students, teachers, schools, and universities from the worst effects of conflict. In 2015 Nigeria was among the first countries to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration,<sup>433</sup> a political commitment by countries to take concrete steps to make students, teachers, and schools safer during times of armed conflict. Implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration is within the framework of the Education in Emergency Working Group, which comprises the Federal Ministry of Education, the Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Federal Ministry of Defence, the National Human Rights Commission, UNICEF, Plan International, and Save the Children. A number of local-level programmes in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States aim to strengthen education services in the context of the insurgency and displacement.

Multiple initiatives have been developed to directly address the insurgency in the north-east, strengthening approaches related to rehabilitation and reintegration. The Victim Support Fund was established in 2014 with a mandate to administer support to and raise awareness of the victims of Boko Haram's insurgency in collaboration with the private sector. It has identified three key priority areas of work: women's economic empowerment, children's education, and the mainstreaming of psychosocial support. The TPPA 2022 (sections 91–92) provides for the establishment of a Victims Trust Fund, which is yet to be implemented.

In 2016, the Federal Government launched Operation Safe Corridor for the rehabilitation and reintegration of low-level Boko Haram members. Initially some children were also referred to Operation Safe Corridor,<sup>434</sup> but it was later recognized that they are entitled to specialized treatment. Accordingly, as children are not included in the Operation Safe Corridor mandate, after identification they are transferred to the Bulumkutu Transit Centre in Maiduguri under the mandate of the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, and supported by UNICEF.

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432 Terms of Reference for the Child Protection Sub-Sector can be found at [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/cpss\\_nigeria\\_tor\\_november\\_2019\\_final\\_updated\\_01\\_june\\_2020.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/cpss_nigeria_tor_november_2019_final_updated_01_june_2020.pdf).

433 Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack "Safe Schools Declaration Endorsements", Safe Schools Declaration. Available at <https://ssd.protectingeducation.org/endorsement/>.

434 International Crisis Group, "An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor", Briefing No. 170, Africa, 19 March 2021.

The Bulumkutu Transit Centre is intended to house children while efforts are being made to reunite them with their families and reintegrate them into their communities. Immediate reintegration is often not possible owing to the extensive stigmatization of children associated with Boko Haram, and the Transit Centre provides an opportunity to prepare them and their families and their communities before they return. In 2018 the government also approved the Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation 3-year action plan.

While the treatment of children associated or suspected of association with Boko Haram has evolved over time, the lack of a fully comprehensive and coordinated intervention has undermined efforts for their rehabilitation and reintegration. A number of reports have emerged alleging ill-treatment of such children by the security forces, describing children's apprehension on the basis of mere suspicion of association with Boko Haram regardless of evidence, and unlawful detention with severe ill-treatment.<sup>435</sup> The United Nations reports that over 1,000 children were detained in 2016 alone on the basis of their parents' alleged association with Boko Haram.<sup>436</sup> The reports also identify inappropriate conditions and widespread human rights violations in Giwa Barracks, where children were being held alongside adults in conditions of extreme overcrowding without appropriate access to sanitation and other basic services. The number of children detained has been drastically reduced since 2018,<sup>437</sup> conditions have also improved in Giwa Barracks, and children have been separated from adults. However, so far there have been no systemic efforts to impose accountability on recruiters of children or on State agents responsible for violations of child rights.

In recent years government action has continued to adapt to changing circumstances on the ground. Following the death of the JAS leader Shekau at the hands of ISWAP in May 2021, Boko Haram has been experiencing mass defection, especially in Borno State. In November 2021, in response to the mass exit, the Borno State Government passed the Borno State Community-Based Reconciliation and Reintegration Policy, known as "the Borno State Model", promising rehabilitation and reintegration support to individuals who handed themselves over to State authorities.<sup>438</sup> At the time of writing close to 100,000 men, women, and children have left territory controlled by the insurgency and presented themselves to the Borno State authorities. Specificity is hard to establish, but a credible assessment suggests that at least 10,000 of these are former Boko Haram fighters and their families, the majority from JAS but also some from ISWAP, and are the Borno government classified them as "high-risk" individuals. The rest, typically described as "farmers" by the authorities, are transitioning through the Hajj Camp facility in Maiduguri. The Nigerian military also continues to detain individuals suspected of terrorist offences in the course of its ongoing operations in the region.

In September 2022, further progress was made regarding children associated with Boko Haram with the adoption of a Handover Protocol for Children Encountered in the Course of Armed Conflict in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin Region<sup>439</sup>, an agreement between the national government, the

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435 Amnesty International (2020) "We Dried Our Tears: Addressing the Toll on Children of Northeast Nigeria's Conflict", Index No. AFR 44/2322/2020, May 27 2020; Human Rights Watch, "They Didn't Know if I Was Alive or Dead: Military Detention of Children for Suspected Boko Haram Involvement in Northeast Nigeria", 2019.

436 S/2017/304, para. 38.

437 S/2022/596, paras 24–25 state that 272 of 275 children verified as having been detained by the Nigerian Security Forces for actual or alleged association with armed groups were released between January 2020 and December 2021, including 230 from Giwa Barracks.

438 Borno State Government, "Operationalizing the Borno Model for Integrated Management of Mass Exits", (April 2022).

439 "Agreement between the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, United Nations Systems in Nigeria and the UNICEF Country Office in Nigeria on the Handover Protocol for Children encountered in the course of Armed Conflict in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin Region" (30 October 2022)

United Nations Organization, and the UNICEF Country Office in Nigeria. The Handover Protocol provides for the immediate transfer of all children who come into contact with the military in the context of terrorism to the civilian authorities, with a view to facilitating their access to protection and reintegration support. In December 2022, the federal government also adopted the “Nigeria Call for Action”<sup>440</sup>, a political declaration that endorses the UNODC Roadmap on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist Groups and which recognizes, in line with relevant international law outlined above, that such children are primarily to be treated as victims. The Nigeria Call for Action also recognizes the need to prioritize prevention and reintegration efforts, with such measures as prosecution and deprivation of liberty considered only as a last resort.

## Rehabilitation and reintegration challenges and risks of re-recruitment

Despite the growing efforts to assist children exiting Boko Haram, their pathways towards rehabilitation and reintegration remain complex, aggravated by the socioeconomic consequences of the ongoing insurgency in the potential communities of return. According to professionals familiar with these contexts, local communities feel unfairly treated by the government, while former Boko Haram members – the very people who have contributed to their predicament – are being supported by authorities with vocational training and other social goods as part of the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. For example a research fellow of the National Judicial Institute reported:

” [Local communities] want the right to be heard; for some people that might even be only an apology. What they ask is inclusivity: they say “There is no rehabilitation without bringing us in”.<sup>441</sup>

A research participant at the Office of the National Security Advisor adds to the above:

” Community members are critical of the vocational training provided to former terrorist group members. They share the grievance that they are not provided with vocational training, while the former terrorists are provided with vocational training that allows them better access to job markets and more economic opportunities.<sup>442</sup>

This material resentment further exacerbates the inevitable mistrust of anyone associated with the groups that have caused so much suffering across the region.

Many children have difficulty with the stigma attached to former combatants in local communities, and do not know where to go if they leave the group. They fear, sometimes for good reason, that their families will not want them back. This is particularly the case for children who have been forced by Boko Haram to commit acts of violence against their own family members, including their murder, to prove their allegiance to the group.

440 STRIVE Juvenile, “Nigeria Call for Action”, UNODC, 1 December 2022.

441 Key informant #93, Member of staff at National Judicial Institute. Interview conducted in February 2022.

442 Key informant #97, Member of staff at Office of the National Security Advisor. Interview conducted in February 2022.

It is also especially true for children thought to have joined the group of their own volition, or who are thought not to have repented their perceived wrongdoing sufficiently. A lingering belief persists that child associates are brainwashed by Boko Haram and their lost innocence can never be recovered. Fatima, for example, faced serious challenges after leaving the group:

” When I returned to my community from the Hajj camp, they rejected me. Even my family rejected me. They blamed me for following a man into the bush. I felt bad and lonely. I had to move to [X] to live with my uncle – he was the only one to accept me ... Now my mother has also accepted me back. However, my two brothers still don't want to see me.<sup>443</sup>

An important gendered aspect of the discrimination is the shaming of girls who have had sexual relationships with Boko Haram fighters, even as victims of rape, sexual abuse and exploitation, particularly those who return to their communities pregnant or with babies. Beliefs about “tainted” or “bad” blood fuel distrust of these girls and women and their young children.<sup>444</sup>

Some of the young women interviewed for this project reported being told they had carried “the spawn of a terrorist”. Aisha, for example, said that while her family and community have welcomed her back, the same could not be said for her son:

” Since I was abducted when I was a child from my home, my parents have accepted me back and they were shedding tears of joy to have me back alive. The community also received me without any problem. Yet my child is sometimes called “the child of Shekau”.<sup>445</sup>

Many young women and girls continued to be exposed to sexual and gender-based violence when they eventually returned to government-controlled territory. In 2016, 43 alleged cases of sexual violence against girls and women at the hands of security guards, army officers, camp officials, and members of the Civilian Joint Task Force in the north-east were reported to the UN.<sup>446</sup> In 2018 the UN reported that several girls had been raped by military officers in the north-east.<sup>447</sup> In January 2023 the National Human Rights Commission established a Special Independent Investigation Panel to look into reports alleging that hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of pregnant girls suspected of carrying the children of Boko Haram fighters had been systematically subjected to forced terminations while in military custody. The military strongly denied these allegations.<sup>448</sup>

443 Female #13, early teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

444 International Alert, “Bad Blood”.

445 Female #23, mid-teens at time of association, Adamawa. Interview conducted in April 2022.

446 S/2017/249, para. 90.

447 S/2019/280, para. 119.

448 Reuters, “Nigerian rights commission panel to probe abortion allegations against military”, February 1, 2023; ; Lauren Aarons, Akila Radhakrishnan, and Osai Ojigbo, “Nigeria's Alleged Forced Abortion Campaign Demands Action”, Foreign Policy, 9 February 2023; Amnesty International, “Op-ed: Stars on their shoulders, blood on their hands”, 3 June 2015.



Exposure to violence after exiting the group is not only a concern for girls: a 2021 Amnesty International Report indicated that since 2008 the Nigerian military has detained over 3,600 alleged child Boko Haram members and violated their human rights without ascertaining their level of involvement with the group. It also reported sexual abuse of women and children by the military.<sup>449</sup>

Finally, experiences of stigmatization and discrimination along with other factors such as the return to abject poverty or chance encounters with recalcitrant former group members, can recreate the conditions that led children to associate with the group in the first place, making them long to return. A young woman who spent several years with Boko Haram after being abducted in her early teens spoke of the temptation to rejoin her former comrades:

” My major concern is that I am always asked to go and sell wares for my family just as I was doing before my abduction, and I don’t have the opportunity to do my own business, which will help me take care of my child ... Sometimes I contemplate going back, because I feel hopeless.<sup>450</sup>

Other interviewees cited social isolation, abuse by the authorities, and a lack of economic prospects as potential motivation for rejoining Boko Haram. Some expressed a desire to return to the bush after being rescued by the authorities because they did not have the material means to survive outside Boko Haram.<sup>451</sup> Moussa, for example, was recruited twice into Boko Haram. The first time, abducted from his village in Borno State at the age of 17, he was intercepted by the authorities during a military raid and taken to the unit’s operations base. When the base was attacked by insurgents two years later, he rejoined the group because he did not want to continue living in such dire circumstances.<sup>452</sup>

Finally, some interviewees reported the widespread belief that some girls and young women want to go back to life in the bush because their children and husbands are still there. The severing of parental and kinship bonds after an individual’s initial recruitment, which then works to keep children from leaving the surrogate family provided by the group, can also create conditions conducive to re-recruitment if their families of origin shun or stigmatize them when they return.

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449 Amnesty International, “Nigeria Submission to the UN Committee against Torture 72nd Session, 8 November-3 December 2021”, 2021

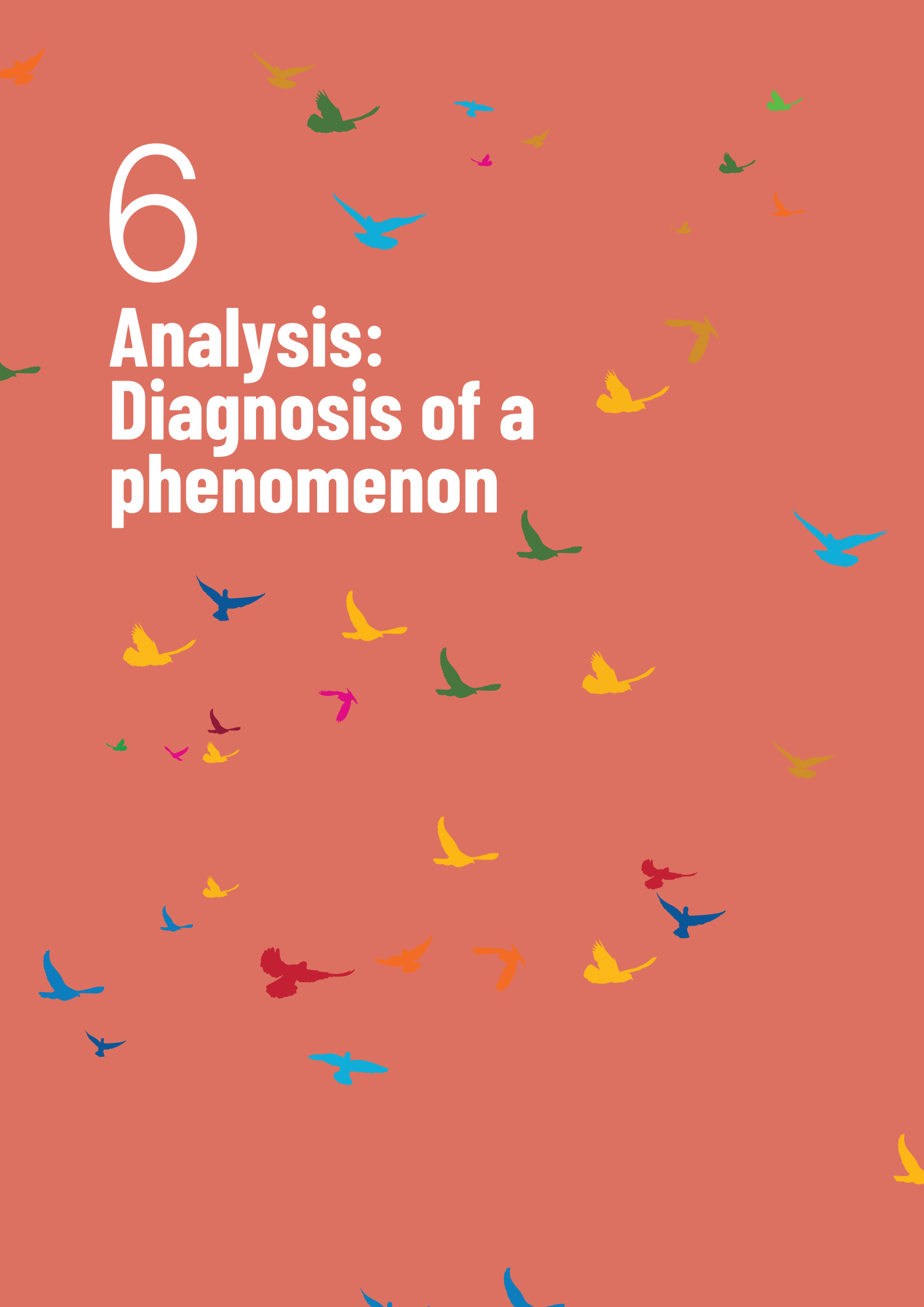
450 Female #17, early teens at time of association, Adamawa. Interview conducted in April 2022.

451 Male #10, mid-teens at time of association, Borno; key informant #42, retired reporter for Borno Radio and Television, Interviews conducted in April 2022.

452 Male #10, mid-teens at time of association, Borno. Interview conducted in April 2022.

# 6

## Analysis: Diagnosis of a phenomenon



# 6. Analysis: Diagnosis of a phenomenon

**T**his research set out to investigate child association with terrorist groups. In particular it questions whether specific protection challenges affect this group of children in comparison to those associated with other criminal and non-State armed groups (NSAGs), and examines the effects of existing State responses on children's and young adults' rehabilitation and reintegration journeys once they have left the group.

Based on the case studies conducted in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria it is possible to draw some general conclusions. The goal is not to make direct comparisons between countries but rather to identify the experiences that are common to children despite the diversity of their contexts. This section addresses four key questions:

- 1 Is child association with terrorist groups an exceptional phenomenon** that is inherently different from the experiences of children with comparable groups not designated terrorist?
- 2 Are agency and coercion mutually exclusive characteristics of such children's experiences?**
- 3 Does the presence of armed conflict determine children's journey of association?**
- 4 What responses work when addressing child association, and must States choose between safeguarding public safety and fulfilling children's rights?**

## 6.1 Children and Terrorism: exceptional risks?

The findings of this study of the experiences of children associated with groups listed as terrorist in Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria broadly align with the conclusions of the literature on child association with NSAGs and other criminal groups in general. Violence, harm and exploitation characterize children's experiences with groups designated terrorist as much as those of children in other situations of armed conflict and criminality. However, the tactics widely employed by terrorist groups, although not exclusive to them, and specialized counter-terrorism interventions exacerbate some of the harms, abuses and rights violations that children face.

## Recruitment and association

This research clearly shows that children are recruited because they are seen as a useful resource. Whether through overt force or other methods of coercion, such as the use of material incentives in a context of economic deprivation, family pressure, propaganda, and persuasion, terrorist groups intentionally target children to exploit them. Across all three case-study countries, campaigns of abduction and forced recruitment in schools, the instrumentalization of peers as recruiters, and extensive online content designed to appeal specifically to children<sup>453</sup> demonstrate the extent to which they are a sought-after resource for such groups.

While a variety of armed and organized criminal groups find children useful, their utility may be especially high for groups that rely heavily on terrorist tactics. Because terrorist groups actively pursue visibility, they may instrumentalize children for their propaganda value (see **section 6.4**). The fact that terrorist groups across Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria have tailored recruitment campaigns specifically for children indicates that they have strong incentives to reach this particular population.

This research has examined the extent of recruitment strategies focusing on children and sought to identify key factors and patterns in children's recruitment processes. Children's entry into terrorist groups is determined by a constellation of factors that interact in non-linear and multicausal ways<sup>454</sup> depending on the individual circumstances of each child.

Context matters: sociopolitical tensions, political turmoil and conflict, economic deprivation and lack of opportunities all provide fertile ground for terrorist groups to extend their sphere of influence. Existing societal cleavages along ethnic, political, religious, intergenerational and geographical fault lines can also create preconditions for association. Context also creates conditions for association through abduction or other overt forms of force (see **section 6.3**), and in other ways.

Children's interpersonal relationships also have an important part in recruitment patterns. Family ties, the school environment, peer groups and friendships, virtual communities and role models exert a particularly strong influence on children across the three countries. As with mafia and other criminal groups,<sup>455</sup> family and the social environment can play a significant role in facilitating association through social pressure and expectations. The absence of a safe and healthy family environment increases the likelihood of association, either because children are lured into the group in search of economic support and physical protection or because they are more exposed to abduction and forced recruitment. In both circumstances, their need to belong and experience acceptance as part of a group is a strong factor in determining association.

At the individual level, the quest for status and significance is a crucial driver among children across the three case studies, manifesting differently in boys and girls depending on local gendered conceptions of status and achievement. Negative personal experiences, especially of

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453 Awan, "Cyber-Extremism: Isis and the Power of Social Media"; Lisa Blaker, "The Islamic State's Use of Online Social Media", *Military Cyber Affairs*, 1, no. 1 (2016), p. 4; Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story via Tumblr Analytics"; Brigitte L. Nacos, "Young Western Women, Fandom, and ISIS", *E-International Relations*, 5, no. 5 (2015).

454 O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

455 Francesco Calderoni and others, "Recruitment into Organised Criminal Groups: A Systematic Review", *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, no. 583 (2020), pp. 1–28; Decker, Decker, and van Winkle, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence*.

shock, violence and trauma, can also influence child recruitment. While their actual weight in driving association remains unclear, direct or indirect experience of abuse by criminal groups or the authorities may trigger a desire for revenge and strengthen the feeling of belonging to a social group that is discriminated against and mistreated, a shared narrative that may influence recruitment more strongly than personal, unrelated trauma. Feelings of injustice and a desire for revenge fuel the perception of association as an opportunity to protect and achieve justice for family members, friends, communities, or society as a whole.

None of these elements are exceptional to terrorist group recruitment; they are also common drivers and patterns of association with other criminal and NSAGs.<sup>456</sup>

The significance of ideology and religious beliefs in association with terrorist groups is often overstated.<sup>457</sup> This research finds that while ideological and religious rhetoric are often instrumentalized to attract children, they are not determinants of their association with terrorist groups, especially in isolation. They tend to become attractive when associated with broader political discontent at the perceived absence of the State or a sense of the injustice of existing policies.

When counter-terrorism responses are perceived as especially punitive, harsh and/or discriminatory, they can enhance the risk of recruitment into terrorist groups by legitimizing their narratives. The Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria case studies have shown how terrorist groups intentionally capitalize on discontentment with State policies, including specific counter-terrorism measures, among local, ethnic, and religious communities.

Indoctrination and ideology play a more important role after recruitment but are not always central to children's experiences. In all three countries an intense period of (generally military) training of varying duration across regions and groups often characterizes the first phase following recruitment. It may also include a phase of desensitization to violence and the dehumanization of perceived enemies of the group. Ideological and religious elements of initial training were reported in Iraq and Indonesia. In Nigeria, the interviewees stressed that physical and weapons training were almost the exclusive focus.

Like children associated with other armed and organized criminal groups, children in terrorist groups are exploited for a variety of roles including direct participation in combat, preparing attacks, acting as scouts, spies, or couriers at military checkpoints, and transporting supplies. They are also used for food deliveries and as domestic staff. In all three countries the children's roles and functions in the groups were flexible and fluid. As also observed in NSAGs and criminal street gangs, children are seldom bound to a specific role and are generally given multiple tasks, sometimes simultaneously.

The above reveals two interconnected and apparently contradictory dimensions of the children's experience: the trauma of performing and living through violence, and the sense of community derived from association with the group. All the children's roles entail severe exploitation and almost constant exposure to multiple and severe forms of physical and psychological violence, not only in active roles but also experiencing and witnessing rape, beatings and public executions.

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456 Decker and Pyrooz, "I'm down for a Jihad".

457 See, for example, Arie Kruglanski, "Inside the Terrorist Mind: The Relevance of Ideology", *Studies in Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2006), pp. 271-77.

Significantly, however, violence is a crucial strategy for attaining children's cohesion around group-centered values, either by making the children perform violent acts themselves or, as is more common in Indonesia, by accustoming and desensitizing them to it. The atrocities and suffering that the children endure can be conducive to a sense of bonding and fraternity.

This has two important implications. First, positive and negative experiences within terrorist groups are not at odds with one another; rather, they are often deeply interconnected. Second, and perhaps most importantly, children are made complicit in reproducing a system aimed at their own exploitation and abuse. While the experience and performance of violence reinforces their association with the group, it also creates preconditions for disengaging from it.

## **Exit, Rehabilitation & Reintegration**

As with recruitment and association, children's trajectories when exiting a terrorist group and their rehabilitation and reintegration journeys largely correspond to those of children leaving other criminal and armed groups. However, children associated with terrorist groups often face stronger rejection by their local communities and national and local authorities due to the stigma associated with terrorism.

When leaving the group involves a decision by the child (i.e. it is not the result of hostilities, arrest, or a release schemes), the process of disengaging can be influenced by multiple motives that accumulate over time until they reach a tipping point. Across the case studies, several interrelated factors motivated children towards this action: frustration or resentment at the group's leadership; the accumulation of traumatic experiences; poor living conditions; the belief that their acts have been wrong and harmful; feeling deceived and used; and awareness of government campaigns encouraging them to leave. A clear common trend across Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria is increasing disillusionment with the group's ideology and general loss of faith in its leadership, a finding consistent with studies of non-State armed groups<sup>458</sup> and organized criminal groups.<sup>459</sup>

Deciding to leave, however, does not always result in exiting the group, which is difficult and at times impossible. In Iraq and Nigeria groups have summarily executed those who tried to escape as a warning to others who may be considering getting away. In other cases, especially in Indonesia, family and affective ties such as marriage, children, or presence of other family members in the group's camps prevented some children from leaving. For others, the presumed or real absence of family members and close friends outside the group and of realistic possibilities for reintegration holds them back. In Nigeria, for example, recruiters and leaders often deliberately stress to children that their communities and families do not want them anymore and would never accept them back.

Across the case studies, children reported their awareness and fear of stigmatization due to their association with terrorist groups. This not only influences the context of their exit but also significantly affects their opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration. Reintegration can come at a great cost, and the chance of returning to the group is high across the three case studies.

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458 O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

459 David C. Pyrooz and Scott H. Decker, "Motives and Methods for Leaving the Gang: Understanding the Process of Gang Desistance," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 39, no. 5 (2011): pp. 417–25.

Like the complexity and involvement of the different variables in the association process, children's rehabilitation and reintegration is similarly complex and often fraught with multiple obstacles. The challenges of rehabilitation and reintegration include sociopolitical instability, lack of economic opportunities and access to services, incidences of physical and psychological trauma, societal stigmatization, and exposure to former recruiters. This study finds that the same factors that are conducive to association and subsequent disengagement from the group can also facilitate or prevent reintegration. If the quest for personal significance and prosocial feelings affects association patterns, those who successfully reintegrate are often those most capable of finding social and vocational fulfilment in life away from the group.

The challenges in and incentives for rehabilitation and reintegration do not appear different or exceptional for children leaving terrorist groups than for those leaving other armed and criminal groups. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that reintegration can be more complex for these children due to their perception outside as a particularly serious security threat (see section 6.4). Across Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria, obstacles to reintegration are exacerbated by children and young adults' exposure to severe stigmatization and discrimination from both the authorities and their local communities.

Gender often determines how these girls and boys experience stigmatization and discrimination. Boys are more likely to face interrogation, arrest, and other forms of punishment after leaving a terrorist group. Many reported remaining in the group longer than they had wanted to, fearing what would happen if they fled. Even those who are detained by the authorities on leaving find themselves rejected and stigmatized by their local communities on their release. Girls face ostracization in their communities and are often discriminated against for their sexual experience and reproductive role. They also suffer discrimination at the hands of the authorities as they attempt to reintegrate into civilian life and their community, and are frequently left without access to appropriate care and support.

Such challenges and obstacles, which are considerably impacted by the perception of children's connection with "terrorism," contribute to significant numbers of those who have left returning to the groups. In some instances, they were coerced by the groups to rejoin, highlighting the pressure that they bring to bear on former members. However, interviews with young adults who had been associated as children indicated other drivers of re-association, particularly in connection with obstacles to the reintegration process. Some expressed feelings of isolation and rejection from society that made the prospect of returning to a familiar setting increasingly appealing. Interviews with key stakeholders such as workers in rehabilitation centers and the authorities confirmed that instances of individuals choosing to return after initially disengaging are not uncommon.

Key actors involved in the treatment of these children and young adults shared insights about the patterns they have observed that lead to reassociation. The reasons for this form of return are consistent: the significant barriers to reintegration, accentuated by societal discrimination stemming from the perception of past affiliation, make the groups seem less threatening by comparison. Stigmatization, combined with bleak economic prospects outside the group, can cause those who have left to reassess their situation.

## 6.2 Coercion and agency in child association with terrorist groups

Policy understanding of the way children interact with terrorist groups is often flawed. Enduring stereotypes around the roles of children in the groups affect key stakeholders' responses to the phenomenon with negative consequences.<sup>460</sup> They contribute to child protection risks and rights violations, for instance by increasing stigmatization and rejection, influence the interpretation of their legal status as victims or as offenders, and their prospects of a safe and effective reintegration.

Flawed understanding of the concept of “voluntariness” – free choice and the expression of pure personal volition – when considering children's trajectories into and association with the groups is widespread. In many cases voluntariness and coercion are portrayed as mutually exclusive alternatives to define the children's roles within the groups: they are either willing members, or coerced victims. Methodological shortcomings and the complexities of collecting data among marginalized and hard-to-reach populations have reinforced this troubling dichotomy.<sup>461</sup> A more nuanced and appropriate understanding of the complex dynamics of coercion and agency in the experiences of children associated with terrorist groups is necessary, to overcome such stereotypes and provide an essential basis for robust and effective policy and programmes.

### Purely voluntary recruitment does not exist

The study findings confirm that child recruitment methods that rely on the use of force are prevalent, especially in contexts affected by ongoing conflict such as in Iraq and Nigeria. Where terrorist groups have the resources to engage in open hostilities and enjoy territorial control of some sort, they can more easily rely on force for recruitment purposes: abducting children from residential schools, their villages, or their families, or taking them with intimidation, open threats or deception. The shock and brutality of these recruitment methods make their violence apparent to anyone. However, coercion also plays a crucial role when children are recruited by different means.

Against the backdrop of these overt forms of violence, children from precarious socioeconomic backgrounds who are lured into groups with a variety of social and material incentives are often perceived by local authorities and communities as fully accountable for their actions, particularly if they are above the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

This interpretation fails to take into account the fact that ongoing uprisings, for instance, created severe socioeconomic instability in certain areas of Iraq and Nigeria, depriving families of their breadwinners and making children their household heads. In these circumstances, children's willingness to join a terrorist group may be driven by the fact that it is the only opportunity to meet their basic needs, including for survival. Similar considerations apply outside conflict environments; the Indonesian case study illustrates the common reality of recruitment processes predicated

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460 O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

461 Scott Gates and Simon Reich, *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).



upon family membership. Membership through socialization from early childhood is also typical of certain organized criminal groups.<sup>462</sup> It creates a context of enormous pressure in which children's fulfilment of their basic needs is again contingent on their association with the group concerned.

While diverse in nature, all these circumstances contribute to the creation of a coercive environment where protracted economic precarity, political violence, and strong social pressures blur the boundary between choice and obligation: and children may see associating with a terrorist group as the least bad option available.

Finally, across the case studies interviewees who had become associated as children recalled having been persuaded that they were making "the right choice". They were targeted through organized school sessions, peer groups, and tailored narratives, all as parts of purposeful recruitment campaigns. While their motivations were diverse, ranging from a quest for identity and significance to a desire for revenge or for economic and social status, their conviction shows that children do exercise some agency in a context of limited alternatives.

The clear power imbalance between children and the organized groups intent on recruiting them to exploit them is a central issue. Voluntariness is incompatible with the situations of children in these realities. As the Graça Machel report eloquently put it over 20 years ago, "while many children are forced to join armed forces or groups, others may present themselves for service. It is misleading, however, to consider this 'voluntary.' Rather than exercising free choice, these children are responding more often to a variety of pressures – economic, cultural, social, and political".<sup>463</sup>

This study has shown that similar pressures apply to children living both within and outside settings of armed conflict, with voluntariness and coercion two ends of a spectrum that interact on a continuum<sup>464</sup> along which elements of coercion can coexist with children's choices, while at the same time inevitably influencing them.

The focus on voluntariness in recruitment processes tends to obscure patterns of coercion during association. The experiences of interviewees who joined a group without the use of abduction or force confirm that coercion determined and shaped both their roles within the groups and their exit journeys. Whether forced, induced or persuaded to join, once associated with a terrorist group the children were part of highly hierarchical and organized networks, to be exploited according to the group's objectives and needs. Furthermore, after experiencing violence and, for those who had believed the promises and propaganda, the deceptions of real life under association, many reported wanting to leave. Yet they faced considerable obstacles, including the credible threat of death, to achieving this.

One aspect that warrants further exploration is family involvement in the association process. Some children become associated with terrorist groups as a result of familial ties. The decision

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462 Calderoni and others, "Recruitment into Organised Criminal Groups: A Systematic Review", Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice, no. 583 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2020); Scott H. Decker, Scott H. Winkle, and Barrick van Winkle, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence* (Cambridge, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

463 Graça Machel and others, *The Impact of War on Children: A Review of Progress Since the 1996 United Nations Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, (London, Hurst, 2001), p. 11.

464 Siobhan O'Neil, "Child recruitment and use by armed groups in contemporary conflict", in O'Neil and van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, p. 32.

of one or both parents to join a terrorist group often leads to their offspring becoming enmeshed in the organization too. As the Indonesia case study clearly shows, the process of association can be subtle and gradual. Such passive immersion, predominantly rooted in familial dynamics, challenges traditional perspectives on levels of coercion, underscoring the necessity of a more nuanced understanding that acknowledges the myriad ways in which children can become associated with terrorist groups.

In summary, separating children into two clear-cut groups, the culpable (voluntary) members and the innocent victims, is not only inaccurate but also discounts the reality of pervasive coercion and violence experienced by all children who became involved with terrorist groups. Importantly, these findings confirm the premise of international law, which prohibits any forms of child recruitment and exploitation and considers children's consent legally void in such cases.<sup>465</sup>

## **“Boys are fighters, girls are brides”: how gender stereotypes shape understandings of children’s agency**

Understanding children's experiences with terrorist groups is also affected by prescriptive definitions of gender. First, gender and age are presumed to determine the degree of agency involved in recruitment, with younger children and girls seen as being coerced into joining and older children and boys as more likely to join voluntarily. A second widespread assumption is that once recruited, boys are allocated combat positions or other violent activities while girls are relegated to domestic and reproductive roles.

These narratives are based on two interrelated misconceptions. One is that boys always have agency; they are assumed to be not only more rational and less exposed to coercion and abuse but also inherently dangerous, and as a result take on roles that entail the use of violence and thus criminal liability. This increases their exposure to heavy-handed security responses and punitive justice.

The other related misconception sees girls lacking any form of agency, either because of their assumed greater vulnerability or due to prevailing cultural norms. In this view, girls more easily fall victim to terrorist groups, who force or deceive them into marrying male group members or subject them to sexual enslavement. These understandings have clear implications for the categories of victimhood and culpability ascribed to children associated with terrorist groups.

This research has found that boys are not exclusively involved in violent action, nor are they necessarily willing to undertake violent roles. Particularly in the initial stages of association, they are called upon to perform a variety of roles that do not necessarily entail violence such as spying, farming, cooking, fetching water and firewood, teaching, cleaning, and acting as porters. Many of these roles are shared by boys and girls, some clearly distributed on the basis of age rather than gender.

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<sup>465</sup> Child recruitment is broadly prohibited by international law, which also requires States to criminalize it. See Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, Articles 4–6; Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention 1999 (No. 182) Articles 1–3; A/Res/55/25, Articles 3–5; S/RES/1373 (2001). Further information and detail on the international legal framework relevant to child recruitment can be found in Chapters 1(C), 2(A), and 3(A) of the [UNODC Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System](#) (Vienna, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017).

Furthermore, while boys may often also be involved in combat in Nigeria and Iraq, groups operating in Indonesia seldom engage children in fighting roles before they reach legal adulthood, although a small but growing number of boys and girls have been involved in terrorist attacks in Indonesia in recent years. Most importantly, as set out above, engaging in violence occurs in contexts where children have limited options for survival. Even in these cases, violence may require further facilitation: in Nigeria, Boko Haram uses drugs to ease children's involvement in highly dangerous activities and to increase its hold on them.

There is evidence in all three countries that most girls are indeed recruited through overt forms of coercion and that they are relegated to mostly sexual and domestic positions. However, the study has also documented several cases of girls joining groups because they were persuaded by the cause, and of their taking on active roles as recruiters, mentors, and even fighters.

In the eyes of children of both sexes, joining can be a unique opportunity to break the gendered bounds of custom or, conversely, to resist certain forms of sociopolitical change such as secular-liberal politics. The groups' capacity to position themselves as a credible alternative to traditional society should be considered when assessing the best options for facilitating previously associated girls and young women's reintegration, whether or not this was a factor in their recruitment process.

The findings from this research warn against assuming a hierarchy of vulnerability among these children<sup>466</sup> based on gender and age. Not only are boys often exposed to the same harm and abuse as girls, but traumas and negative experiences among boys are often under-reported. On the one hand their exploitation in dangerous roles increases their exposure to death, injury and punitive responses from authorities, while on the other their gender does not protect boys from sexual violence or exploitation in domestic roles. Similarly, being younger is not always indicative of greater vulnerability. Evidence suggests that transitioning into legal adulthood can increase children's, and particularly boys', vulnerability to punitive responses and exclude them from specialized humanitarian programmes and support services addressing only those under the age of 18.

## **Agency in a coercive environment**

Science has proven beyond doubt that childhood is a period of extensive changes to brain structure and capacity.<sup>467</sup> Children's ongoing brain development, during which their cognitive, social and emotional abilities are forming and should not be equated with those of adults, extends well beyond the age of 20. This means that children are more vulnerable to peer-pressure and violence, more prone to taking risks, and less capable of gauging the long-term consequences of their actions. These developmental processes explain why specific needs such as those for belonging, recognition, and significance are especially pressing for children, particularly during adolescence. Growing scientific understanding of their development provides an important basis from which to appreciate the power imbalance between terrorist and violent extremist groups and children, and clarifies the rationale behind the comprehensive prohibition and criminalization

466 Virokannas, Elina, Suvi Liuski, and Marjo Kuronen, "The Contested Concept of Vulnerability – A Literature Review", *European Journal of Social Work*, 23, no. 2 (2020), pp. 327–339.

467 N. Gogtay and others, "Dynamic mapping of human cortical development during childhood through early adulthood", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 101, no. 21, May 25 2004, pp. 8174–8179.

of child recruitment and exploitation. Recognizing children as victims is crucial to addressing and redressing the consequences of terrorist groups' violations of their rights and the punitive approaches imposed on them once they have left.

However, children's experience of victimization should not be conflated with passivity, nor should it lead to discounting their agency or dismissing their motivations. Exploring children's reasons for joining terrorist groups and their tactics for surviving the experience is essential to grasp the full complexity of this phenomenon. Where recruitment happens through persuasion, it is often in a context where children are exposed to protracted deprivation and vulnerability, see the State as having "broken the social contract", and have feelings of exclusion and injustice that are compounded by punitive counter-terrorism approaches.<sup>468</sup> In such an environment, association with these groups can be a strategy for navigating through increasing precarity.

In Indonesia family ties, peer pressure, social media content, feelings such as hatred, desire for vengeance, and injustice are intertwined with other apparently contradictory motivations, such as a sense of adventure, love for the community, and other prosocial emotions. In Iraq the pursuit of a meaningful future drives some children's decision to join Da'esh and cannot be disentangled from their desire for agency and control over their environment, or from grievance- or revenge-based motivation, underpinned by the need for survival. In Nigeria some children may see joining Boko Haram as the only way of improving their chance of survival in a context marked by economic despair where neutrality is not an option. It becomes a rational coping mechanism to acquire both material welfare and social status, and a rite of passage that offers children some capacity to exert agency and control over their own life.

A full appreciation of these nuanced and complex dynamics is crucial when attempting to design effective policy and programmatic responses, particularly those concerned with reintegration and community reconciliation.

### 6.3 How the presence or absence of armed conflict shapes children's experiences

In recent years terrorist groups have recruited children in many regions and contexts around the world, yet most of the literature analyzing child association with such groups focuses on areas of ongoing armed conflict<sup>469</sup> or on the departure of foreign terrorist fighters<sup>470</sup> from countries not experiencing conflict in their national territories.<sup>471</sup> While this helps to identify the impact of conflict-related factors on processes of child recruitment, association and exit, it may also have the unintended effect of suggesting there is an important crucial distinction between children living in conflict situations and those who are not. It also contributes to the perception that children recruited in conflict situations can more easily be considered victims, while those who are recruited in "peaceful" environments are more easily seen as driven by ideological motives and guilty of embracing terrorism.

468 UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*; O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

469 O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*.

470 See Terminology

471 Radicalisation Awareness Network, "Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families", RAN Manual, July 2017; United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, "Children Affected by the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon: Ensuring a Child Rights-Based Approach", Handbook, 2019.

This study has covered conflict (northern Iraq, north-east Nigeria) and non-conflict (Indonesia) settings.<sup>472</sup> The findings indicate that child recruitment and association practices in both instances are rooted in the exploitation of the children's specific needs and levels of development. Context has a notable impact on the nature of association but that does not necessarily depend on the presence of active conflict.

## Children's needs and the impact of violence

Despite the varying amounts of violence in Iraq, Indonesia and Nigeria, this study has found extensive similarities in children's experiences of association. This common ground often shapes recruitment processes, children's experiences with the groups, as well as their rehabilitation and reintegration.

Terrorist recruitment tactics use family bonds to facilitate children's association in a variety of ways. Family members' loyalty and membership of the group are leveraged as incentives to join across the three case studies. Family ties are also widely used as a deterrent from disengagement from the group, whether in the form of overt threats that family members will suffer, or the risk of severing family ties by leaving the group.

The influence of peers motivating children to join also emerges as a common theme across the different groups' strategies in all three case-study countries. The Indonesian example particularly shows the extent to which bonds among friends are systematically instrumentalized as part of the broad-ranging recruitment strategies that purposefully target children. The primary role of these social relationships in determining recruitment, whether through pressure, affection or a combination of both, speaks to children's specific need for attention, love and a sense of belonging.<sup>473</sup> At the same time, they are indicative of children's higher vulnerability to pressure, whether for material reasons (dependence on family for protection and survival) or because of their greater malleability.

This study shows how children are exploited in a variety of roles, all of which rely upon victimization and exploitation, in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria despite the different levels of collective violence in these countries. Children had similar experiences of disillusionment with the groups, which they often described as directly connected to the perpetration of indiscriminate violence and the incongruity of the groups' formal objectives as stated in their propaganda and recruitment processes, and their unjust practices.

It is significant that the interviewees across the case studies reported similar obstacles to their disengagement, the two main ones being fear of the group's retaliation, showing that terrorist groups are capable of intimidation and appealing to a thirst for revenge both in the presence and the absence of armed conflict, much like other criminal groups, and fear of the State's punitive response, whether or not the government is formally engaged in a conflict.

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472 See Terminology

473 K. A. Allen and M.L. Kern, *School Belonging in Adolescents: Theory, Research and Practice*, Springer Briefs in School Psychology (Singapore, Springer, 2017); G. G. Bear and K. M. Minke, *Children's Needs III: Development, Prevention, and Intervention* (Bethesda, Maryland, National Association of School Psychologists, 2006); E. A. Skinner and J. G. Wellborn, "Coping during childhood and adolescence: A motivational perspective", in David L. Featherman, Richard M. Lerner, and Marion Perlmutter, eds., *Life-span Development and Behavior* (New York, Routledge, 2019), pp. 91–134.

Finally, the diverse experiences of children's rehabilitation and reintegration processes analysed in this study show important commonalities despite the different contexts. Children who have left groups designated terrorist are subject to higher levels of stigmatization and rejection than those who have exited other armed or organized criminal groups, who may share similar experiences of violence and exploitation. This appears to be explained by the "terrorist" label and the accompanying fear of exceptional threat that this involves, rather than deriving from the likelihood of children having themselves been involved in combat.

Terrorist groups' recruitment and association tactics, like those of other armed and organized criminal groups, are therefore rooted in a clear understanding and systematized exploitation of children's specific needs and vulnerabilities. At the same time, the scale of victimization is not directly related to the degree of armed violence in the country. The experience of violence is the common denominator that characterizes these children's trajectories, and it is aggravated by securitized counter-terrorist approaches.

## **Context matters: feelings of injustice shape association beyond war**

The evidence presented in this study clearly points to a correlation between the socioeconomic and political context and the unfulfilled rights of children, which in turn motivate, spark, and reinforce association processes. However, contextual factors can play a similar role in creating conditions for child recruitment, whether or not existing tensions amount to armed conflict.

In many instances the origins of discontent can be traced back to before the spread of extremist violence. This is clearly the case in Iraq, where children's lives were profoundly affected by uprisings, political violence, and marginalization prior to the current conflict. Though pre-dating these boys' childhoods, the 2003 Iraq war led to widespread insecurity, rising violence and socioeconomic precarity.<sup>474</sup> The testimonies of those who joined the terrorist groups as children characterize these events as relevant, often decisive factors motivating their journey.

Similarly, respondents in Indonesia stressed the importance of both global events such as the Soviet-Afghan War and the Arab Spring and local tensions such as the communal conflicts emerging after the 1998 transition in shaping their worldview and providing motivation for association. In particular, the communal conflicts revealed underlying sociopolitical frustrations and feelings of marginalization and discrimination that continue to fuel recruitment decades later. The recurrence of so-called "multi-generational jihad" demonstrates the continued relevance of historical grievances.

The Indonesian case study shows that there does not need to be armed conflict in a country to drive the recruitment of children. Several interviewees associated as children were recruited via online information and social media content produced by terrorist groups operating in conflict areas. When the reasons for conflict depicted in such propaganda appear to reflect local grievances, the conflict need not be geographically close to be integrated into child recruitment patterns.

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<sup>474</sup> Nadia Siddiqui and Khogir W. Mohammed, *Movements Before Mechanisms: Community Grievances and Windows of Opportunity for Restorative Justice in a Transitional Justice Context* (Erbil: Social Inquiry, 2022), p. 16.

In Nigeria, the protracted conflict in the north-east has exposed entire communities to widespread vulnerability and lack of access to basic services and of socioeconomic opportunities, especially for children and youths. Ongoing violence has affected families directly, their losses generating a desire for revenge and discontent with State authorities, who are held responsible for insufficient protection or for the direct involvement of security forces in violations of their rights.

Two interrelated processes had a devastating impact on children and created opportunities for their recruitment. On the one hand, experiences of social marginalization, perceived injustices, and the relevance of material incentives in contexts where access to these is very limited for certain groups are rooted in often-longstanding tensions between groups of citizens and public authorities. These feelings have been described as perceptions of “a broken social contract”.<sup>475</sup> Whether or not such tensions result in armed conflict seems less relevant to determining association than the existence of grievances that are generally attributed to a specific group.

On the other hand, the securitization of political debate and of social spaces, which is often directly connected with counter-terrorism efforts (see section 6.4) in both the presence and the absence of war, has notably intensified these underlying fractures, reinforcing rather than curbing motivations for recruitment. As discussed, the widespread belief among groups across the three case studies that the country in which they operate is in a state of emergency has prompted Boko Haram, Da’esh, and others to encourage children and women to engage with them which, in a vicious circle of escalation, has triggered an increasingly securitized response from the States in which they operate.

A United Nations University study finds that “it would be hard for children to engage in political violence without some larger political conflict – real or perceived – around which to orient their actions”.<sup>476</sup> This research confirms this hypothesis, while further clarifying that “political conflict” need not amount to armed conflict to function as a trigger for child association processes. Children can be subjected to forceful and historically rooted pressures whether or not the countries in which they live are at war.

This is not to say that the existence of full-fledged armed conflict has no impact on children.<sup>477</sup> The consequences of extensive violence are numerous and clearly exemplified by the differential magnitudes of the phenomenon across the three case studies, with a substantially smaller number of children recruited by terrorist groups in Indonesia.<sup>478</sup> In conflict situations, armed groups’ control over parts of the territory creates facilitating conditions for recruitment relying on overt force, with kidnapping widely used in Iraq and Nigeria but virtually absent in Indonesia. In contexts of ongoing hostilities children are more likely to be routinely exposed to physical injury and death due to their engagement in active combat roles. However, recent events in Indonesia, such as the Surabaya bombings, have found an increasing number of children engaging in active violence outside armed conflict.

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475 UNDP, “Journey to Extremism in Africa”, p. 17.

476 O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, p. 43.

477 See, for example, MEAC, “Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin”.

478 While it is impossible to provide comprehensive data on the number of children affected by this phenomenon in each of the case-study countries, the United Nations verifies that in Nigeria 1,385 children were recruited and used by Boko Haram between 2017 and 2019 (see S/2020/652, para 22), and that 2,114 grave violations were committed against children, the majority by Da’esh but also by other parties to the conflict, in Iraq between 2015 and 2019 (see S/2019/984, para. 23).

The effects of armed conflict also shape children's rehabilitation and reintegration challenges. Children exiting terrorist groups in Nigeria and Iraq have sustained physical injuries and are suffering from acute or chronic health conditions and diseases as a result of their participation in the fighting. These health issues may have affected their development and can hinder their successful rehabilitation and reintegration. For example, research shows that the psychological problems facing children associated with Boko Haram are exacerbated by armed conflict,<sup>479</sup> and the massive internal displacement and prolonged hostilities mean they also face huge obstacles to accessing livelihood and basic support services.<sup>480</sup>

The presence of armed conflict exacerbates protection challenges faced by children even if it is not a precondition for child association with terrorist groups, and it should not be used to establish a scale of victimhood and culpability among children.

Broader-ranging factors such as socioeconomic and political grievances, disenfranchisement and specific groups' feelings of relative exclusion can fuel "us versus the enemy" narratives that create particularly fertile ground for recruitment, especially when such grievances can be directly blamed on the State, whether because they are interpreted as the result of the State's absence or as a direct outcome of security-led approaches. These elements are especially important for the design and application of appropriate State programmes targeting children's rehabilitation and reintegration.

Finally, the similarity of tactics employed both within and outside situations of armed conflict show that, analytically as well as operationally, terrorist groups are not merely a subset of non-State armed groups. At the analytical level this means acknowledging that children's association with terrorist groups in very different contexts share a number of features across. At the operational level, this calls for recognition of these children as victims who need to be addressed as such, regardless of whether they became victims within or outside a conflict area.

## 6.4 Security first or child rights first?

Too often, terrorism issues are framed as implying a choice: either public safety is effectively protected, or human and child rights are fully enforced. This perceived dichotomy is compounded by the different skillsets, expertise and mandates of child protection experts and security specialists, who can often frame the same issues in opposing terms, prioritizing different objectives. The pervasive narrative that public safety cannot be reconciled with upholding human and child rights has a direct impact on the treatment of children and young adults who have been associated with groups designated terrorist. It influences the way they are perceived, how their situation is addressed by the media, reactions in the communities they return to, and the policies, practices, and attitudes of the professionals responsible for their treatment.

This study reveals the extent to which this perspective is detrimental to children and their full enjoyment of their rights but at the same time the findings reveal opportunities to adopt a more

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479 Mia Bloom and John Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism* (Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 2019) pp. 155–156; L. Amusan and U. P. Ejoke, "The Psychological Trauma Inflicted by Boko Haram Insurgency in the North Eastern Nigeria", *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 36 (2017), pp. 52–59.

480 Bloom and Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*, pp. 155–156.



coherent, integrated approach based on the primacy of their best interests, prevention of their recruitment, and their rehabilitation and reintegration.

## **Children as security threats in a counter-terrorism context**

Over the past years counter-terrorism has become a focus of security policies all over the world. The resonance and visibility of notable terrorist attacks and the contemporary rise of groups such as Boko Haram and Da'esh and their reliance on terrorist tactics, communication strategies, and ability to act across State borders have consolidated the understanding of terrorism as a serious threat to global peace and security.

A growing corpus of international law related to countering terrorism has emerged in response, defining the boundaries for States' responses to this phenomenon. Over the years the increasingly detailed universal legal framework addressing terrorism has contributed to harmonizing national counter-terrorism practices and strengthening coordination among States. However, some of its features have also highlighted practical challenges to the implementation of policies and programmes that are fully aligned with human rights in general and with child rights specifically.

One issue is the lack of a global consensus on a definition of what constitutes "terrorism" in international law. While international conventions and relevant Security Council resolutions indicate some of the core characteristics of "terrorist acts",<sup>481</sup> no comprehensive definition is provided. It has been argued that this leaves room for Member States to exercise their discretion and arbitrary practices in designating actions "terrorist acts", leading to serious violations of human rights, particularly the right to freedom of expression and assembly, the advancement of minority rights, and the right to self-determination.<sup>482</sup>

A second element of international law that has shaped national counter-terrorism responses is the emphasis on the accountability and prosecution of perpetrators of terrorism-related offences. The language of Security Council resolutions has made it especially clear that States are to adopt measures to ensure that anyone who participates in "the financing, planning, preparation or perpetration of terrorist acts or in supporting terrorist acts is brought to justice",<sup>483</sup> and that domestic legislation should "establish serious criminal offenses sufficient to provide the ability to prosecute and to penalize in a manner duly reflecting the seriousness of the offense".<sup>484</sup>

While this emphasis on criminalization, prosecution and punishment is justified by the serious threats that terrorism poses, it has also enabled a broad punitive and securitized approach in national counter-terrorism laws and policies that does not take children's vulnerabilities and specific rights into account and obscures the relevance and appropriateness of reconciliation and reintegration-focused measures. This has facilitated a perception of children associated with terrorist groups as potential security threats, which has been instrumentalized to justify extensive violations of their rights.

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481 Terrorist acts are often defined by international legal instruments as acts of violence that constitute offences and are committed with the intent of intimidating a population or compelling a government or international organization to do or abstain from doing something; see for instance A/RES/54/109 (1999), Art. 2.

482 A/77/ 345 (2022), para. 24.

483 S/RES 1373 (2001).

484 S/RES/2178 (2014).

It can also be argued that certain tactics employed by terrorist groups have directly contributed to the widespread perception of the children they have recruited as a high-level security concern. The terrorist groups analysed in the three case studies have heavily relied on propaganda featuring, and sometimes centering on, children being sensitized to, trained in, and exploited for the perpetration of violence. Showcasing the groups' abilities to recruit children in this way is essential to prove their State-building capacities and the sustainability of their tactics. These interests are common to a broad range of armed groups and, to a lesser extent, criminal groups, who all share an interest in allying themselves with children. Images of children participating in paramilitary activities dressed as soldiers and/or involved in violent acts are especially powerful for their shock and propaganda value. Propagating images of the "dangerous child terrorist" directly contributes to the objectives of terrorist tactics, which aim to increase the visibility of their actions and spread fear.

This perception has been destructive. It has encouraged the view amongst authorities and communities that children join such groups voluntarily and accordingly should be held accountable, obscured recognition of their victimization, and fostered the belief that all children who have been associated have the potential for future violence. Highly securitized counter-terrorism responses have both adopted and compounded this risk-oriented perception of children, creating the basis for future grievances, and further contributing to the vicious cycle of recruitment and violence.

The evidence reveals the devastating consequences of these views for the lives of the children in all three case-study countries. In Iraq and Indonesia, criminal justice responses have emerged as the prevailing approaches for the treatment of these children, often leading to their spending long periods in detention. In both countries children have been extensively charged with offences of "association/affiliation" or "membership". While the criminalization of membership of a terrorist organization is not a requirement under international law, it has become common practice in Member States all over the world. In line with international advocacy for child rights,<sup>485</sup> children should never be charged with and prosecuted for mere "association", as being associated with a group is the direct result of the crime of recruitment perpetrated against them.<sup>486</sup> Due to their exploitation in various supporting roles, children are especially exposed to being charged with these offences.

Even in situations where children have not been formally charged with terrorism-related offences, such as in Nigeria, the prominence of the security agenda has a direct impact on their treatment after exiting these groups. The data confirm that many children spend prolonged periods under the responsibility of military authorities and subjected to administrative detention.

Reports also detail cases of abuse at the hands of national authorities both in and out of detention.<sup>487</sup> Such punitive approaches are not only detrimental to the children's well-being: they fail to recognize that they are victims, contribute to labelling them "terrorists", and further separate and marginalize them from society. This has a direct and long-term negative impact on rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. An additional element that emerges clearly from the testimonies collected for this study is the children's fear of punishment and reprisals if they exit the group, discouraging them from leaving. Across all three case studies, formerly associated

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485 UNICEF, *The Paris Principles*, para 8.7.

486 For further details see UNODC, *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups*, pp. 79–80.

487 Human Rights Watch, "Everyone Must Confess"; International Crisis Group, "An Exit from Boko Haram?".

individuals mentioned their concern about the governmental response as one of the obstacles they faced when attempting to leave.

The pervasiveness of the perception of these children as a security threat is also evidenced by community responses to their return. The research in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria demonstrates clearly that children face stigmatization, rejection, and exclusion in their communities and in general public opinion because they are perceived as irremediably tainted due to their association with terrorism. Their testimonies highlight how they are well aware of this while still associated with the groups, and how group leaders instrumentalize it to prevent them leaving and to strengthen prosocial bonds within the organization. The negative attitudes that children are met with upon exit not only impede their transition to a new role in their communities and their reintegration process; they also create a strong incentive to return to terrorist groups or other armed and criminal groups, which may appear the only viable economic opportunity and their only chance of achieving belonging and recognition.

## **A necessary shift: recognizing child rights as the premise for security**

In recent years, the international community has progressively recognized the need to invest more in prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration practices in counter-terrorism contexts.<sup>488</sup> This shift has progressed in parallel with increased recognition of children's exploitation by terrorist groups and the need to recognize their status as victims and provide treatment in line with international human rights law.<sup>489</sup>

In parallel, States have taken considerable steps in designing and applying innovative measures to promote rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, prioritizing reconciliation and stabilization over punitive approaches. The case studies in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria reveal how notable progress has been made in the three countries' recognition that children are entitled to specialized treatment and the pursuit of their best interests in the context of counter-terrorism.

Political leadership can play a key role in signaling the importance of providing appropriate treatment for children, reaffirming the validity of international obligations and national laws that protect child rights in contexts of insecurity. Over the past few years the three case-study countries have made important progress on this front. In Iraq, the 2017 National Child Protection Policy provided a new approach to recruitment, prioritizing the release of children associated with terrorist groups and recognizing their right to receive rehabilitation and reintegration support. In 2021, the Draft Child Protection Bill built on this, fully criminalizing those who involve children in armed conflict.

Both Indonesia and Nigeria have adopted political declarations on the situation of children associated with terrorist groups. The Bali Call for Action<sup>490</sup> and the Nigeria Call for Action<sup>491</sup>

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488 See S/RES/2349 (2017), para. 29; S/RES 2396 (2017), paras. 29–30; EC Decision 2019/17, Key Principles for The Protection, Repatriation, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children with Links to United Nations Listed Terrorist Groups.

489 A/RES/70/291 (2016), para. 18 ; S/RES/2349(2017), para. 30; A/RES/77/298, paras. 49, 56, 117, 121.

490 The Bali Call for Action for the implementation of the UNODC Roadmap on Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups, March 2020.

491 The Nigeria Call for Action: Declaration on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups, December, 2022

condemn any form of child recruitment, regardless of the designation of the armed and/or criminal group, and recognize that all children associated with such groups should be considered and treated primarily as victims, prioritizing their rehabilitation and reintegration. Such political moves are especially important to creating a growing consensus on the need to recognize the impact of violence against children perpetrated in the context of terrorism, and to direct national policies and practices.

Change can also be seen in practice: in Indonesia, the entry into force of its new Juvenile Justice Law in 2014 and recognition of its full applicability to children prosecuted and sentenced for terrorism-related offences has led to a notable improvement in their treatment by the justice system. The government has also accelerated the provision of rehabilitation and reintegration services, prioritizing psychosocial support, including for children linked to the FTF phenomenon who have returned from Iraq and Syria.

Iraq has begun the process of implementing the Yezidi Female Survivor's Law, granting the first applicants, including children, access to the Reparations Fund in March 2023. Taking into account the needs of victims and their right to material support, this process is a crucial step in recognizing the magnitude of the violations that have been perpetrated and actively moving towards reconciliation. The negotiation of local peace agreements and adaptation of customary justice processes to address individuals formerly associated with terrorist groups and facilitate their return to the communities is another crucial step in addressing communities' needs for accountability beyond a purely punitive perspective.

In 2022 Nigeria adopted a Handover Protocol committing the authorities to ensuring that any child apprehended by military officials, including in the context of operations against Boko Haram, is immediately transferred to civilian and child protection authorities to access appropriate care and support services.<sup>492</sup> This agreement between the government and the United Nations system is designed to prevent any detention of children as a result of their contact with security forces. In addition, several initiatives have been developed to provide rehabilitation and reintegration services in the parts of north-east Nigeria that are most directly affected by the conflict.

Despite this progress, a comprehensive shift in attitudes is still to be achieved and stigmatization and labelling continue to be significant obstacles to the progress of reintegration programmes. There is also limited evidence of measures in the three countries to hold perpetrators of the crime of recruitment of children accountable, even though this can have a deterrent effect, send an important signal on the severity of this offence to communities, and demonstrate that the children in this situation are victims.

While these measures are not yet sufficient and much more work is needed to ensure that all children exiting terrorist groups receive an appropriate level of support, the testimonies collected during the course of this study prove that they have had an immediate impact. They indicate that nationally led programmes promising rehabilitation and reintegration support have provided children with a direct incentive to leave such groups. Multiple sources also recount positive,

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492 UNICEF Nigeria, "Government of Nigeria, UNICEF sign handover protocol to protect children encountered during military operations", press release, 30 September 2022.

respectful, and supportive encounters with national authorities that have strengthened their disillusionment at the false narratives proposed by group leaders and facilitated their personal commitment to the reintegration process.

Measures supporting prevention of the recruitment, rehabilitation, and reintegration of children associated with terrorist groups can help to reduce the effects of their sustained exposure to violence. They contribute to bridging the gap between the child protection and the security agendas, which can appear particularly disconnected in humanitarian contexts, and in doing so they deconstruct the false opposition between child rights and public safety, creating opportunities for more integrated approaches. Rehabilitating and reintegrating these children is critical to breaking the cycle of violence, and for the long-term peace and stability of the countries concerned.

# 7

## Key findings and implications for law, policy and programming



# 7. Key findings and implications for law, policy and programming

## 7.1 Key Findings

This study has produced seven key findings:

- 1** Child recruitment by terrorist groups is not exceptional and largely overlaps child recruitment by other armed and criminal groups.
- 2** Children do not join terrorist groups voluntarily. Their association is characterized by a spectrum of coercion, even when they exercise some form of agency.
- 3** A background of political conflict and the perception of a broken social contract are determinants of children's association with terrorist groups both in conflict and non-conflict settings.
- 4** While children's roles in association with terrorist groups vary according to the duration of the association, their gender, and other factors, their experiences are consistently characterized by violence and harm.
- 5** Children exit and disengage from terrorist groups despite serious risk of retaliation when they reach a tipping point of negative experience within the group and positive prospects for life outside it.
- 6** The barriers and incentives to successful reintegration are determined by gendered and stereotypical representations of children's association with terrorist groups.
- 7** While upholding children's rights has proved challenging in efforts to counter terrorism, it contributes to the effectiveness of counter-terrorist programmes and the promotion of peace and security.

## 7.2 Implications for law, policy and programming

### Conducting additional research on child recruitment and its consequences

Evidence-based policy making is necessary to improving the outcomes of prevention efforts and rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. Research can play a considerable role in supporting professionals to better understand children's trajectories, including their variety. This study indicates the need for further research in several specific areas to support full comprehension of the complexity of children's association with terrorist groups and to inform effective policymaking.

#### Limitations Due to Access

Gaining access to children associated with terrorist groups, especially in contexts affected by insecurity, presents an array of challenges. Some groups may be in locations that are hard to reach due to conflict, while others may exist within closed communities that are reluctant to allow external interaction. Delving deeper into these less-accessed groups, possibly through remote research methods or local intermediaries, could unlock important insights that would enrich the evidence base.

#### Evolving Modus Operandi of Terrorist Groups

Terrorist organizations are not static nor homogenous. As global political, social, and economic landscapes change, so do their recruitment and indoctrination techniques and children's experiences within them. While this study provides a snapshot, ongoing longitudinal research is vital to monitor their evolving strategies and understand how these may affect the association of children with such groups in new ways.

#### Comparative Analysis with Other Types of Terrorist and Violent Groups

This study has primarily centered on Al-Qaida and ISIL-affiliated groups subject to sanctions. However, there is a spectrum of organizations labelled as terrorist and/or violent extremist worldwide, that act on the basis of xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief. There are also a number of other violent gangs and criminal groups that recruit and exploit children. The experiences of children associated with diverse groups may vary considerably according to cultural, political, and socioeconomic contexts, as well as legal and policy responses. Conducting comparative research across these groups will reveal commonalities and differences, offering a more complete view of children's associations with violent groups and informing interventions that are globally applicable.

#### Long-Term Impact on Children

A longitudinal study observing children for several years after they have disengaged from a group could prove extremely useful. Association with terrorist groups undeniably leaves a lasting imprint on children but what is known about the trajectory of their lives five, ten, or twenty years post-disassociation? Longitudinal studies are essential to monitor sustained effects on mental



and physical health, personal and societal relationships, and economic outcomes, and would also offer insights into the long-term efficacy of various rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

## Local Cultural and Traditional Influences

The factors contributing to a child's association with a terrorist group may be rooted in local beliefs, practices, and traditions. While this study has touched upon these factors, dedicated research examining these local nuances can lead to policy recommendations that respect and integrate local cultural values, potentially making interventions more accepted and effective.

Further exploration in these areas is critical to ensuring that interventions and policy recommendations are comprehensive, context-sensitive, and forward-looking.

## Protecting children from recruitment

This study has shown that children are pursued by groups designated terrorist using tailored, intentional strategies and techniques for the purpose of recruitment. It is the responsibility of society, and primarily of States, to take deliberate action to protect children from the dangers to which recruitment exposes them. Measures to prevent their recruitment into terrorist groups will be more effective if they are rooted in an understanding of the root causes and characteristics of the phenomenon. Based on the findings from this study, this requires:

- 1 combating recruitment practices** by holding perpetrators accountable and recognizing the extent to which they use coercive and abusive measures on children;
- 2 building and strengthening positive, protective factors** in the lives of children and their families that can help to shield them from, and increase their resilience to, recruitment attempts;
- 3 designing broad-based programmatic interventions** that respond to children's specific needs, particularly during adolescence, and **mainstreaming these considerations into existing policies and programmes**. This includes addressing often deep-rooted socioeconomic frustration and feelings of injustice.

## Implications for law, policy and programmes

- a. Hold perpetrators of violence against children accountable through appropriate prohibition, criminalization, investigation and prosecution**

Measures prohibiting and criminalizing child recruitment and detecting, investigating and prosecuting offenders can set clear legal boundaries and deter and disrupt ongoing recruitment practices. Being recruited by a terrorist group is too often characterized as a child's voluntary choice, leading to interventions that focus on the child rather than on the groups perpetrating the

recruitment. Prohibiting and criminalizing child recruitment redresses this balance, shifting the focus of national authorities' and public attention back to the criminal activity and responsibility for it back to the perpetrators. It can reduce incentives for exploiting children and strengthen the rule of law by holding perpetrators accountable for the harms they have caused, thereby fostering a sense of justice restored.

The scope of prohibition and criminalization is important. It is not sufficient to use legislation applicable to the recruitment of adults in this context, as this cannot sufficiently reflect the severity of the harms experienced by a child. For clarity, child recruitment and exploitation should be explicitly prohibited and criminalized, sending a clear signal that the child is the victim of a criminal offence in a severe violation of their right to protection from violence that must be combated according to international law. This prohibition and criminalization of recruitment should apply to all children up to the age of 18 years.

When prosecuting these offences, distinctions should not be made based on whether the child's association was "voluntary" or forced. As this study has clearly established, no child-recruitment process can be regarded as truly voluntary due to the forms of coercion used, the abuse of their vulnerability, and the inherent power imbalance in favor of those perpetrating the recruitment and exploitation. Furthermore, recruitment by any armed, criminal or non-State armed group, regardless of whether or not it is designated "terrorist", should be prohibited and criminalized. Terrorist groups are merely one type of group that recruits and exploits children, exposing them to the same forms of exploitation and danger as other armed and criminal groups and, in many instances, non-State armed groups. Finally, the law should recognize the recruitment of children as a serious violation, not only when it leads to their use in hostilities but also when it results in their exploitation in various support roles including as cooks, domestic workers, spies, propagandists, messengers or recruiters.<sup>493</sup>

Such criminalization can also be pursued effectively within existing national anti-trafficking legislation frameworks. In this context it should be noted that the consent of the child is always considered irrelevant in such cases because a child cannot give informed consent to their his or her own exploitation, even if they understand what is happening.<sup>494</sup> Furthermore, child victims of trafficking cannot be punished for offences directly connected or related to the trafficking situation that they have experienced.<sup>495</sup> As well as ensuring justice for children who have been trafficked by terrorist groups, prosecution using this framework can help them to access support for their physical, psychological and social recovery.<sup>496</sup>

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493 Holding perpetrators accountable for such offences may not require criminal prosecution, except in the case of war crimes. In certain settings, particularly in post- or ongoing conflict contexts, perpetrators may be held accountable within transitional justice mechanisms and processes designed to foster justice and reconciliation following large-scale and systematic violations of children's rights. The use of such transitional justice mechanisms should comply with international law requirements on accountability for international crimes against children, including child recruitment as a war crime.

494 A/RES/55/25 (2000), Article 3 (c).

495 For more on this point see UNODC, "Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violence Extremist Groups", p. 76.

496 General Assembly, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, (2000), Article 6.

**b. Develop comprehensive, multi-sectoral prevention policies and programmes based upon up-to-date research and data**

Multiple issues drive child recruitment, and its prevention must be understood from a wide perspective that integrates both rule-of-law and sustainable-development initiatives. Prevention requires whole-society and whole-government approaches. A multisectoral approach will help to strengthen integrated delivery across government, ensure consistency and accountability in decision-making, and encourage collaboration among State and non-State actors.

To this end, programmes to prevent the recruitment of children should be developed along several axes, including holding perpetrators accountable and social and child protection initiatives tailored to meet individuals', families', communities', and societies' specific needs. They should be based upon thorough context analysis and up-to-date research and data aiming to clarify the dynamics of any conflict or community grievances and the requirements for a protective environment framework for children, taking gender into account. Understanding the key players who influence the decisions and the pathways towards child recruitment can be valuable.

**c. Provide families with tailored support, particularly in contexts where they have experienced collective violence**

Investment in building and strengthening a protective environment framework for children, their families, and their communities should be prioritized. Prevention measures should address underlying systemic issues affecting families, such as those identified in this study including poverty, loss of livelihoods, displacement, inequalities, discrimination, marginalization, experience of collective violence, and lack of access to education and economic opportunities.

Measures can include providing support to redress marginalization and social exclusion, such as through parent discussion groups, community-based mediation and education and skills development programmes. They can include support to alleviate pressures in family life, such as access to economic assistance and livelihood opportunities, reducing food insecurity, parenting techniques, and psychosocial support for adults. They can also include community dialogues with families and community members on the inherent risks and dangers of child association. These initiatives are recommended for all vulnerable communities, to reduce the stigmatization of previously associated children and prevent further recruitment.

**d. Promote educational curricula that encourage tolerance, diversity, open dialogue and conflict-management skills**

Education systems' response to the phenomenon of child recruitment varies according to context, not least because although access to education can serve as a vital protective factor against recruitment and promoting reintegration upon exit, in some contexts schools have served as a focal point for propaganda and recruitment. As well as providing safe and supportive environments where children can learn and have a sense of belonging, educational curricula should intentionally encourage tolerance, diversity, open dialogue and conflict management skills. An explicit focus on children's cognitive, social, and emotional capacities to think critically and to see issues from different perspectives can help them resist narrow and simplistic narratives that incite the use of violence.

Teachers may need support with delivering such a curriculum, as also with building their own skills to create safe spaces that encourage open dialogue. This includes opportunities for children to discuss controversial issues with each other, build counter-arguments to violent narratives with both individual and groups of students, and help children to critically evaluate information and media content to which they are exposed.

**e. Foster community-based initiatives that promote access to essential services, justice, and socio-economic opportunities, and that encourage and actively support children's and young adults' meaningful participation in all decision-making processes regarding them**

Many of the salient drivers of recruitment highlighted in this study (poverty, social marginalization, lack of livelihoods and stable incomes, insecurity) can be addressed through investment in building the resilience of families and communities where children are at risk of recruitment. Strengthening protective factors via specific community-based programmes focusing on access to essential services, justice and socioeconomic opportunities can act as a counterbalance. Measures can include promoting dialogue, supporting community leaders and women's and youth-led organizations, and promoting education and employment opportunities. Using holistic and multifaceted approaches is important since, as the study demonstrates, it is the accumulation of risk factors in a child's life, including not only proximity to a terrorist group but also unmet basic needs and lack of opportunities for education, employment, and status in society, that can tip them into association.

This study also clearly demonstrates that in many contexts children have active agency in their own recruitment process. Community-based prevention initiatives need to acknowledge this and purposefully engage children and young adults in developing and implementing programmes aimed at building their capacity as agents of positive change and peace processes.

## **Actively supporting children's exit from terrorist groups**

Children's experiences within terrorist groups often bring them to wish and plan for their exit, despite the extreme risk of doing so. State authorities' have a primary responsibility to continue to protect children during their exploitation and to take action to put an end to their victimization.

In addition, as former members testified, State-led operations that aim to facilitate demobilization from the groups have an important role in encouraging children to overcome their fears of rejection or reprisals if they leave. Beyond providing support and protection for children, these programmes can also help curb terrorist groups' resources and power, and further security objectives.

### **Implications for law, policy and programmes**

**a. Design and implement rescue operations, involving personnel trained to deal with children in this context.**

State security actors are frequently children's initial point of contact during and after their escape and in other military or police operations, and it is vital that they are adequately trained in the

skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to fulfil this important function to ensure success.<sup>497</sup> This implies having an understanding of how and why children are recruited, what roles they play within the groups, how their gender can affect the challenges they face, and of how to interact with them, seeing the child first and the characteristics of the phenomenon second. Security-sector actors should work closely with other agencies, including child protection agencies, to ensure full collaboration, coordination, and information-sharing to support children's safe and secure exit. They often have access to key information about a child's experiences within the group that can be used to strengthen rehabilitation and reintegration responses.

**b. Organize child-sensitive programmes to support children's disengagement from terrorist groups, integrating rehabilitative and reintegration-oriented approaches**

Following their release, whether through escape, State capture, or any other form of separation, children should be identified as children as early as possible, with the presumption that the person is a child if there is no clear evidence to the contrary. They should be promptly handed over to civilian child-protection authorities for their rehabilitation and community reintegration to begin. Ensuring the child's safety is a key concern throughout the release period. In this initial phase efforts should be made to preserve family unity, provided this is in the child's best interests. Girls should be separated from boys, children should be separated from adults (exceptions may be made in the case of children who exit together with their families, on consideration of the children's best interests) and they should be provided with basic care including food, clothing, appropriate shelter, any urgent medical care, and protection from any form of violence, abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Special provisions should be made for pregnant girls and girls with children.

While children may be assessed regarding their age and protection needs to enable their prompt and safe referral to the relevant child-protection actors, they should not be interviewed for any other purpose.

Challenges arise when release occurs during an ongoing conflict, when additional adaptations may be needed to secure their safety and protect them from re-recruitment. This may involve identifying and establishing a safe space far from the conflict such as an interim care center where they can receive the necessary support, protection, and reintegration services. It is known that girls are often overlooked in the provision of services in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes, which must make a particular effort to ensure that they are fully aware of the services available to them in the context of programmes addressing their disengagement from terrorist groups.

**c. Implement awareness raising campaigns reaching out to children associated with terrorist groups, disseminating information about available programmes and support services relating to their disengagement**

Targeted information campaigns aimed at children associated with terrorist groups can provide them with necessary information about their eligibility for disengagement programmes and opportunities for support. Such information must be accurate, up to date, and reliable, and must

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<sup>497</sup> For further information regarding training for security actors on these and other issues, see Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security, "Child Soldiers: A Handbook for Security Sector Actors", 3rd ed., The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative (Halifax, Canada, Dalhousie University, 2017).

not mislead and or raise expectations that cannot be met. The development of these campaigns should involve children and young adults in the community to ensure that they are credible and use effective communication approaches.

## Prioritizing children's rehabilitation and reintegration

Despite the diverse contexts that this study has explored and the wide variety of children's experiences it has found, a consistent feature throughout is that children's experiences of rehabilitation and reintegration are fraught with difficulty. This is a particularly complex area for intervention, especially in contexts of ongoing insecurity. While progress has been made in recognizing that supporting rehabilitation and reintegration after association with terrorist groups is an urgent priority, much remains to be done to ensure that programmes are effective and specifically adapted to meet the needs and fulfil the rights of children and young adults recruited as children.

The findings from this study highlight how rehabilitation and reintegration programmes can be adapted effectively to fit the circumstances of children and young adults recruited as children who have left terrorist groups. Drawing on findings from this study, this involves:

- 1 addressing the consequences of the specific forms of violence** that children have experienced, including neglect, psychological pressure, and trauma;
- 2 actively countering the perception of children as a security threat and as terrorists;**
- 3 recognizing the necessity of integrating the specific needs of children, both as a group and as individuals, into rehabilitation and reintegration planning and programme implementation;**
- 4 facilitating continuity of care** and long-term, gradual approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration;
- 5 increasing awareness of the importance of avoiding secondary victimization of children** while they are in the care of State and non-State actors.

### Implications for law, policy and programmes

#### a. Recognize and operationalize children's status as victims across the legal, policy and programmatic framework

In many cases children associated with terrorist groups are portrayed as either willing members (bad) or coerced victims (good). This study has clearly demonstrated that the interplay between coercion and agency in relation to children's recruitment is far more complex than this. Irrespective of their pathway into association, the children have been victims of serious and multiple forms of

violence, including their recruitment. Moving beyond simplified depictions of them is necessary for the destigmatization of their association and to ensure they have equal access to effective reintegration support.

Recognizing children's victimization does not mean discounting or ignoring their agency or undermining the logic of their decision-making, nor does it mean they should be passive participants in their own rehabilitation and reintegration. It does mean having in place robust and effective law, policy and programmatic frameworks that ensure that:

- children who have been victims of recruitment and association are safely identified and offered a secure avenue via which to leave the group;
- the context in which their victimization occurred and its impact on them is carefully assessed, and measures put in place so they can receive the necessary short-, medium- and long-term individualized and gender-sensitive care, protection, and reintegration support;
- links with their families and communities are restored, providing this is in their best interests;
- prosecution only ever occurs as a last resort and is conducted within specialized justice systems for children, and in line with international standards that favor alternatives to prosecution and detention.

When children's victimization is addressed as a priority, their rehabilitation and reintegration is far more likely to be successful. The long-term consequences of this can be beneficial, not just for the individual child and young adult but also for society: communities' trust in authorities otherwise perceived as corrupt or illegitimate may be renewed, and children are more likely to seek help and support with disengaging from terrorist groups if they know they will be treated fairly and proportionally by the authorities. This in turn can reduce the risks of re-recruitment and secondary victimization, and support long-term stability. The long-term impact of not treating children primarily as victims can be significant, undermining efforts for community development and child protection and exacerbating marginalization and exclusion.

#### **b. Design and implement child - and gender - sensitive reintegration programmes, focused on the provision of psychosocial support and trauma informed care**

Reintegration is a complex, nuanced and long-term process. The reintegration of children differs from that of adults, and the reintegration of girls differs from that of boys. A child rights-based approach to reintegration seeks to address individual harms and recognizes the child as an individual with agency and rights. The best interests of the child and the child's right to participate in decisions that affect him or her depending on age and maturity should remain central throughout reintegration programmes.

This study has found that children associated with terrorist groups not only experience high levels of violence but also face displacement, stigmatization, and rejection from their communities and families. The evidence demonstrates the importance of social bonds and different forms of attachment, including within the family and community, at school and among peers, in promoting positive and socially constructive behavior among children who have experienced and performed violence. In this context, assessment processes that focus on how to build a child's resilience and reinforce positive strengths in her or his life, including supportive relationships with family

members, can be a helpful resource. Based on such assessments, reintegration planning should specify how the individual child can best be enabled to overcome the challenges she or he faces as a result of association, including the provision of psychosocial support and trauma-informed care.

The study has found that there are inaccurate stereotypes at play in relation to girls' and boys' recruitment, roles, responsibilities, experiences, needs, and vulnerabilities arising from association with terrorist groups. Girls are often perceived as powerless, passive, and irredeemably harmed as victims of sexual and gender-based violence, while boys are assumed to be dangerous, actively violent, and inherently unworthy of the status of a victim of violence, and are treated as de facto adults and suspected violent extremists or fully-fledged terrorists.

These generalized and often inaccurate stereotypes about girls' inherent powerlessness and boys' inherent dangerousness have a significant impact on their rehabilitation and reintegration. Girls are largely not subject to arrest or harsh treatment by security forces or other law-enforcement institutions, but can face significant ostracization in their local communities and discrimination at the hands of the authorities, often in connection with having given birth to terrorists' children. Boys, on the other hand, are usually subject to interrogation, arrest, physical violence, deprivation of their liberty, and abuse when disengaging from a terrorist group. Many interviewees reported remaining with the terrorists longer than they wanted to due to fear of punishment by the security forces, upon release from which many are then rejected and stigmatized by their local communities.

Gender dynamics must be considered in reintegration programming, which should effectively identify and respond to the different vulnerabilities and strengths of girls and boys, young women and young men. For example, it may be helpful for girls to re-enter their communities through more informal, low-profile processes supported by mentoring, and they may need access to gender-specific services to aid their recovery from sexual and gender-based violence. Further research specifically looking at the challenges that confront by girls and boys in rehabilitation and reintegration is needed.

### **c. Avoid over-reliance on the deprivation of children's liberty in the context of rehabilitation and reintegration**

Children associated with terrorist groups, especially boys, are often treated as perpetrators and a security threat rather than as victims of serious violations, and are consequently routinely deprived of their liberty both during and after release. The study demonstrates that children are typically detained and prosecuted under laws that criminalize "association with" or "membership of" a designated terrorist group, terms that are often ill-defined and can be interpreted to cover activities that would not otherwise be deemed criminal such as cooking, driving or cleaning. As discussed, criminal responsibility for children's association with these groups should lie with the individuals responsible for their recruitment rather than with the children themselves. Children's association with groups designated terrorist should not be criminalized, and nor should they be detained or prosecuted based on their families' association with such groups.

In exceptional cases children may be prosecuted for more serious offences, provided this is in accordance with international law, and particularly with child rights, meaning that their treatment must take into account the child's age, the desirability of promoting his or her reintegration and assumption of a constructive role in society, and prioritization of alternatives to judicial proceedings,



including reconciliation measures. A specialized child justice system, rather than military or national security courts, must have primary jurisdiction. In such exceptional circumstances, deprivation of liberty should only ever be applied as a measure of last resort, for the shortest possible period of time and with the objective of promoting the child's recovery and reintegration.

During periods in detention children have the right to legal and other appropriate assistance and should only be held in facilities that can actively support and protect them and prepare them for reintegration. This is in recognition of the harms that deprivation of liberty causes to their prospects for rehabilitation and reintegration, including the risk of re-recruitment and further ruptures in their relationship with their families and communities and violations occurring within them. It is recommended that States design diversion measures for children prosecuted for offences committed during their period of association that help them understand the consequences of their acts and, more broadly, promote reconciliation with their victims and their communities.

#### **d. Ensure safe transition from childhood to young adulthood**

Reintegration after association with a terrorist group is not a one-time event but a long-term process. Many children associate with terrorist groups in late adolescence, and their reintegration into their communities often occurs during their transition to adulthood. They may also transition to adulthood before exiting the groups. This must be taken into account when planning reintegration programmes. Consistent funding and resources should be allocated to sustain continuity of reintegration support throughout this transition. Children should be directly prepared for the social, economic, legal and psychosocial aspects of transitioning to adulthood through programmes such as life skills training, vocational training and family reunification support. They may need support with acquiring adult documentation. Children and young adults should be actively engaged in the design and implementation of reintegration initiatives that straddle this crucial transition and investment in research is recommended to better understand the unique challenges faced during this period.

#### **e. Address challenges experienced by children affected by the "Foreign Terrorist Fighter" phenomenon**

Children returning to their country of origin after time spent with a terrorist group abroad face additional reintegration challenges. Many have lived through war and acute deprivation, spending years of their childhood in appalling conditions in camps or detention. Furthermore, they often lack official documentation, which complicates the administrative processes related to their repatriation. Their needs on returning will depend on a variety of factors including the extent of their exposure to violence, the impact of being deprived of water, food, shelter and healthcare at crucial stages of their development, their legal status as citizens, refugees, immigrants and/or IDPs, their level of education and the strength of their familial and community ties. These specific dimensions should be addressed through individualized assessment that considers gender, age, educational needs, family situation, and cultural background and facilitates progressive adaptation so that assistance received is tailored to each returnee's circumstances.

## Supporting communities to protect children

Reintegration is not an individual journey: by its very nature, it takes place within a social and family context and requires the active participation of the communities affected by children's return. Finding themselves met by rejection and stigmatization in their communities is a considerable obstacle for children attempting to resume life after association. However, fear and feelings of injustice often prevent community members from trusting reintegration processes.

State and non-State actors, including international organizations, play a crucial role in providing reintegration support tailored to communities' needs. To do this effectively it is essential that they agree on the priorities to be addressed and coordinate over policy design and implementation.

### Implications for law, policy and programmes

#### a. Listen to community demands and needs and integrate them into the design of rehabilitation and reintegration services

Reintegration will not succeed if it focuses on the individual child alone. The success of programmes depends on their active work with families and communities, listening to them and integrating their demands and needs. Failing to recognize the difficulties that communities face accepting children back following their association with terrorist groups undermines the importance of their demands for accountability and justice, especially where they have borne the brunt of violence and conflict and have been exposed to terrorist propaganda portraying children as voluntary, willing and violent members of their group.

A first step is to sensitize communities and understand their perspectives and fears. A broad section of the community should be engaged including women's groups, religious leaders, teachers, parent-teacher associations and civil-society organizations. Platforms for enhanced communication between government authorities and communities can help promote understanding and awareness about the need for rehabilitation and reintegration and garner crucial community support and acceptance that this is a shared responsibility that can ultimately benefit the community. These public platforms also provide the opportunity to challenge incorrect narratives or notions about children's experiences of joining and often living with terrorist groups. As recognized as good practice in the context of demobilization, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation, it is important to extend access to rehabilitation and reintegration services to other children with protection concerns in order to incentivize support for and commitment to these services and to minimize tension, stigmatization and new grievances about unfair treatment.

#### b. Foster decentralized reintegration programmes that provide opportunities for children and youths' meaningful participation

One of the key features of counter-terrorism processes and initiatives, including reintegration services and programmes, is that they remain centralized, usually in capital cities, as a result of their specialization and the need to be near to political decision-making centers. This creates a logistical challenge in relation to implementing such programmes because many of the communities affected are in remote and difficult-to-access locations and travel may be both expensive and unsafe.

Decentralized approaches to reintegration have several advantages. They can build on the knowledge and expertise of local communities and child protection actors to deliver programming tailored specifically to the children's and the communities' needs. This is a necessity in contexts where the State's capacity to deliver the needed services is overstretched or simply lacking. Informal community support as a supplement to formal provision support is increasingly important in such contexts, and existing community child protection mechanisms and networks should be strengthened rather than developing competing parallel structures to deliver reintegration services. This can help to deliver the long-term sustainable reintegration services that children need. Practice based on contexts of demobilization, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation demonstrates that a decentralized approach can reduce tensions between programme participants and their communities and it provides opportunities to build trust and commitment in communities, which is especially important in a context where they have experienced disenfranchisement.

This study reveals the extent to which children associated with terrorist groups carry the burden of stigmatization and are readily dismissed as sources of discord in society, precluding opportunities to improve reintegration programming. Since these children have in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the groups with which they were associated, the strategies used for their recruitment, and the opportunities for release, they have the expertise to advise on their own reintegration needs. Mechanisms should be developed to gather their views on and contributions to the design, implementation and evaluation of reintegration programmes.

**c. Ensure safety of service providers and participants is a crucial aspect of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.**

Children are often monitored and supervised following their return to their communities. In some cases this involves a stay in a transitional facility; in others they are placed under the supervision of an adult in the community or a criminal justice agency. This process serves several functions: it ensures that the child receives the support she or he needs, protects against re-recruitment, further victimization, and retaliation, and acts as protection against involvement in criminal activity. This kind of monitoring is best performed by social workers in collaboration with the law-enforcement and security sectors.

While aggressive surveillance is counter-productive, this is an opportunity for the law enforcement and security sectors to contribute to the reintegration process by ensuring the child's compliance with certain conditions, intervening in the event of imminent revictimization or re-recruitment, and gathering and sharing information about reintegration with relevant actors.

