UNODC AND IRAQ JOIN HANDS TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM TERRORISM
Background

Children are often among the casualties of acts of terrorism. They are victims of abduction, trafficking, and sexual and gender-based violence and are deliberately recruited and exploited by terrorist groups. This is not a new phenomenon, but technological advances, and the specific strategic objectives of terrorist groups have made instances of recruitment increasingly difficult to detect, recruitment campaigns broader in their reach; and children and young people associated with such groups more vulnerable to stigma and discrimination.

Between 2015 and 2019, the UN verified 2,114 grave violations against children in Iraq, the majority of which were committed by Da'esh. Da'esh deliberately targeted, recruited, and exploited children as part of its ideology and strategy including through establishment of the so-called “Cubs of the Caliphate”. Today, hundreds of juveniles in Iraq are deprived of their liberty following association with terrorist groups. Promoting their rehabilitation and reintegration poses numerous challenges.

Based on its mandates in the areas of violence against children and counter-terrorism, UNODC has provided tailored technical assistance to Iraq to address the phenomenon of child association with terrorist and violent extremist groups since 2019, including under the EU-funded STRIVE Juvenile project.

Long-term UNODC - Iraq partnership to protect children from terrorism

Since 2015, UNODC has provided assistance to over 35 countries that face the phenomenon of child association with terrorist and violent extremist groups. Iraq has been a key partner in this process. This cooperation informed the design and implementation of the STRIVE Juvenile project; contributed to enhancing the visibility of this issue at regional level in South-East Asia and shaped the production of UNODC technical assistance material in this area.

01 Iraq contributed to UNODC technical manuals

In 2017, UNODC produced a handbook with a view to providing legal and policy guidance to Member States facing this complex phenomenon. In 2018 and 2019, Iraqi experts contributed to the full UNODC training package, by piloting and revising two training manuals that complement the Handbook and by participating in the elaboration of the “UNODC Roadmap on the Treatment of children associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups” published in 2019 to disseminate UNODC’s strategic vision.

02 UNODC provided support to prioritize children in partnership with Iraq

Through the implementation of a project funded by Japan and delivered between 2021 and 2022, that contributed to the following notable achievements:

- Key actors expressed a positive shift in perceptions and attitudes towards children and young people affiliated with or recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups following workshops focused on rights-based treatment and support for these children.
- Reformatory staff were supported to become drivers of change in the facilities and to improve the quality of services provided to meet the special individual needs of juveniles.
- Juveniles deprived of liberty strengthened their positive coping skills and resilience in preparation for rehabilitation and return to their communities.
- Community leaders and other key actors recognized their role in reintegrating these children and young people within society and local communities.
The added-value of STRIVE Juvenile action

In 2021, UNODC, in partnership and under the lead of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), High Judicial Council (HJC) and National Security Advisory (NSA), joined hands with the European Union and started the implementation of the Project STRIVE Juvenile. STRIVE Juvenile is a five-year project that aims to address child association with terrorist and violent extremist groups and its consequences for the lives of children, young people and society at large. The project delivers activities at the global level and in three partner countries: Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria, pursuing two interconnected objectives:

1. **Strengthening government strategies, policies and mechanisms related to child association with terrorist groups.**

2. **Increasing the resilience of children and their environment against violent extremist and terrorist agendas.**

Intervention under the STRIVE Juvenile project pursues an integrated approach, which recognizes that child rights and security interests are complementary objectives. This approach is built on three cornerstones:

**01 Choosing to invest in children as agents**

The project acknowledges that children can be extremely vulnerable to terrorist tactics whilst - most importantly - recognizing that they have the power to transform societal dynamics. STRIVE Juvenile strongly advocates for the primary recognition of children who become associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups as victims and provides assistance that is focused on addressing their victimization. At the same time, the project aims at to move beyond the myopic dichotomy between victim and perpetrator. STRIVE Juvenile invests in children first, advocating for their active participation in rehabilitation and reintegration processes and the building of peaceful societies.

**02 Building partnerships with national counterparts**

The three partner countries selected to take part in STRIVE Juvenile were chosen for their willingness to confront the situation of children who become associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups, as well as for their influence on regional and global agendas. The effectiveness of the project is maximized through activities that are relevant to national contexts and driven by local stakeholders. The project prioritizes national ownership throughout its planning and implementation by means of: i) the selection of a lead coordination agency or key lead partners in each country; ii) in-depth consultations with a broad range of stakeholders during the inception phase; and iii) involvement of national stakeholders in the ongoing development of the project through its national project coordination committees.

**03 Fostering a participatory and whole-of-society approach**

The treatment of children associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups is the shared responsibility of a broad array of actors. A multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder framework is therefore a key requirement for the success of STRIVE Juvenile. The project brings together the security, justice and child protection sectors with a view to overcoming the perceived conflict between security interests and child protection. The prevention of recruitment and exploitation of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups and the rehabilitation and reintegration of children formerly associated with these groups are both crucial to the curtailment of terrorist tactics. In addition, the project aims to favour initiatives that involve both governmental and non-governmental actors, recognizing that civil society and community-based organizations (CSOs and CBOs) are key to supporting the resiliency of children and their environments.
STRIVE Juvenile achievements in Iraq

Between January 2021 and June 2023, STRIVE Juvenile Iraq reached multiple objectives, from collecting and analyzing new evidence; to producing specific tools; to strengthening the skills and capacities of practitioners; to supporting directly juveniles deprived of their liberty. These achievements, combined, have contributed to creating an integrated approach to fostering the rehabilitation and reintegration of children and young people associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups in Iraq.

Creation of a multi-stakeholder coordination platform: in order to provide strategic guidance with regard to the implementation of the STRIVE Juvenile project, UNODC, MOJ, NSA and HJC have set up a National Steering Team, to provide strategic guidance for the implementation of the STRIVE Juvenile project. The work of the Steering Team fosters multi-stakeholder coordination; promotes dialogue on the situation of children and young people among national counterparts; and consistently monitors project activities, ensuring their alignment with national priorities.

Collection and analysis of new evidence on child association and exit from terrorist groups: the STRIVE Juvenile project started with the undertaking of an in-depth situation analysis, based on desk review and comprehensive consultations with all national counterparts involved in the protection of children from terrorism. The Situation Analysis served to collect all existing evidence on this phenomenon in Iraq, identifying priorities for action and gaps in policy and practice. Then, the project launched an ambitious research programme on children’s trajectories in and out of terrorist and violent extremist groups. The final research report (forthcoming 2023) presents a detailed picture of this phenomenon in Iraq, contributing to better understanding of the perspectives of children and young people, their families and communities; their reintegration journeys, as well as the specific strategies mobilized by terrorist groups for their recruitment and exploitation.

Elaboration of policy-guidance and operational recommendations for implementation: in consultation with Iraqi professionals, UNODC elaborates specialized guidance tools to support the appropriate treatment of children and young people associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups. Specifically, STRIVE Juvenile conducted an assessment of the Observation House and Four Rehabilitation Schools in Baghdad and Mosul, Iraq resulting in a report, including detailed recommendations for action; and is currently developing a Guidance Note on Psychosocial Support in the Context of Rehabilitation and Reintegration and a Guidance Note to improve the treatment of juveniles deprived of liberty. These kinds of tools functions as repositories of relevant international and national law; provides operational guidance on procedures and authorities; and includes strategies for strengthening practice and coordination among different stakeholders.

Development of capacities and skills of professionals: legal and operational guidance is meaningless if policy-makers and professionals are not empowered to apply innovative strategies. Accordingly, the STRIVE Juvenile project couples the development of specialized guidance with the design and delivery of tailored capacity development activities. Over three years, the project has organized and delivered training to policy-makers and practitioners from law enforcement, social reformatory institutions, judiciary, security sector, child protection, social affairs, administrative authorities and civil society organizations. Training activities have focused on: treatment of juveniles deprived of their liberty; and rehabilitation and reintegration strategies and measures, with a focus on psychosocial assessment.

Improvement of conditions for juveniles deprived of their liberty: through the Assessment of the Observation House and Four Rehabilitation Schools in Baghdad and Mosul, the STRIVE Juvenile team identified the need for various items and equipment to improve the conditions of detention and the treatment of juveniles deprived of their liberty which is a key requirement for the rehabilitation and reintegration process and prevention of further engagement with terrorist groups. These included needs to upgrade existing equipment and provide new equipment and facilities for education and vocational training, medical and dental care, contact with the outside world and leisure and recreational activities. The recommendations of the assessment were endorsed by the MOJ, and resulted in equipment being procured and delivered to four institutions in Baghdad.
**STRIVE Juvenile Iraq: results at a glance**

1. **COORDINATION PLATFORM CREATED (Steering Team)**
   Bringing together 3 national governmental stakeholders.

1. **SITUATION ANALYSIS COMPLETED**
   Collecting and disseminating new evidence on the phenomenon of child association with terrorist and violent extremist groups.

1. **NEEDS ASSESSMENT CONDUCTED**
   Identifying priority needs to advance the treatment of juveniles deprived of liberty.

4. **INSTITUTIONS RECEIVED EQUIPMENT**
   Conditions of detention improved for young people through provision of equipment to 4 institutions.

112. **PROFESSIONALS TRAINED (26w, 86m)**
   Enhancing the skills of national experts and fostering knowledge growth in a sustainable way.

*Based on results to 30 June 2023*
Thank you for taking the time to read this factsheet. If you have any questions or would like to discuss further, please do not hesitate to reach out to us.