

# CRADLED BY

CHILD INVOLVEMENT WITH ARMED GROUPS

# CONFLICT

IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

EDITED BY

SIOBHAN O'NEIL &

KATO VAN BROECKHOVEN



UNITED NATIONS  
UNIVERSITY

# CRADLED BY

CHILD INVOLVEMENT WITH ARMED GROUPS

# CONFLICT

IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

EDITED BY

**SIOBHAN O'NEIL &**

**KATO VAN BROECKHOVEN**



**UNITED NATIONS  
UNIVERSITY**



THE GOVERNMENT  
OF THE GRAND DUCHY OF LUXEMBOURG  
*Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs*

Directorate for Development Cooperation  
and Humanitarian Affairs



United Nations  
Peacekeeping



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

**Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA**

# Table of Contents

ABOUT THIS VOLUME	7
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	8
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	10
PREFACE	14
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	16

## 1 Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict

### An Introduction

By Siobhan O'Neil

1 INTRODUCTION	24
2 THE PROJECT	26
3 PROJECT COMPONENTS	28
4 TERMINOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY	30
5 A NOTE ABOUT CHILD AGENCY	32
6 ABOUT THE CHAPTERS IN THIS VOLUME	33

## 2 Trajectories of Children Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups

By Siobhan O'Neil

1 INTRODUCTION	38
A Methodology and Value of Approach	38
B Evidence Base	38
C Organizing Principles	40
2 THE STATE OF RESEARCH ON CHILD TRAJECTORIES INTO NSAGS	43
A Structural-Level Analysis: Necessary and Conducive Contextual Conditions	43
B Social-Level Factors That Influence Child Trajectories into NSAGs	50
C Individual-Level Factors That Influence Child Trajectories into NSAGs	54
3 CHILD USE AND EXPERIENCES WITHIN NSAGS	67
A Roles	68
B Indoctrination and Group Processes	68
C Drugs and Alcohol	69
D Identity	69
E Trauma	72
F Differences by Demographics	72
4 HOW AND WHY CHILDREN EXIT NSAGS	74
A Desistance and Disengagement	74
B How?	74
C Why?	75
D Why Didn't They Leave?	75
E Recidivism/Side-Switching	76
5 CONCLUSION – PROSPECTS FOR REINTEGRATION	77

# 3 A Complex Programming Landscape

## The Prevention of and Response to Child Association with Non-State Armed Groups

By Kato Van Broeckhoven

1	INTRODUCTION	80
2	A SELECTIVE OVERVIEW OF THE PREVENTION AND RELEASE AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMMING LANDSCAPE	81
	A Child Protection In Emergencies	81
	B Prevention of Child Association with NSAGs	82
	C Release and Reintegration: The United Nations Approach to Post-NSAG-Involvement Programming for Children	84
3	PREVENTION, RELEASE AND REINTEGRATION IN TODAY'S COMPLEX CONFLICT LANDSCAPE	91
	A Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism	91
	B State of Knowledge	96
4	INSIGHTS FROM OTHER FIELDS	97
	A Criminology	97
	B Public Health	98
5	CONCLUSION	100

# 4 "I Am Nothing Without a Weapon"

## Understanding Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in Syria and Iraq

By Mara Revkin  
with research assistance by Ahmad Midhi  
and Mazn Najmaldeen Saber

1	INTRODUCTION	104
2	METHODOLOGY	106
3	OVERVIEW OF NSAGS	107
	A Ahrar al-Sham (AS)	108
	B Groups Self-Affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA)	108
	C Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)	108
	D Hizbullah	109
	E Islamic State (IS)	109
	F Jaysh al-Islam (JI)	110
	G National Defense Forces (NDF)	110
	H People's and Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ)	111
	I Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)	111
	J Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS)	112
4	WHY AND HOW DO NSAGS RECRUIT OR COERCE CHILDREN INTO THEIR RANKS?	112
	A Why Recruit Children?	112
	B Techniques of Recruitment	114
5	WHAT INDIVIDUAL, SOCIAL, AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS INFLUENCE CHILD TRAJECTORIES INTO NSAGS?	116
	A Individual-Level Factors	117
	B Social-Level Factors	119
	C Structural-Level Factors	123
6	WHAT ARE THE EXPERIENCES OF AND ROLES FOR CHILDREN IN NSAGS?	128
	A Relationships and Identity	128
	B Training and Indoctrination	128
	C Roles	129
7	HOW AND WHY DO CHILDREN EXIT NSAGS?	132
	A Individual-Level Factors	132
	B Social-Level Factors	132
	C Structural-Level Factors	132
8	OBSTACLES TO DISENGAGEMENT AND REINTEGRATION	134
9	CONCLUSIONS	137



# Table of Contents

## 5 “I Joined to Save My People”

### Children and Non-State Armed Groups in Mali

By Jaimie Bleck, Marc-André Boisvert, and Boukary Sangaré

1	INTRODUCTION	142
2	BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT	144
3	MALIAN NSAGS	146
4	THE USE OF CHILDREN BY NSAGS	150
5	DATA AND METHODOLOGY	151
6	MODES OF CHILD RECRUITMENT	151
7	PATHWAYS INTO MALIAN ARMED GROUPS	152
	A Structural-Level Factors	153
	B Social-Level Factors	159
	C Individual-Level Factors	163
8	ARMED GROUPS’ USE OF CHILDREN	170
9	EXIT – HOW AND WHY CHILDREN LEAVE NSAGS IN MALI	171
10	CONCLUSION: OBSTACLES TO RELEASE AND REINTEGRATION	174

## 6 Beset on All Sides

### Children and the Landscape of Conflict in North East Nigeria

By Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair, and Chad Hazlett

1	INTRODUCTION	178
2	METHODOLOGY	180
3	CHILDREN’S PATHWAYS INTO ARMED GROUPS	181
	A Child Recruitment into Boko Haram	181
	B Child Recruitment into Vigilante Forces	187
4	CHILDREN’S ROLES IN ARMED GROUPS IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA	191
	A Boko Haram	191
	B Children’s Roles in the CJTF and Other Vigilante Groups	197
5	EXIT FROM ARMED GROUPS AND LIFE AFTER DISENGAGEMENT	198
	A Exiting from Boko Haram	198
	B Exiting from Vigilante Groups and the CJTF	201
6	CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ASSISTING DISENGAGED CHILDREN	202
7	CONCLUSION	205

# 7 Navigating Challenges in Child Protection and the Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Groups

By Mark Drumbl and Gabor Rona

1	INTRODUCTION	210
2	THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK	213
	A Scope of Application of the Three Main International Legal Frameworks	213
	B Content of International Human Rights Law and International Criminal Law Applicable to Children	216
3	TODAY'S REALITY FOR CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT AND COUNTER-TERRORISM: PROTECT OR PUNISH?	220
	A Contemporary Realities	220
	B What Happened to Cause This Shift?	222
	C Why This Matters	224
4	APPLYING THE "BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD" PRINCIPLE IN CONTEMPORARY ARMED CONFLICTS	225
	A Targeting	225
	B Grounds and Procedures for Deprivation of Liberty	226
	C Treatment of Children Deprived of Liberty	227
	D Trials / Due Process	227
5	ADDITIONAL ISSUES FOR POSSIBLE FUTURE ELABORATION	228
6	CONCLUSION	232

# 8 The Road to a Better Future

By Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven  
with research assistance by Kabba Williams

1	INTRODUCTION	236
2	KEY INSIGHTS	237
	A Multidimensional Causality	237
	B The Narrative of Violent Extremism vs. Local Realities	237
	C Terminology Matters	238
	D The Fallacy of Neutrality	239
	E Community Mobilization vs. Individual Recruitment	239
	F The Fluidity of Association and Membership	240
	G Differences Inside and Outside Conflict Theatres	240
	H Risks, Needs, and Resilience	241
	I The Appeal of Armed Groups	241
	J Old Problems, Continued Challenges	242
	K Disengagement and Desistance	246
	L Reintegrate into What?	247
3	PROGRAMMING IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS	247
	A Enduring Challenges and New Dynamics	249
	B The Nature of Today's Conflicts and the Groups Fighting Them	250
	C PVE/CVE	251
	D Nature of the State Response	253
4	CONCLUSION	253



**TAMBO, COLOMBIA**

A girl plays at the playground of her school in Tambo Colombia, which is located in front of a police station and has been caught in the cross fire between the police and armed groups for years.  
— August 2016

Diego Ibarra Sánchez

## About This Volume

The United Nations University (UNU) is a global think tank established by the United Nations General Assembly. The mission of UNU is to contribute, through collaborative research and education, to efforts to resolve the pressing global problems of human survival, development, and welfare that are the concern of the United Nations, its Peoples, and Member States.

UNU's Centre for Policy Research, in Tokyo, and its Office at the United Nations, in New York, are at the forefront of the University's efforts to bring evidence into United Nations policy processes. This initiative was established as a joint project of the two UNU entities, with the support of UNICEF, the DDR Section of the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and the Governments of Switzerland and Luxembourg.

In July 2018 the UNU Centre for Policy Research will relocate to New York and merge with the UNU Office at the United Nations. The new institution will remain an independent think tank within the United Nations system, combining research excellence with deep knowledge of the multilateral system to generate innovative solutions to today's and tomorrow's global public policy challenges.

# Acknowledgments

This edited volume and the research it represents would not have been possible without the generous support and partnership of UNICEF, the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and the Governments of Luxembourg and Switzerland. This initiative benefited greatly from UNICEF funding that was provided by the European Union through its Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) through its Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA).

The editors wish to thank representatives from these institutions who served as members of the Project Steering Group and who provided support and guidance over the last two years, particularly Ibrahim Sesay, Saudamini Siegrist, and Tasha Gill of UNICEF; Isabella Castrogiovanni of the UNICEF Middle East and North Africa regional office (MENARO); Simon Yazgi, Thomas Kontogeorgos, and Christopher O'Donnell of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Section of DPKO; Hanna Bodenmann of the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations in New York; Marielle Mumenthaler of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs; and Olivier Maes and René Lauer of the Permanent Mission of Luxembourg to the United Nations.

We are indebted to colleagues at UNU who provided key support in the production of this edited volume, notably James Cockayne, Alexandra Cerquone, Serwah Asante, Julia Blocher, Nadeshda Jayakody, Sebastian von Einsiedel, Adam Day, and Cale Salih.

We owe a debt of gratitude to UNICEF and DPKO field staff (particularly Solange Vasse and Ndiaga Diagne of MINUSMA) and other partners in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, Mali, and Nigeria, who facilitated research visits. The project would not have been possible without their unfailing support.

We wish to express our appreciation to members of the Project Advisory Group for their advice and counsel over the course of this project. Particular thanks go to Sharon Riggle of the Office of the United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict; Imma Guerras-Delgado, Nicole Bjerler, and Kellie Ognimba of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); Ann Makome of the Child Protection Team of DPKO; Julianar Green of the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations; Samar Sukkar of the Permanent Mission of Jordan to the United Nations; Per-Axel Frielingsdorf and Karin Seydlitz of the Permanent Mission of Sweden to the United Nations; Samer Melki, Raphaël Dang, and Yann Le Bec of the Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations; Mauricio Carabali and Natalia Arboleda of the Permanent Mission of Colombia to the United Nations; Jo Becker of Human Rights Watch; and Madeline Rose and Beza Tesfaye of Mercy Corps.

We are grateful to the participants of the three regional working meetings, in Amman (February 2017), Bamako (March 2017), and Abuja (July 2017), as well as those who attended the legal convening in New York (August 2017), for their invaluable insights and feedback.

The authors also wish to thank several research consultants, without whose support this volume would not be nearly as rich: Prabin Bahadur Khadka of New York University in particular, for his support with the literature review; Kabba Williams, for his interviews with former child soldiers; Nuhu Ndahi and Oluwatosin Adeniyi, for their interviews in Nigeria; and Yana Mayevskaya, for her insights on public health. Special thanks also go to participants of

UNU's three "state of research" workshops that examined how the fields of social science, criminology, and brand marketing might be brought to bear on this research project. We would like to thank the experts who produced the resulting research briefs that ultimately supported this volume's literature review: Rebecca Littman, Jacqueline Scott, and Amanda E. Rogers.

The chapters in this volume benefitted from excellent peer reviews by Lydia Wilson of the University of Oxford; Kimberly Gamble-Payne of George Washington University; Claudia Seymour of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva; Alex Moorehead of the Human Rights Institute at Columbia Law School; Virginia Comolli of the International Institute for Strategic Studies; Mohammed Ag Alhousseini of the United States Institute of Peace; and Émilie Roy of Qualé, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi. We are grateful to Sarah Courteau, the copy editor, for her sharp eye and mastery of the UN style guide.

Recognition goes to Bob Miller for the inspired design of this volume and Lindsay Branham for the exceptional video she created to highlight its findings. Special thanks are due to Diego Ibarra Sánchez and Marc-André Boisvert for contributing their beautiful images to bring to life the themes explored in this work.

Finally, our thanks are due to the authors featured in this volume for their insights and considerable patience throughout the sometimes difficult research and drafting process.



# About the Authors

## GRAEME BLAIR

Graeme Blair is an assistant professor of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Previously, he was a post-doctoral fellow at Columbia University with the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) network. He holds a PhD in political science from Princeton University. Graeme studies why and how civilians interact with and are affected by non-state armed groups, based on survey and field research in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan, and he has developed new methods for studying sensitive questions through surveys. Graeme's work appears in the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, and *Political Analysis*. He won the 2016 Leamer-Rosenthal Prize for Open Social Science and the Midwest Political Science Association's 2013 Pi Sigma Alpha Award for best paper. Graeme is a co-founder of the Project on Resources, Development, and Governance.

## JAIMIE BLECK

Jaimie Bleck is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame. She specializes in African politics, with a focus on democratization, education, participation, and citizenship. Her book *Education and Empowered Citizenship in Mali* (Johns Hopkins University Press) was published in 2015. Her work appears in the *Journal of Politics*, the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *Comparative Political Studies*, and *African Affairs and Democratization*. Jaimie spent 2014–2015 on sabbatical in Mali as an American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) fellow. Her research has been funded by grants from the Spencer Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and USAID-DRG.

## MARC-ANDRÉ BOISVERT

Marc-André Boisvert is a West Africa-based journalist and a postgraduate researcher at the University of East Anglia. He has covered West Africa since 2005 for several media outlets, notably *La Presse*, Associated Press, Reuters, *The Economist*, and IRIN. While living in Mali, and in the years since, he has closely followed the current crisis, from the early troubles in the north to the French military intervention. He also extensively covered the Ivorian conflict; the coups in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Mauritania; and numerous terrorist attacks in places ranging from Mauritania to Burkina Faso. His current research is focused on armed forces and militant groups in Mali and the Sahel. From 2009 to 2011, Marc-André worked at the Swedish Defence University in Stockholm as a researcher on African armies and peacekeeping missions. In this position, he conducted several research field missions in the Sahel. He has published several academic articles on the military, armed groups, and the use of violence in Mali. He is currently working on a book about the Malian armed forces.

## MARK DRUMBL

Mark Drumbl is the Class of 1975 Alumni Professor at Washington and Lee University, School of Law, where he also serves as director of the Transnational Law Institute. He has been on the permanent faculty at Washington and Lee University since 2002, during which period he has also held visiting law faculty appointments at several other institutions, including Oxford University, Université de Paris II (Panthéon-Assas), University of Melbourne, Masaryk University, University of Sydney, Vanderbilt University, Free University of Amsterdam, University of Ottawa, and Trinity College–Dublin. His book *Atrocity, Punishment, and International Law* (Cambridge University Press) won commendations from the International Association of Criminal Law (U.S. national section) and the American Society of International Law. In 2012, Mark published *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy* (Oxford University Press), which has been widely reviewed and critically acclaimed. He is co-editing the *Research Handbook on Child Soldiers* (with Jastine Barrett). He holds degrees in law and politics from McGill University, the University of Toronto, and Columbia University.

**CHAD HAZLETT**

Chad Hazlett is an assistant professor of statistics and political science at UCLA. He holds a PhD in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In statistics, his work focuses on how researchers can make causal claims in circumstances in which running experiments is difficult or unethical. In political science, his interests cover a variety of topics related to mass atrocity and civil war violence, especially understanding how civilians respond to violence and what influences their willingness to make peace. His work appears in journals including *Political Analysis*, the *Journal of Statistical Software*, *Annals of Applied Statistics*, the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, and *Social Science and Medicine*, as well as media outlets including *Foreign Affairs*, the *Washington Post*, and *Foreign Policy*.

**HILARY MATFESS**

Hilary Matfess is a PhD student at Yale and the author of *Women and the War on Boko Haram*. She is also the co-author of the Combatting Terrorism Center's report "Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers." Previously, she contributed to the Nigeria Social Violence Research Project at Johns Hopkins SAIS and worked with the Center for Democracy and Development in Abuja, Nigeria. Her analysis has been featured in the *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, and CNN.

**AHMAD MHIDI**

Ahmad Mhidi is a freelance journalist and researcher working for Chemonics International. His research and reporting are focused on Islamic State (IS) governance and finance. His work has been published in the *Financial Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *The Economist*. He began his career in journalism as a reporter for a local Syrian publication, *Ain Al-Madina*, focusing on life in Deir Ezzor under IS rule and the tribulations of displaced eastern Syrians as a result of the conflict. He currently serves as the public relations manager of the publication. Ahmad won the Overseas Press Club Award for Best Investigative Reporting in 2015 for his work on the *Financial Times* series "ISIS Inc." In 2017, he was selected as runner-up for the Raif Badawi Award for Courageous Journalists, selected by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation. He contributed research to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2017 research brief "Eastern Expectations: The Changing Dynamics in Syria's Tribal Regions in Eastern Syria." Ahmad is currently based in southern Turkey.

**MAZN NAJMALDEEN SABER**

Mazn Najmaldeen Saber is a sociologist and social worker in the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, where he specializes in the rehabilitation of juveniles. He has eight years of experience as a practitioner working with juveniles who have been exposed to trauma, including conflict-related violence. Mazn holds a master's degree in sociology from Savitribai Phule Pune University. He speaks Kurdish, English, and Arabic.

**SIOBHAN O'NEIL**

Siobhan O'Neil currently runs the United Nations University (UNU) Children and Extreme Violence research initiative, which examines child recruitment and use by non-state armed groups engaged in contemporary conflicts. Previously, she managed UNU's research initiative on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) in contemporary conflict contexts. Prior to joining UNU, Siobhan worked as a consultant to the United Nations Mine Action Service and the RAND Corporation. She has served as deputy chief of the Intelligence Division of the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness; the homeland security and domestic intelligence analyst

for the Congressional Research Service; and an analyst for the New York State Office of Homeland Security. Siobhan holds a doctorate in international relations from UCLA, a master's in Homeland Security and Defense from the Naval Postgraduate School, an M.Litt. in international security studies from the University of St. Andrews, and a bachelor's in political science and history from the College of the Holy Cross.

### **MARA REVKIN**

Mara Revkin is a PhD candidate in political science at Yale University, where her research focuses on governance and law-making by armed groups. Her dissertation examines the state-building project of Islamic State (IS) – and its eventual failure – through multi-method data collection and analysis of archival documents, social media data, surveys, and interviews with key informants, including former IS employees, conducted during extensive fieldwork in Turkey and Iraq. Mara holds a JD from Yale Law School, where she was an Islamic Law and Civilization Research Fellow in 2016–2017. Her legal scholarship focuses on the status of civilians who have lived in areas controlled and governed by terrorist groups under international humanitarian law and domestic material support laws. Her academic work has been published or is forthcoming in the *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, the *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Law*, the *Harvard National Security Journal*, and the *UCLA Journal of Near Eastern and Islamic Law*.

### **GABOR RONA**

Gabor Rona served for six years as a legal advisor in the Legal Division of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva, Switzerland, where he worked on application of the law of armed conflict and human rights law to terrorism and counter-terrorism and represented the ICRC in matters dealing with the International Criminal Court and other international criminal tribunals. He then served for 10 years as the international legal director of Human Rights First (HRF), where he advised programmes on questions of international law and represented HRF with governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, the media, and the public on matters of international human rights and the international law of armed conflict. Gabor is now a visiting professor of law at Cardozo Law School, where he directs the Law and Armed Conflict Project of the Cardozo Law Institute in Holocaust and Human Rights. He is also an adjunct professor at Columbia Law School, a member of the United Nations Working Group on Mercenaries, and a member of the Executive Committee of the International Law Association – American Branch. He has taught and published extensively on the intersections of terrorism/counter-terrorism, human rights, and humanitarian law.

### **BOUKARY SANGARÉ**

Boukary Sangaré is a PhD student at Leiden University. He has been working in the Sahel region since 2009. His research on mobile telephony among Fulani nomads in central Mali was part of his master's programme for Bamako University and his ResMa (MA II) for the University of Cheick Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal. Today, Boukary is one of the best-known anthropologists on the region of central Mali, with an expertise in the Fulani and their plight in the ongoing conflict that began in 2012. He has been part of several consultation missions in the north of Mali and has published various reports and articles on the region. Boukary is currently teaching at the University of Letters, Languages and Social Sciences of Bamako (Mali).

**KATO VAN BROECKHOVEN**

Kato Van Broeckhoven works at the UNU Office in New York as a research officer on the Children and Extreme Violence project. Prior to joining UNU, she worked on city-level programming aimed at preventing violent extremism in Flanders, Belgium. Kato has worked as a consultant for the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, the World Bank's Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development, and Columbia University's Global Policy Initiative. Her work has focused on cities and human mobility, and her research has examined ways to prevent violent extremism. She holds master's degrees in linguistics and communications, and in conflict and development studies from the University of Antwerp and Ghent University, respectively.

**KABBA WILLIAMS**

Kabba Williams is a former child soldier from Sierra Leone who is one of the most prominent activists and spokesmen in Africa for young victims of conflict. Williams has often been consulted by international media agencies and foreign organizations on the experience of children in conflict. He contributed to the video documentary *Let Children Be Children* by WUOMI-Canada, and has been interviewed by media outlets ranging from the BBC World Service to Serbian television and Australian newspapers. He worked with others to successfully lobby Sierra Leone's parliament for a child rights bill, and he played a leading role in pioneering the Voice of the Children project with Radio Sierra Leone and the United Nations, coordinating and producing a radio programme called "My Story". He has also worked with UNICEF Sierra Leone and Amnesty International as well as the National Commission for War Affected Children and PLAN International Sierra Leone. Kabba is a founding executive member and Sierra Leone's national coordinator of the Children's Forum Network, and has served as the Sierra Leone spokesperson for Kids Can Free the Children, a group formed by Canadian children to help advocate for children's rights. He recently contributed to the documentary feature *A Culture of Silence* by Worldwide Cinema Frames. Kabba graduated from the Bo campus of Njala University of Sierra Leone with a bachelor of arts in education, and has been living and working in the United States since 2012. He is currently working on a memoir.

# Preface

In adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, governments agreed to end the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups. SDG Target 8.7 compels States to take immediate and effective measures to “secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers...” which reaffirms the already established international humanitarian law and international human rights framework that prohibits the recruitment and use of children.

Despite considerable progress made in the release of some 65,000 children from the ranks of armed forces and armed groups in the past ten years, however, the recruitment and use of children – boys and girls under the age of 18 – is widespread in armed conflicts worldwide.

In Central African Republic, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Syria, and Yemen, and beyond, children are targeted along with their families and communities; the schools that expand their minds and feed their ambitions are attacked; and they are pressed into ranks of armed forces and armed groups, with long-lasting devastating consequences for children, their families, and their communities. The issue of child recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups is a long running scourge that has plagued too many communities, a plague that the international community must never tolerate.

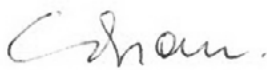
Today, there is concern that the nature of contemporary conflict, and the non-state armed groups fighting them, pose seemingly new policy and programmatic challenges to prevent child recruitment by, and facilitate disengagement of children from, these groups. We are thus confronted with the question – does the international community’s approach to preventing child association with non-state armed groups, and releasing and reintegrating associated children, require a reassessment, particularly in light of extreme violence and tactics associated with many of the non-state armed and terrorist groups fighting today?

This volume is a valuable first step to addressing this pressing question. It seeks to understand how and why children become associated with, are used, and exit non-state armed groups in contemporary conflict in order to craft effective policy and programmatic responses. While the opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of UNICEF, DPKO, and the Governments of Luxembourg and Switzerland, we trust this volume will provoke serious reflection on, and inform discussions about, how the international community can prevent and respond to child recruitment and use by armed groups in today’s conflicts.

To be effective, the international community’s response must be rights-based, empirically grounded, responsive to challenging operational realities and do no harm and uphold the principles of best interests of children. With this in mind, the two-year initiative that produced this volume has been driven by a dedication to research excellence and emphasis on collaboration by a wide-range of stakeholders. This collaborative approach extended to the management of the project itself as each organization and government represented in this preface was involved in a joint effort to shepherd this important initiative from the very outset. We feel that this collaboration is exemplary of the system-wide approach and broader cooperation necessary to successfully tackle the global policy challenges of today and tomorrow. Likewise, we feel the focus on operationalizing research is laudable; we must endeavor to

support research that translates into concrete programmatic guidance to assist child protection and other humanitarian actors in the field working to effectively and safely prevent child association with armed groups and facilitate disengagement and reintegration for already associated children.

Lastly, it is worth highlighting that this research initiative, through a variety of strategies, has endeavored to engage war-affected children to ensure that no research or programmatic efforts about them, are made without them. To build sustainable peace, we must shift the perspective of seeing war affected children as passive programme beneficiaries and recognize their potential as partners on the long road to peace.



**CHRISTIAN BRAUN**

Ambassador  
Permanent Representative  
of Luxembourg to the  
United Nations



**HEIDI GRAU**

Ambassador  
Head of the Human Security Division,  
Federal Department of Foreign Affairs,  
Switzerland



**JEAN-PIERRE LACROIX**

Under-Secretary-General for  
Peacekeeping Operations  
United Nations



THE GOVERNMENT  
OF THE GRAND DUCHY OF LUXEMBOURG  
Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs

Directorate for Development Cooperation  
and Humanitarian Affairs



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

**Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA**



United Nations  
Peacekeeping



# Executive Summary

Today, tens of thousands of children are thought to be involved with armed groups<sup>1</sup> in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Mali, Nigeria, Yemen, Central African Republic, Libya, and elsewhere. How and why do children become associated with non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in these conflicts, and what helps or hurts their chances of exiting from their ranks? This volume analyses the evidence for children's movement into and out of armed groups, and considers how the international community can improve its efforts to prevent and respond to child recruitment. The volume specifically addresses the widely held assumption that there is something exceptional about the nature of contemporary conflicts and the armed groups fighting in them that requires unique policy and programmatic responses.

The research suggests that most children do not so much "opt" into conflict as "grow" into it. Conflict structures the information they see and the choices they make. It pulls and pushes them in many directions. Conflict erodes their relationships. It exacerbates their needs and exposes them to untold risks. Conflict shapes their identity and heightens their need to find meaning in their lives. Ultimately, the forces of conflict narrow the paths available to children, and tragically, for many, lead to exploitation, violence, and trauma.

These findings undermine the conventional wisdom that "violent extremism" or ideology is predominantly responsible for driving children into armed groups. In addition, the volume proposes that the international community maintains outdated and unrealistic notions of how children leave armed groups and their prospects for reintegration in unstable contexts. These misconceptions can result in poorly suited – and potentially counterproductive – policy and programmatic responses.

Recognizing these challenges, and drawing on the available empirical evidence, the volume proposes five principles for more effective international efforts to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use by armed groups: (1) avoid programmes focused primarily on ideological factors; (2) only incorporate ideological components where individually necessary and where they can be embedded into larger, holistic efforts to address the needs and risks of children; (3) ensure all interventions are empirically based; (4) rigorously assess interventions over the long term; and (5) engage children not just as beneficiaries, but as partners.

---

<sup>1</sup> Children also continue to be recruited and used by armed forces, but this publication is focused on the recruitment and use of children by non-state armed groups. For a list of state forces that have been identified for recruiting and using children, see *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary General*, 24 August 2017, A/72/361–S/2017/821.

# 1 This Volume

This volume is one of the marquee outputs of a two-year collaborative research project to fill key knowledge gaps about how and why children become associated with, are used by, and leave NSAGs in contemporary conflicts. The initiative is led by the United Nations University (UNU) in close consultation with and with generous support from UNICEF, the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and the Governments of Luxembourg and Switzerland. The project combines wide-ranging desk reviews; three conflict case studies based on original fieldwork in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria; and an analysis of the challenges to prevention and release and reintegration programming for children in contemporary conflicts. The ultimate goal of the project is to use the empirical findings to inform programmatic guidance for practitioners in the field working to protect children from NSAG association.

The heart of this project is the original case-study research, based on extensive interviews with key stakeholders, focus group discussions, and survey work, among other research methods. In each case study, a scrupulous effort was made to engage children and youth to understand their experiences. In Iraq, the researchers conducted a pilot survey of 45 children detained or convicted of association with Islamic State and interviewed 143 key informants, including former combatants who were under 18 at the time of their recruitment across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. In Nigeria, the researchers ran a pilot survey of more than 200 internally displaced persons who had been impacted by Boko Haram violence and drew from 39 interviews with children formerly associated with Boko Haram conducted in a joint initiative by UNU and the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme. In Mali, the research team conducted 65 interviews and 12 focus groups with more than 190 respondents across key provinces affected by the conflict and drew from five UNU focus groups with children from those same areas.

# 2 Diagnosing the Problem

The original research findings in this volume suggest that in many ways common understandings of child recruitment and use by and exit from armed groups in contemporary conflict fail to reflect the realities on the ground.

## THE DISTORTING EFFECT OF THE “VIOLENT EXTREMIST” LENS

The narrative often superimposed on today’s conflicts (at least from outside the conflict theatres) is one of “violent extremism”, ideology, or “radicalization”. Simplifying conflicts – and children’s involvement in them – along a single dimension inevitably distorts their driving factors, which are multifaceted, complex, and often intertwined. In Mali, for example, the narratives of violent extremism and radicalization fail to resonate with local populations, for whom intercommunal conflicts over resources and cattle – exacerbated by climate change and state corruption, weakness, and retreat – are far more pressing. These dynamics are lost when the Mali crisis is reduced to a simplistic, dichotomous characterization of the actors involved. Such an approach leads to equating widely disparate groups who differ along key characteristics that may be more important than a violent extremist demarcation (e.g., territorial control, state sponsorship, extra-state goals).

## THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGY

The outsized emphasis often placed on the role of ideology in driving communities and individuals to engage with armed groups reflects the distorting effect of a singular outside focus. Evidence from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria detailed in this volume suggests that ideology is rarely the primary force motivating child association with armed groups. Even in cases where ideology plays a role in a child’s trajectory towards an armed group, it is usually one of a number of motivating or facilitating factors. In Nigeria, for example, Boko Haram has conflated its religious ideology with a rejection of the Nigerian state, the latter of which may be the greater driver of association with Boko Haram for Nigerians who have experienced state oppression and violence.

## A MULTIPLICITY OF CAUSES

As has been the case historically, child association with armed groups in conflicts today is multifaceted. Children become involved with armed groups for interrelated reasons that range from extreme coercion to the mundane. Some of the specific factors that influence involvement today overlap significantly with factors that influenced child involvement in earlier conflict contexts, including physical and food security, family and peer networks, financial incentives, coercion, status, and identity. Moreover, the stressors of conflict appear to put children at risk for a range of adverse outcomes beyond NSAG association. For example, the same factors that put children living through the Syrian civil war at risk of association with armed groups may also put them at risk for trafficking and exploitative labour, among other hazards. While certain structural and social factors are especially influential in particular contexts, each child's trajectory is determined by a personalized cocktail of interconnected risks, needs, and resilience factors. Unfortunately, the state of knowledge surrounding the protective factors and processes that could help safeguard children from armed group recruitment and community mobilization is still nascent.

## THE FALLACY OF NEUTRALITY

In many of today's wars, as in earlier ones, it can be virtually impossible for children to remain unaffiliated with a party to conflict. When armed groups are the only employer and exert physical control over the populace, joining an armed group may be the only realistic survival strategy. In parts of Syria, where unemployment is rampant, there are few options for children to support themselves and their families other than to turn to the armed groups who control the area. When the state assumes that all adolescent boys and young men in a given territory are affiliated with rebel groups, as was the case in Aleppo, neutrality has no benefit. When remaining unaffiliated raises suspicions about whether an individual has truly disengaged from a rebel group, the benefits of side-switching to a self-defence group far outweigh those of remaining neutral, as is the case for children in Nigeria exiting Boko Haram who feel compelled to join the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). Likewise, it is highly unlikely that children can avoid association with an aligned armed group or local self-defence vigilantes when their families and entire communities are engaged. This is the case in Mali, where community mobilization is often the dominant, although underappreciated, pathway of children into armed groups.

## DIFFERENCES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE CONFLICT THEATRES

It is important to recognize the differences between factors that influence child association with armed groups inside conflict theatres and those that drive participation from areas adjacent to or far away from the fighting. Evidence from the Syria and Iraq conflicts suggests that while social media can play a role in recruitment inside conflict zones, its influence is often greater in distant areas. Media coverage and social media are the dominant channels through which children and youth further afield are exposed to a conflict. Social media can be a gateway to connect with armed groups, a virtual replication or reinforcement of direct personal connections to armed actors. Another key difference relates to ideology. For many Syrian children and youth once associated with armed groups, ideology did not appear to be a key motivational factor for their involvement. Some evidence suggests, however, that ideology played a larger role for those who were drawn to the fight from outside the conflict theatre.

## THE PROSOCIAL APPEAL OF ARMED GROUPS

It can be difficult to appreciate the allure of armed groups, especially those that are deemed terrorist, violent extremist, or jihadist. But for many children and youth, particularly inside conflict zones, armed groups provide a ready-made identity, community, and sense of significance, as well as some semblance of order amid chaos. Armed groups deliberately exploit children's greater tendency towards altruism and group bonding. Furthermore, armed groups can confer individual perks to children and youth, from food and financial incentives to less tangible benefits. In Mali and Nigeria's strictly hierarchical societies, for example, armed groups can provide a way for young people to express themselves and attain a level of status beyond what society would usually allow someone of their age. Lastly, even if children do not willingly join an armed group, once inside, group processes may lead to identification and bonding with the group and its members, complicating exit.

# 3 Charting a Way Forward

Child recruitment and use by armed groups in today's conflicts bear some important similarities with previous conflicts. Likewise, many child protection efforts remain stymied by the same enduring challenges as yesteryear. Current conflict contexts, however, do present new dynamics – in nature, scope, degree, and combination – that present further challenges to efforts to prevent and respond to the recruitment and use of children.

## AVOID VIEWING TODAY'S CONFLICTS AS EXCEPTIONAL

The research featured in this volume cautions against viewing today's conflicts and the groups fighting them – particularly those labelled as terrorist, violent extremist, or jihadist – as exceptional and thus exempt from comparison with other contexts and/or necessitating unique responses. In particular, demarcating armed groups like Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb as exceptional, solely based on the ideology they promote, oversimplifies their relationships with ideology and obscures the totality of the dynamics that render them challenging to address programmatically (e.g., territorial control, integration with organized crime). Numerous findings reinforce the conclusion that there are enough similarities with previous conflicts to warrant applying lessons from past conflicts and programming experiences. At the same time, contemporary conflicts do pose some new and/or compounded challenges that require careful analysis and thoughtful responses. For example, the media have always covered foreign wars, but technological innovations and social media have given young people today unprecedented access to conflicts, the perpetrators of violence, and their victims. Other notable shifts include the proliferation and the fragmentation of armed groups, the supra-state objectives pursued by some armed groups, and the increasing internationalization of today's conflicts. State responses to contemporary conflicts have also contributed to the securitization of the humanitarian space, growth in counterterrorism legislation, and the increasingly punitive treatment of children alleged to have been associated with armed groups. More holistic, nuanced analyses of today's conflicts and their dynamics and actors are required.

## RE-EXAMINE DISENGAGEMENT AND DESISTANCE

Common conceptions of how children disengage from armed groups are both outdated and influenced by the current political climate towards groups deemed terrorist, violent extremist, and jihadist. The expectation that exit from an armed group is a discrete event appears to be a holdover from when (and how) entire armed groups were demobilized as part of a peace process. In reality, exiting an armed group is likely a process or, more accurately, a series of interrelated processes whereby an individual desists from violence and disengages both physically and psychologically. The processes are likely influenced by how and why children became associated with the group, and their experiences in its ranks. In many cases, neither desistance nor disengagement is a smooth or linear process, but is full of fits and starts. In active conflict settings, as the Syria and Iraq case study highlights, the continued stressors many children and youth experience upon leaving an armed group, as well as barriers to reintegration, can push them back into its ranks, or entice them to switch to another. This outdated conception of exit as a single, distinct event is also likely reinforced – particularly for terrorist groups – by laws that specifically criminalize membership in proscribed groups and assumptions that individuals are unlikely to be casually associated with such fanatical organizations. Yet child association with armed groups today is rarely dichotomous (e.g., “member” or “non-member”), but rather is fluid, even with many of the most violent terrorist groups. This is particularly true in community mobilization contexts where children may be living alongside armed groups and where the nature of engagement may be irregular and informal. In such settings, it is highly unlikely that children could disengage from the armed group with which they are associated until their community stands down or withdraws its support from the group. To help children permanently exit armed conflict, programmatic responses need to be grounded in the realities of association and reflect the processes of exit.

## RECALIBRATE EXPECTATIONS FOR PROGRAMMATIC INTERVENTIONS

One of the tenets of the Paris Principles is that children associated with armed groups should be released “at all times, even in the midst of conflict and for the duration of the conflict.”<sup>2</sup> Once released, the assumption is that most children will be reunited with their families and reintegrated into their communities. In each of the three conflicts examined in detail in this volume, large swaths of territory remain completely unstable – the economy does not function, and there are no services or rule of law. In parts of Syria, for example, the unemployment rate is staggering, there are no functioning schools or basic social services, and violence is prevalent. This raises the question: reintegrate children into what? Does the international community need to alter its expectations for release and reintegration programmes, which, like prevention programmes, are relatively limited in scope, duration, and funding, given the conflict contexts in which they increasingly operate? Even if programmes successfully address children’s needs and risk factors, and work to enhance their resilience to future challenges, will children who have gone through them realistically be able to withstand the structural conditions and pressures that characterize active conflicts?

# 4 Guiding Principles

Given the finding that child association in armed groups today is driven by multiple, often interconnected factors, the volume raises concerns about the utility of crafting narrow, ideologically focused programmatic responses. The emerging fields of preventing and countering violent extremism (PVE and CVE), may have some potentially positive impacts, including fostering a shift from a reactive to a proactive stance and efforts to address political exclusion. Yet they also present cause for concern. This is especially true with regard to a subset of PVE and CVE programmes that are based on narrow and simplistic ideological readings of conflict, fail to appreciate the appeal of armed groups, and operate from outdated assumptions about how and why people associate with and disengage from violent groups. Such programmes are unlikely to effectively address the factors that actually drive conflicts and participation in them. Moreover, if they are narrowly targeted and branded as “PVE” and “CVE”, they may prove counterproductive if they cause resentment among, stigmatize, and further alienate the very communities they are meant to engage. In light of these concerns, the volume concludes with five general principles to guide decisions on when and how to adjust standard prevention and release and reintegration efforts for children in the face of shifting dynamics of contemporary conflicts.

## AVOID ONE-SIZE-FITS-NONE PROGRAMMES FOCUSING PRIMARILY ON IDEOLOGICAL FACTORS

Given that ideology does not appear to play as significant a motivational role for many children joining armed groups in many contemporary conflicts, one-size-fits-all ideological interventions are more likely to be one-size-fits-none.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it makes sense to incorporate targeted activities and/or interventions related to ideology only when there are clear indications that they might have a preventive effect. Likewise, such interventions and activities should be messaged and branded to avoid further alienating the very populations they are meant to engage.

<sup>2</sup> The Paris Principles are international guidelines that consolidate global knowledge on, and complement international mechanisms to protect and respond to, children recruited and used by armed groups and forces. UNICEF, The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, February 2007, p. 5, para 1.5. Available from [www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Quoting Ibrahim Sesay (with his permission), “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence’”, Expert Level Working Meeting, Abuja, 4-5 July 2017.

## **IDEOLOGICAL COMPONENTS, WHEN DEEMED NECESSARY, SHOULD BE EMBEDDED IN THE LARGER HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ADDRESSING A CHILD'S NEEDS AND RISKS**

There is some evidence to suggest that ideology can become more important during indoctrination or as a post hoc justification for joining or engaging in violence. When individual children are influenced or motivated by ideology, or other factors specific to a conflict or an armed group, a well-designed, fully implemented prevention or release or reintegration programme should be able to address these factors as part of its larger holistic approach. Ideology can be difficult to distinguish from other important factors (e.g., community). Any programmatic components addressing ideology should work to mitigate possible risks associated with them and be empirically based and drawn from nuanced understandings of what constitutes ideology and how it is held by beneficiaries.

## **INTERVENTIONS SHOULD BE EMPIRICALLY BASED**

Specialized activities aimed at preventing child recruitment and use and/or responding to associated children in contexts labelled as terrorist, violent extremist, or jihadist should be employed only after thorough, empirically driven conflict and risk analyses, and following an assessment that the proposed intervention has a high likelihood of success based on past experience. This may mean focusing on other empirically supported concepts such as group processes, efforts to shift social norms around violence, and interventions that make political violence costlier.

## **INTERVENTIONS SHOULD BE RIGOROUSLY ASSESSED OVER THE LONG TERM**

When any changes or innovations are made to programming, they need to be rigorously assessed over the long-term to determine if they had positive prevention and/or reintegration effects and/or resulted in unintended consequences. Continuous assessment should feed into programme monitoring, and programmes should be flexible enough to change course if it appears that their approaches are not having the intended effects.

## **ENGAGE CHILDREN NOT JUST AS BENEFICIARIES, BUT AS PARTNERS**

Ultimately, the key to ending child recruitment is the same today as it was decades ago – creating peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive societies, where children do not need to rely on armed groups for their basic needs or self-worth. That end goal will not be achieved easily or quickly, but prevention and release and reintegration programming for children can play a role in the larger efforts to resolve conflict and sustain peace. Most importantly, children are not just beneficiaries of such efforts, but should be partners in designing and implementing their own road to recovery, reintegration, and reconciliation. The journey to peace is long and difficult; we may have to carry children at the outset, but they will carry us at the finish.





**GAO, MALI**  
School children in a classroom.  
— December 2014

UN Photo/Marco Dormino



7

# **Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict**

By Siobhan O'Neil

# 1 Introduction

In today's civil conflicts, non-state armed groups (NSAGs)<sup>1</sup> are recruiting and using children at alarming rates. Contemporary armed groups such as Islamic State (IS), Boko Haram, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) are not unique in this respect, but they are recruiting children on a stunning scale and using them for extreme acts of violence. For example, in 2015, IS is believed to have recruited over three times as many children as adults.<sup>2</sup> In Mali, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, and MUJAO all recruit and use children, many as young as 11 years old, to man checkpoints, conduct patrols, collect intelligence, guard prisoners, and enforce morality and sharia laws.<sup>3</sup> In addition, contemporary armed groups are increasingly using children for extreme violence, including to conduct suicide attacks and perform executions. From January 2014 through March 2017, Boko Haram deployed 117 children – 80 per cent of them girls – to conduct suicide attacks in Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, Boko Haram is not an exception, as an array of armed groups use children for all manner of military roles. As it has struggled with defections, for example, IS has increasingly employed children in combat functions alongside adult fighters,<sup>5</sup> capitalizing on children's inability to comprehend the gravity of violence in order to use them to carry out horrific acts.<sup>6</sup> The trauma children experience in the ranks of armed groups – or living under their control – is calamitous and threatens to create a lost generation in parts of Syria, Iraq, Mali, Nigeria, and other areas of conflict.

<sup>1</sup> Non-state armed groups may be referred to hereafter as NSAGs or simply armed groups. While children are also being recruited and used by armed forces (i.e., official state armies) in contemporary conflicts, the primary focus of this volume is on the recruitment and use of children by non-state actors. While many of the factors that contribute to child association with, use by, and exit from non-state armed groups may be similar to those for armed forces, the points of leverage and programmatic options for addressing them may be different.

<sup>2</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "IS Organization Continues in Attracting Children, and Recruit More Than 400 Children from 'Ashbal al- Khilafah'", 24 March 2015. Available from [www.syriahr.com/en/?p=15709](http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=15709).

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Islamist Armed Groups Spread Fear in North", 25 September 2012. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2012/09/25/mali-islamist-armed-groups-spread-fear-north](http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/09/25/mali-islamist-armed-groups-spread-fear-north).

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, "Silent Shame: Bringing Out the Voices of Children Caught in the Lake Chad Crisis", April 2017. Available from <https://weshare.unicef.org/Package/2AMZFLJWEZA>. From 2014 to 2015, the number of children used in suicide attacks in Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon increased tenfold (from 4 to 44). UNICEF, "Beyond Chibok: Over 1.3 Million Children Uprooted by Boko Haram Violence", April 2016. Available from [www.unicef.org/infoycountry/files/Beyond\\_Chibok.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/infoycountry/files/Beyond_Chibok.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> AFP, "Desertions Prompting IS to Rely on Child Soldiers: Washington", 14 March 2015. Available from [www.yahoo.com/news/desertions-prompting-rely-child-soldiers-washington-212929293.html](http://www.yahoo.com/news/desertions-prompting-rely-child-soldiers-washington-212929293.html).

<sup>6</sup> Lizzie Dearden, "ISIS Is Using Far More Child Soldiers Than the World Realised", *Independent*, 19 February 2016. Available from [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-using-more-child-fighters-than-feared-as-suicide-bombers-and-soldiers-after-brainwashing-at-a6883626.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-using-more-child-fighters-than-feared-as-suicide-bombers-and-soldiers-after-brainwashing-at-a6883626.html). Lizzie Dearden, "ISIS Propaganda Video Shows British Four-Year-Old Isa Dare 'Blowing Up Car' with Prisoners Inside in Syria", *Independent*, 11 February 2016. Available from [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-execution-video-shows-british-four-year-old-isa-dare-blowing-up-car-with-prisoners-inside-a686626.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-execution-video-shows-british-four-year-old-isa-dare-blowing-up-car-with-prisoners-inside-a686626.html).

While the recruitment of children is widespread, and the use of children for extreme violence abhorrent, these trends do not represent a total departure from past conflicts. Many armed groups have participated in grave violations against children. For 20 years, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has forced children in its ranks "to help beat or hack to death fellow child captives who have attempted to escape."<sup>7</sup> The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) long employed children as suicide bombers, among them a 17-year-old girl known as Dhanu, who killed former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.<sup>8</sup> The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone forced abducted children to kill friends, neighbours, and even members of their own families.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the continued recruitment and use of children across contexts, a distinction is increasingly made between some of the armed groups operating today and groups from previous conflicts. Often the armed groups that arouse particular concern are those that are listed as terrorist or characterized as "violent extremist". Although discussions about terrorist and violent extremist groups are almost always caveated to clarify that neither term is specific to a particular religion, nationality, or ethnic group,<sup>10</sup> not all such groups are seen as equally threatening. A subset of armed groups – often those that are self-avowed jihadists – is assumed to pose unique political and programmatic challenges.<sup>11</sup> This subset – which is rarely explicitly defined in debate, but whose contours become clearer in practice – will be described, for lack of a better term, as jihadists. These groups, it is often assumed, require unique policy and programmatic responses, and they inspire heavy-handed responses from states. This is evidenced by international sanctions regimes,<sup>12</sup> a shift towards war tactics<sup>13</sup> (e.g., legislation promoting military responses over law enforcement ones<sup>14</sup>), and state efforts to limit legal protections<sup>15</sup> and even rescind citizenship for those involved with jihadist groups.<sup>16</sup> This security response often extends to children.<sup>17</sup> Despite the legal protections and international best practices for handling children who have been associated with armed groups, states appear to feel less obligated to uphold the rights of children associated with jihadist groups.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, "UNICEF Calls for Release of Child Soldiers by LRA", press release, 5 March 2002. Available from [www.unicef.org/newsline/02pr06lra.htm](http://www.unicef.org/newsline/02pr06lra.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Khan, Rory McCarthy, and Luke Harding, "Female Suicide Bombers: Tamil Tiger Teenage Girl Led the Way", *Guardian*, 11 June 2009. Available from [www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/11/female-suicide-bombers-iraq-sri-lanka](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/11/female-suicide-bombers-iraq-sri-lanka).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the story of M. G. Jan Goodwin, "Sierra Leone Is No Place to Be Young", *New York Times Magazine*, 14 February 1999. Available from [www.nytimes.com/1999/02/14/magazine/sierra-leone-is-no-place-to-be-young.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/14/magazine/sierra-leone-is-no-place-to-be-young.html).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary-General's Remarks at General Assembly Presentation of the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism [As Delivered], 15 January 2016. Available from [www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2016-01-15/un-secretary-general-remarks-general-assembly-presentation-plan](http://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2016-01-15/un-secretary-general-remarks-general-assembly-presentation-plan).

<sup>11</sup> Several terms are used by and/or used to describe these groups, all of which present some problems – Islamist militants, jihadists, Takfiris, Salafis, and Salafi-Jihadists. With regard to "Salafi-Jihadists"; even though there is no agreed-upon definition, Hegghammer identifies three main characteristics of this term as it is used in the grey and academic literatures: They are "more extremist and intransigent than other groups"; "draw on Salafist or Wahhabi religious tradition and discourse"; and are "seen as more internationalist and anti-Western than other groups." Tomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism"; in Roel Meijer, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 253–254.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the United Nations terrorist sanctions regime is focused primarily on two jihadist groups – Al-Qaida and Islamic State – and affiliated groups, entities, and individuals. UN Security Council Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1373 (2001), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015). Occasionally, other jihadist terrorist groups or individuals associated with them are sanctioned as part of other sanctions regimes. For example, Al-Shabaab is sanctioned under the Somalia/Eritrea regime (UN Security Council Resolution 1844) for threatening peace in Somalia. Certain individuals involved in Al-Shabaab are also sanctioned under the 1267 ISIL/Al-Qaida regime.

<sup>13</sup> Jihadist groups that control territory (like IS) or enjoy access to territory (like Al-Qaida) are more likely than non-jihadist groups to be met with a "hybrid war-and-policing model" that focuses more on war tactics (e.g., multilateral military action usually reserved for state opponents, including airstrikes and coalition offensives). For a discussion on this model, see "State Responses to Terrorism"; in Dustin A. Lewis, Naz K. Modirzadeh, and Gabriella Blum, "Medical Care in Armed Conflict: International Humanitarian Law and State Responses to Terrorism"; Harvard Law School Program on International Law and Armed Conflict, September 2015. Available from <https://njjac.law.harvard.edu/mcac-report/5-state-responses-to-terrorism>.

<sup>14</sup> For example, see National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012, Pub. L. No. 112-81, 125 Stat. 1298 (2011), Sec. 1022. Available from [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-112publ81/pdf/PLAW-112publ81.pdf](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-112publ81/pdf/PLAW-112publ81.pdf). This section requires U.S. armed forces to hold in custody pending disposition a person who was a member or part of Al-Qaida or an associated force and participated in planning or carrying out an attack or attempted attack against the United States or its coalition partners, and authorizes the president to waive such requirement in the national security interest. It makes such requirement inapplicable to U.S. citizens or U.S. lawful resident aliens.

<sup>15</sup> Although not explicitly directed at jihadists, an argument for the extension of detention powers for suspected terrorists in the 2006 UK Anti-Terrorism Bill was that they were needed to address the "specific features of modern terrorism." While some of the identified features might apply to a broad range of groups (e.g., the use of technology), several specific references to "Al Qaeda methodology"; the "need to allow time for regular religious observance"; and reference to the July 7 attacks in London suggest a narrower inspiration. Letter to Charles Clarke, Home Office, from Andy Hayman, New Scotland Yard, 6 October 2005. Available from [www.statewatch.org/news/2005/oct/met-letter-terror-law.pdf](http://www.statewatch.org/news/2005/oct/met-letter-terror-law.pdf). See Terrorism Act 2006, c. 11, Part 2, "Detention of Terrorist Suspects". Available from [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/11/part/2/crossheading/detention-of-terrorist-suspects](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/11/part/2/crossheading/detention-of-terrorist-suspects).

<sup>16</sup> For example, the Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) Act 2015, which provides grounds on which dual citizens, whether by birth or naturalization, may lose their citizenship, appears to have been drafted specifically to target Australian citizens associated with jihadist groups. The amendment outlines three grounds for the revocation of Australian citizenship: service in the armed forces of an enemy country or a declared terrorist organization; conviction of terrorist offences; and "renunciation by conduct"; which includes engaging in terrorist activities, providing or receiving training, recruitment, and financing of terrorism. Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) Act 2015, No. 166. Available from [www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2015A00166](http://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2015A00166). The timing of the amendment, references to foreign fighters in the Government's explanatory memorandum (see Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) Bill 2015, Revised Explanatory Memorandum, available from [http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/ems/5507\\_ems\\_210d7d3ca0bf4ea09e7c1bc3d4b48d5e/upload\\_pdf/EM%20Citizenship%20Allegiance%20Bill%20-%20amended.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/ems/5507_ems_210d7d3ca0bf4ea09e7c1bc3d4b48d5e/upload_pdf/EM%20Citizenship%20Allegiance%20Bill%20-%20amended.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf)), focus of the groups listed in the criminal code as relevant terrorist organizations (see Australian National Security, "Listed Terrorist Organisations"; available from [www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/ListedTerroristOrganisations/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/ListedTerroristOrganisations/Pages/default.aspx)), and focus on subsequent prosecutions (e.g., IS fighter Khaled Sharrouf) all seem to suggest that the types of groups the Australian Government is concerned about are jihadists.

<sup>17</sup> This is evidenced, for example, by the handling of Omar Khadr, a 15-year-old Canadian boy who was detained in Guantánamo Bay following a firefight in Afghanistan in 2002. He was allegedly tortured before he confessed to war crimes, including the murder of an American soldier, before a US military commission. Jo Griffin, "Payout for Guantánamo Teenager Could Boost Rights of Child Soldiers"; *Guardian*, 12 July 2017. Available from [www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/12/omar-khadr-compensation-payout-could-boost-rights-of-child-soldiers](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/12/omar-khadr-compensation-payout-could-boost-rights-of-child-soldiers).

<sup>18</sup> For example, citing the October 2015 murder of a police employee by 15-year-old Farhad Khalil Mohammad, who was "on the police radar in relation to possible terrorist activity"; the Australian parliament passed legislation to expand control orders for suspected terrorists (i.e., the length of time they can be detained without charge) and lower the minimum age when they can be imposed from 16 to 14. See Bills Digest No. 20, 20-16-17, Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 1) 2016, 10 October 2016, p. 17. Available from [http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/billsdgs/4867350/upload\\_binary/4867350.pdf](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/billsdgs/4867350/upload_binary/4867350.pdf). And the Criminal Code Act 1995, including amendments up to Act No. 73, 2017, Division 104. Available from [www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2017C00235](http://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2017C00235).



This approach to jihadist groups has contributed to the securitization of the humanitarian space and has significant implications for child protection practitioners working to prevent child association with such groups or helping children exit and reintegrate after association. It is not so much a question of if, but how, child protection practitioners must learn to navigate this new environment in order to access impacted populations and implement effective programmes. What remains a question, however, is whether the international community's approach to programming aimed at preventing child recruitment – as well as reintegration programming for children formerly associated with armed groups – requires a reassessment in light of the types of jihadist groups that have come to characterize contemporary conflicts. Are there programming gaps that need to be filled? Or does the nature of the groups involved or conflict dynamics at play require new substantive approaches to programming?

## 2 The Project

In close consultation with and with generous support from UNICEF, the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and Luxembourg and Switzerland, the United Nations University (UNU) ran a two-year research initiative to address these issues and questions. This initiative aimed to fill key knowledge gaps about how and why children become associated with, are used by, and leave NSAGs in contemporary conflicts, including those self-avowed or characterized as jihadist. The project combines wide-ranging desk reviews of existing knowledge and practice with three case studies based on original fieldwork (Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria) and an analysis of the challenges – legal and otherwise – to child protection programming in contemporary conflict contexts. The ultimate goal of the project is for the empirical findings presented in this volume to inform programmatic guidance for staff working to prevent the recruitment and use of children by contemporary armed groups, and release and reintegrate children already associated with such groups.

From the outset, this research initiative operated under three guiding principles:

- the research must apply a rigorous, scientific approach;
- the project should be collaborative and consultative; and
- children and youth needed to be engaged to understand the challenges they face and ensure their voices and perspectives influence any prescribed way forward.

**SCIENTIFIC RIGOUR:** This project seeks to bring the latest rigorous academic research and innovative approaches to bear on a thorny programmatic and policy question perplexing the international community. It aims to use empirical research findings to inform policy and programmatic discussions on how to address the peace, security, and justice challenges of the day. To that end, the project adopted a methodologically rigorous and comprehensive approach to this research. By conducting conflict-wide case studies, researchers were able to better understand patterns across NSAGs, space, and time, thus avoiding some of the methodological pitfalls of overly narrow studies that exceptionalize a subset of armed groups. While conducting research in conflict zones and on subjects where there is little access or visibility is always challenging, the researchers endeavoured to employ well-thought-out mixed-methods approaches. All of the work featured in this volume has undergone peer review to ensure the quality of analysis and the veracity of evidence cited.

**COLLABORATION AND CONSULTATION:** From the outset, this project was designed to be collaborative and consultative. While UNU's Office in New York (UNU-ONY) has led the project with support from UNU's Centre for Policy Research, an oversight body of all the project partners/donors oversaw its management and direction. This Project Steering Group is comprised of UNU-ONY, UNU's Centre for Policy Research, UNICEF, UNICEF's Middle East and North African Regional Office (MENARO), the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) Section of DPKO, and the Governments of Luxembourg and Switzerland. In addition, UNU has convened a Project Advisory Group (PAG) comprised of members of the wider community of experts and concerned actors working on issues related to children and armed conflict, including individuals from the Governments of Canada, France, Jordan, Sweden, and Colombia; the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children



**ISTANBUL, TURKEY**

A 100cameras program for Syrian refugees between the ages of 4-16-years-old, hosted by the non-profit organization Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM). The program allowed children to learn photography, document their daily lives, and express themselves.  
— Winter 2016

By 100cameras Snapshot Project Leader, Beatrice Schachenmayr

and Armed Conflict; DPKO Child Protection; the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); Human Rights Watch; and Mercy Corps. This PAG met periodically to provide the project staff with advice and counsel. UNU also undertook outreach around each case study and as part of the programmatic guidance development stage to ensure that the perspectives of practitioners in each region were incorporated. The project has endeavoured to ensure that the programmatic guidance informed by this volume will be grounded in the operational realities, concerns, and potential of the practitioner community for whom it is intended.

**ENGAGING CHILDREN AND YOUTH:** This project operated from the assumption that although there are differences in the legal protections available to children and to youth over 18 years old, their needs and the risks they face are likely very similar. As such, many of the substantive findings in this

volume about how and why children become engaged with, used by, and exit armed groups are relevant to youth and vice versa. As is pointed out later in the volume, evidence suggests that those who are recruited into armed groups as children but disengage as adults are particularly vulnerable and do not benefit from many of the support services that those under the age of 18 may access. To ensure this research accurately reflected these hardships, and empowered children and youth to embrace their futures, this project sought, from the outset, to engage them not only as research subjects, but also as research and programming partners.

Engaging children and youth as research subjects has proven challenging for a number of reasons: First, the child protection community is divided about whether researchers should directly engage war-affected children. Some believe the potential for such interactions to re-traumatize vulnerable children outweighs any benefits of interviewing them. Others in the community fiercely advocate for direct engagement to ensure that children's voices are brought into policy discussions and that their agency, views, and needs help drive the design of policy and programmatic responses. UNU attempted to occupy a cautious middle ground, guided by the research ethics requirements for each author's home university and operating under the guidance of UNICEF partners. The significant variation in institutional review permissions, which tend to be extremely conservative when it comes to engaging minors, combined with varied bandwidth and support from local partners, created challenges for accessing formerly associated children and other war-affected children in some contexts. The researchers have gone to great lengths to engage children and youth in line with rigorous ethical standards, conducting interviews in safe locations and without security officials present; obtaining parental permissions where possible; avoiding potentially triggering questions; and ensuring that children were well aware they could refuse to answer questions and terminate interviews at any time. Each research team featured in this volume also worked to protect the identities of the children and, where necessary, key stakeholders whom they interviewed for this project.<sup>19</sup> To that end, each team has taken steps to document those interviews safely (e.g., aliases, unique codes for each respondent or focus group). While concerns about re-traumatizing children are valid and ethical guidelines must be observed when interviewing them, not talking to children and youth impacted by conflict is a sure way to develop programmatic solutions that are ill suited to their needs and challenges.

UNU's researchers also worked to find alternate ways to understand these conflicts through the eyes of children and youth that did not carry the same potential for harm as direct engagement, including reviewing their artwork – some of which is included in this volume – and following their social media posts. The project worked with 100cameras, a non-profit organization that seeks to help children who have suffered from traumatic experiences, including armed conflict, to find a voice, connect with community, and begin to heal.<sup>20</sup> Several of the photos

<sup>19</sup> Due to space limitations, details about interviews and focus groups (e.g., location, date, general description), as well as the bibliography for the volume, are available online only, at <https://unu.edu/children-and-extreme-violence>.

<sup>20</sup> For more information, see <http://100cameras.org>.



When children are engaged, they become active participants in resilience building and recovery.

featured in this volume were taken by war-affected children with the assistance of 100cameras.<sup>21</sup> Photography allows children an unfiltered medium through which to express their voices, and the photos included herein serve as a window into their experience.

This project has also worked to engage youth as research collaborators and partners. Specifically, UNU worked with Kabba Williams, a former child soldier from Sierra Leone, to design a survey that he then conducted with other former child soldiers in his country a decade and a half after the civil war there ended to better understand their needs, their goals, and what, in hindsight, would have helped facilitate their re-entry into civilian life. The findings from these interviews are highlighted in chapter 7 and inform the programming conclusions discussed there. UNU also reached out to youth-led organizations for its expert-level working meetings in Amman, Bamako, and Abuja to learn from their experiences on engaging their peers, particularly over social media, and advocating for their particular needs.

Lastly, this project advocates for engaging children in the initial assessment, design, and implementation stages of prevention and release/reintegration programming. As the conclusion in chapter 7 outlines, research suggests that when children are engaged, they become active participants in resilience building and recovery. Ultimately, even though such engagement can be difficult and time consuming, as far as research about and programming for children is concerned, the guiding principle should be “nothing about us without us”.

## 3 Project Components

To answer the research questions at hand, this project combined desk reviews; field research and three original conflict case studies (Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria); and an analysis of the legal challenges to conducting prevention, and release and reintegration programming for children in contemporary conflict contexts.

A **desk review** of secondary sources, featured in chapter 2, pulls from the global practitioner and advocacy literature on child involvement in armed groups, the broader academic literature on political violence, and other potentially relevant fields and topics (e.g., criminology/gang desistance) to identify strong empirical findings, points of consensus across fields and contexts, and persistent knowledge gaps.

As part of the desk review process, UNU hosted three “state of research” workshops to identify strong empirical findings, highlight points of consensus across disciplines, and draw upon relevant perspectives and expertise not traditionally included in United Nations policy and programmatic discussions in this area. The workshops took place between October 2016 and January 2017 and looked at evidence from the social sciences, criminology, and brand marketing and communications. UNU published three briefs in October 2017 detailing the workshops and the research they spotlighted: “Children and Extreme Violence: Insights from Social Science on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups”;<sup>22</sup> “Children and Extreme Violence: Insights from Criminology on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups”;<sup>23</sup> and “Children and Extreme Violence: Viewing Non-State Armed Groups from a Brand Marketing Lens – A Case Study of Islamic State.”<sup>24</sup>

A **second desk review**, featured in chapter 3, is based on secondary sources and interviews with practitioners, and outlines how the international community has worked to prevent child recruitment and use by NSAGs and facilitate release and reintegration after association. The review also maps out emerging disciplines and examines the potential application of lessons learned from other relevant fields of practice.

<sup>21</sup> UNU paid 100Cameras the same licensing fees it pays adult photojournalists for the use of the children’s photography. Through the 100cameras platform, the funds will be given to each child photographer’s community organization to address the most pressing needs in their community, enabling the children to see the impact of their contribution.

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Littman, “Children and Extreme Violence: Insights from Social Science on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups,” State of Research Brief, United Nations University (UNU), 2017. Available from [http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6290/unu\\_briefs\\_SocialScience.pdf](http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6290/unu_briefs_SocialScience.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Jacqueline Scott, “Children and Extreme Violence: Insights from Criminology on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups,” State of Research Brief, UNU, 2017. Available from [http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6291/unu\\_briefs\\_Criminology\\_WEB-PAGES.pdf](http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6291/unu_briefs_Criminology_WEB-PAGES.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Amanda E. Rogers, “Children and Extreme Violence: Viewing Non-State Armed Groups from a Brand Marketing Lens – A Case Study of Islamic State,” State of Research Brief, UNU, 2017. Available from [http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6292/unu\\_briefs\\_Branding\\_WEB.pdf](http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6292/unu_briefs_Branding_WEB.pdf).



#### ISTANBUL, TURKEY

"The Invisible Camera"

— Winter 2016

By 100cameras student  
photographer,  
Mohammad, age 15.

**Three conflict case studies** – detailed in chapters 4, 5, and 6 – examine child recruitment and use by NSAGs in today's conflicts in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria. Although there is a particular interest in whether distinct trends and motivational factors are associated with certain jihadist groups, these case studies take a conflict-wide perspective,<sup>25</sup> examining how and why children become associated with, are used by, and leave across all armed groups in the selected conflicts.<sup>26</sup> As discussed later in the chapter in more detail, doing so both helps prevent biased findings and reflects the dynamics of child association. Each case study examines the structural-, social-, and individual-level factors that contribute to child recruitment and use by NSAGs. The conflicts in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria were chosen for both practical and methodological reasons: These are conflicts characterized by grave violations against children;<sup>27</sup> there were significant knowledge gaps and programmatic guidance needs related to each conflict; and there are interesting similarities and differences that allow important cross-case analysis. The case studies each employ mixed-methods approaches, drawing from the particular skill sets of the research team and the operational realities of conducting research in these conflicts. The mixture of interviews, original survey and focus group work, secondary sourcing, and other research methodologies pertinent to each chapter is described in more detail therein.<sup>28</sup>

The consultative approach to this research project extended to the case studies. Prior to commencing field research for each case, UNU and UNICEF co-hosted expert-level working meetings that included United Nations and non-governmental organization (NGO) staff, civil society members (including youth and religious leaders), journalists, academics, and government representatives. The working meetings were held in Amman (15-16 February 2017), Bamako (13-14 March 2017), and Abuja (4-5 July 2017) to introduce the research teams and the project, workshop research questions and scope the case study, facilitate information sharing, and make connections for further interviews. In addition, these working meetings served as both focus groups of experts and listening sessions to ensure that the research team understood the concerns, challenges, and operational realities facing the child protection community in each country.

**An analysis of the legal challenges and grey areas** practitioners encountered in the course of their prevention programming and reintegration efforts for children is detailed in chapter 7. To this end, UNU hosted a two-day convening in New York (14-15 July 2017) with legal experts and practitioners to examine the complex legal landscape of child protection and release and reintegration programming in current conflict theatres with the goal of informing programmatic guidance. This convening formed the basis for chapter 7, which examines child protection requirements and standards outlined in international law, international human rights law, international

<sup>25</sup> The conflict case study approach situates individual armed groups in the contexts that helped create them and influenced their aspirations, organization, and actions.

<sup>26</sup> For the Syria and Iraq case study in chapter 4, it was impossible to get enough information on all of the estimated 1,000 to 7,000 armed groups involved in the conflict, so a non-random sample of 10 NSAGs was selected to represent diversity among several key variables: size, ideology/ethnicity, transnational recruitment, state-building, state sponsorship or oversight, and policies towards children.

<sup>27</sup> United Nations Security Council, Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary General, 20 April 2016, A/70/836-S/2016/360. Available from [www.undocs.org/s/2016/360](http://www.undocs.org/s/2016/360). Recruitment and use of children occur in 20 situations of armed conflict in 14 countries involving 58 parties to conflict: 7 government security forces and 51 NSAGs. The project will conduct in-depth case studies/research on three to four conflicts, including an analysis of data obtained that will inform the development of programmatic guidance.

<sup>28</sup> Each case study was largely completed by early/mid-autumn 2017.

humanitarian law, international criminal law, and key guidance child rights documents to understand how these protections interact with the counter-terrorism and United Nations sanctions regimes in current conflicts.

Extensive **consultations** were undertaken with United Nations field personnel, national staff, and NGO partners working in the child protection, children and armed conflict, and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) fields to ensure the project addressed the questions of most concern to them. In addition, further consultations were undertaken upon the completion of this volume to ensure that the study's empirical findings translated into programmatic guidance in a manner that reflects practitioner needs and realities to help United Nations partners effectively and safely design and implement prevention and release/reintegration programmes for children.

## 4 Terminology and Methodology

As highlighted at the outset of this chapter, this volume seeks to explore whether a particular subset of contemporary armed groups requires a unique policy and programmatic toolbox for the prevention of child recruitment, and the release and reintegration of associated children. One of the challenges in answering this question is how to demarcate this subset. This is complicated because (a) few people explicitly acknowledge that they harbour assumptions about Islamist militant groups and (b) the terminologies in use (e.g., terrorism, violent extremism, jihadism) are problematic because they lack internationally agreed-upon definitions and legal basis; are used in practice by different actors in dramatically different ways; and, importantly, are politicized. In addition, these terms suggest dichotomies that either oversimplify or inaccurately characterize the groups involved (e.g., many groups designated as terrorist employ a whole range of tactics blurring the line between terrorist and insurgent groups). Moreover, these terms can be highly politicized, pejorative, and stigmatizing to those to whom they are applied. Governments often purposely deploy these labels to delegitimize violent actors and perhaps their cause and, more broadly, to signal society's disapproval, but doing so can have unintended consequences.<sup>29</sup> Many recognize that these terms are imperfect, but lack clear and succinct alternative language.<sup>30</sup> As categories of analysis – the building blocks for research – these terms can present challenges, as they are subjective and/or may lead to unhelpful disaggregation and subsamples, which could, in turn, lead to biases in the research.

With regard to how this volume uses terminology, an important distinction must be made between the policy and programmatic environment the project is responding to and the methodological approach it employs. This volume uses terms such as terrorist, violent extremist, and jihadist to describe how states and policymakers understand and classify armed groups. It also employs the terms used by those researchers and sources cited in the text, including references to research on “terrorist groups” and “violent extremists,” in order to accurately portray the parameters and findings of the cited research. Where relevant, the authors' definitions are provided in footnotes to help the reader understand the categories of analysis used and how research findings map (or do not) onto larger samples of NSAGs. With regard to the research methodology for this initiative – particularly the case studies – these terms are only used occasionally to describe local distinctions and interviewee comments where relevant, but are largely avoided as categories of analysis.<sup>31</sup>

For both methodological and empirical reasons, the broader category of non-state armed groups forms a unit of analysis for this study. To the first point, only examining the subset of jihadist groups that policymakers appear most concerned about would introduce a bias into the study.<sup>32</sup> By looking across all armed groups operating in a conflict

<sup>29</sup> Labelling a group as “terrorist” serves to delegitimize it, but in doing so, the prospects for peacefully resolving a conflict with said group may be reduced. Harmonie Toros, “Legitimacy and Complexity in Terrorist Conflicts,” *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2008). Indeed, “part of the reason terrorists operate outside the moral norms of society is that they feel alienated from that society and so consciously reject it.” Jeremy Ginges, “Deterring the Terrorist: A Psychological Evaluation of Different Strategies for Deterring Terrorists,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 1997), p. 175.

<sup>30</sup> This was apparent across the workshops held as part of the consultative process for this project, as many participants critiqued the various terminologies available but struggled to offer viable alternatives. “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence’,” Expert Level Working Meeting, Amman, 15-16 February 2017; “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence’,” Expert Level Working Meeting, Bamako, 13-14 March 2017; “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence’,” Expert Level Working Meeting, Abuja, 4-5 July 2017; “Navigating the Legal Challenges and Grey Areas around Child Protection and the Reintegration of Children Associated with Non-State Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict,” Expert Level Workshop, New York, 14-15 August 2017.

<sup>31</sup> It is important to recognize that the terms widely used to talk about this subset of armed groups – jihadists, Takfiri, Salafists, Jihadi-Salafists – are seen as being “more nuanced and culturally more authentic” than other terms to analyse Islamist movements, but they lack “clear definitions ... [and] there is notably considerable confusion about the precise political content of these terms.” Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries?,” p. 245.

<sup>32</sup> For example, sample selection bias is introduced by selecting on the dependent variable (e.g. limiting your sample of study), which is explained in more detail in chapter 2.

Trying to impose clear demarcations for subsamples of armed groups is out of step with the fluidity of modern conflicts, both with regard to the identity and associations of armed actors, and also the nature of child association with those groups.

(to the extent possible, as some conflicts involve upwards of 7,000 armed groups), it is possible to more clearly discern differences in child recruitment and use across groups. To the second point, as previously mentioned, the existing subcategories are problematic because they lack agreed-upon definitions and often conflate diverse groups along a single oversimplified variable, reducing analytical leverage. Moreover, trying to impose clear demarcations for subsamples of armed groups is out of step with the fluidity of modern conflicts, both with regard to the identity and associations of armed actors, and also the nature of child association with those groups.

For the purpose of this volume, “non-state armed group,” “NSAG,” or simply thereafter “armed group” refers to a group that is party to conflict, demonstrates some level of organization, and is not commanded by nor answers to a state(s), a definition that is not without its own problems. In some cases, as with some pro-state or state-aligned militias, the distinction between the NSAG and the state is blurry, and it is difficult to determine whether the NSAG is a distinct entity or an extension of the latter. In addition, the term NSAG is derived from international humanitarian law, which is focused on situations of armed conflict, thus raising a question about whether this approach excludes non-state groups that employ violence in contexts that states have been reluctant to label as armed conflicts, or else

in peaceful contexts. The case studies featured herein are all conflict based, so they avoid any such definitional challenges. For the literature reviews, however, the analysis pulled from the larger literatures on political violence, to include armed groups that operate in non-conflict contexts (e.g., the Red Brigades in Italy), as there may be lessons to be learned from other contexts and other types of non-state groups (e.g., terrorist groups that are not party to armed conflict). The desk review in chapter 2 draws from an array of disciplines and studies on a wide variety of non-state groups that use violence, to include terrorist groups; criminal groups, including street gangs; and insurgent and rebel groups. Likewise, the programming overview in chapter 3 looks beyond child protection programming to derive applicable lessons learned from other disciplines (e.g., gang desistance) that may have utility for prevention and release and reintegration efforts. While recognizing that there are many differences across contexts and that what works in one may not work in another, it is distinctly possible – indeed likely, in many cases – that some of the findings and related guidance derived from peaceful contexts may also be applicable to conflict zones.

Similarly, this project has moved beyond the limited research on children and armed groups to pull from the broader literatures on human behaviour and motivations that are drawn from largely adult samples. While children, youth, and adults are similar in many ways, where necessary the authors of this volume sought to be explicit about the applicability and potential limitations of such comparisons. The desk review in chapter 2 draws from a broad range of work in an attempt to increase the analytical leverage on an issue that is extremely difficult to study for the host of reasons outlined below.

It is hard to know how to best describe children in the ranks of non-state armed groups. Traditionally, the term “child soldier” was used in the practitioner community, but many have moved away from it because its reference to combat roles misrepresents most associated children’s experiences. The 2007 Paris Principles attempted to counteract this impression by explicitly defining a child soldier as “a child associated with an armed force or armed group ... any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part

in hostilities.”<sup>33</sup> Recognizing that children play a whole host of roles within NSAGs, the terminology has evolved in recent years, with many practitioners using the term “children associated with armed forces and armed groups” (CAAFAG). As Mark Drumbl and Gabor Rona note in chapter 7, while CAAFAG is more accurate, it “may resonate poorly outside of specialist circles.”<sup>34</sup> Moving forward, all the authors featured in this volume try to use the language associated with the individual studies cited or used by their sources, in order to accurately describe their findings, but in general this report uses CAAFAG, children associated with armed groups, or simply associated children.

## 5 A Note about Child Agency

Child trajectories into NSAGs occur along a continuum of coercion. As Graphic 1 “The Continuum of Coercion” highlights, and the literature review and case studies in this volume reinforce, a wide range of coercive factors can influence child association with armed groups. For example, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF)<sup>35</sup> and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) were assembled largely by abduction,<sup>36</sup> and Al-Shabaab has largely engaged in forced recruitment.<sup>37</sup> Towards the other end of the coercive spectrum are children who describe their entry into a NSAG as “voluntary”. Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) and Tigrean People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in Ethiopia largely engaged in voluntary recruitment.<sup>38</sup>

**GRAPHIC 1**  
The Continuum of  
Coercion.



Whether child association with armed groups can ever be truly “voluntary” is contested. The advocacy community has worked hard over the last 30 years to enshrine in law<sup>39</sup> and practice the idea that no one under 18 ever becomes a child soldier by free choice.<sup>40</sup> It is argued that the coercion and stressors under which children in conflict zones operate necessitate legal responses that limit, but do not necessarily expunge, the criminal culpability of children associated with armed groups. While this approach may help curb heavy-handed security and punitive justice responses, it also may encourage the application of an overly narrow lens to research and programmatic

<sup>33</sup> UNICEF, *The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, February 2007, p. 7. Available from [www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Chapter 7, p. 228.

<sup>35</sup> Kristine Eck, “Coercion in Rebel Recruitment,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 23 (2014), p. 386.

<sup>36</sup> An estimated 66,000 children were abducted by the LRA. Children made up an estimated 66 per cent to 80 per cent of the LRA force. Christopher Blattman and Jeannie Annan, “On the Nature and Causes of LRA Abduction: What the Abductees Say,” chapter in Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot, eds., *The Lord’s Resistance Army: Myth and Reality* (London: Zed Books, 2010), pp. 135, 138.

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch interviewed Somali refugees who fled to Nairobi in May–June 2011. Of the sample, a number were children who had been associated with Al-Shabaab. Almost all said they were forcibly recruited. Of the few who said they joined voluntarily, their agency was exercised under great duress (e.g., extreme poverty, Al-Shabaab’s violent retaliation against those children who refused to join). Laetitia Bader, Zama Coursen-Neff, and Tirana Hassan, “No Place for Children: Child Recruitment, Forced Marriage, and Attacks on Schools in Somalia,” Human Rights Watch, 20 February 2012. Available from [www.hrw.org/report/2012/02/20/no-place-children/child-recruitment-forced-marriage-and-attacks-schools-somalia](http://www.hrw.org/report/2012/02/20/no-place-children/child-recruitment-forced-marriage-and-attacks-schools-somalia).

<sup>38</sup> Eck, “Coercion in Rebel Recruitment.” It should be noted that Human Rights Watch has questioned how voluntary some of CPN-M’s recruitment was. See Saman Zia-Zarifi, “Children in the Ranks: The Maoists’ Use of Child Soldiers in Nepal,” Human Rights Watch, 1 February 2007. Available from [www.hrw.org/report/2007/02/01/children-ranks/maoists-use-child-soldiers-nepal](http://www.hrw.org/report/2007/02/01/children-ranks/maoists-use-child-soldiers-nepal).

<sup>39</sup> By comparison, state armed forces’ recruitment of 15- to 17-year-olds can be legal under certain circumstances (if the state in question is not a signatory to African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, or CRC Optional Protocol if the state declared 18 was the age minimum), but recruitment of children under 15 is never viewed as voluntary.

<sup>40</sup> “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.” Graça Machel, *The Impact of War on Children* (London: Hurst and Company, 2001), p. 11.



The failure to flesh out the full gamut of child trajectories into NSAGs, examine specific causal factors, and respect child agency impedes understanding of children’s pathways into armed groups.

planning, thus preventing an adequate exploration of and response to the agency of children and “youth volunteerism.”<sup>41</sup> The failure to flesh out the full gamut of child trajectories into NSAGs, examine specific causal factors, and respect child agency impedes understanding of children’s pathways into armed groups, making it difficult to tailor prevention, and release and reintegration interventions.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, failing to recognize child agency has potential implications for children’s prospects for reintegration and community healing.<sup>43</sup> It is possible for us to consider children who have been or are associated with NSAGs as a “generally protected [legal] class while distinctions among individual class members still remain respected.”<sup>44</sup> Recognizing that “the realities of children’s lives in war zones blur the boundaries between choice and coercion ... defying] neat categories,”<sup>45</sup> this literature review nonetheless attempts to respect children’s agency when they articulate their motives for decisions, while reiterating that such decisions almost always take place in contexts where choices are constrained. This recognition should not be construed as justification for punitive justice responses to children associated or accused of association with NSAGs.

## 6 About the Chapters in This Volume

Following this introduction, in **chapter 2** Siobhan O’Neil examines the existing academic, advocacy, and practitioner research on children associated with non-state armed groups. Beyond this relatively limited literature, the chapter explores the broader literatures on political violence, intergroup conflict, and violent organizations, drawing from across the social sciences, criminology, and even brand marketing disciplines. O’Neil helps guide the reader through the shards of evidence on the influence of a multitude of structural-, social-, and individual-level factors that influence the trajectories of children into and out of NSAGs. While there is no evidence of a particular cocktail of factors that influences child association with NSAGs, there are indications that these factors interact. In an effort to navigate these disparate pieces of evidence, O’Neil examines the utility of an expanded risk accumulation model for understanding child association. In response to the recent focus on ideology, religion, and radicalization, the chapter parses the research on these subjects and highlights some of the conceptual and empirical problems with the widely held assumptions around them. Ultimately, O’Neil argues that it is important to adopt a holistic view of a child’s trajectory into and out of an armed group. How a child became involved with an armed group impacts her/his experience in it, and those combined factors and experiences influence how and why she/he might exit the group. Looking forward to reintegration challenges, the chapter concludes that exiting a NSAG must be viewed as a process and one that – especially in settings of continued instability and conflict – may not be instantaneous or permanent.

In **chapter 3**, Kato Van Broeckhoven provides an overview of how the international community has approached programming both to prevent child recruitment and use by NSAGs, and to release and reintegrate children who could not avoid association. In addition to highlighting the programming landscape, the chapter examines the empirical evidence for measuring the impact of these programmes and interventions. While there are few rigorous

<sup>41</sup> Mark Drumbi, *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> “The legality or otherwise of the recruitment has to be considered separately from the question of the approach to be taken in relation to designing and implementing practical programs to provide protection from and alternatives to such involvement, and in relation to demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs. Insofar as the young people themselves are concerned, if they consider that they volunteered, this has to be taken seriously in identifying the reasons why they joined and in planning how to address them whether as a preventative or a remedial measure.” Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), p. 117.

<sup>43</sup> Shepler argues that absolving children of responsibility for actions during conflict can allow them to be forgiven and reaccepted by their communities. Susan Shepler, *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), p. 90. Drumbi, in contrast, argues that war-affected communities do not see all returning child soldiers as “fungible moral equals” and rejects “the suitability of the collectivized faultless passive victim narrative,” which is applied regardless of a child’s conduct during conflict. Drumbi, *Reimagining Child Soldiers*, p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> Drumbi, *Reimagining Child Soldiers*, p. 18.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 33.



impact evaluations to allow us to conclude with confidence if these programmes effectively prevent recruitment and use of children or facilitate successful reintegration into civilian life, the institutional experience in this area has yielded some key insights. Van Broeckhoven continues to examine emerging approaches characterized as preventing violent extremism (PVE) or countering violent extremism (CVE). With the dearth of evidence on the impact of PVE and CVE interventions, and concerns regarding unintended consequences, Van Broeckhoven turns to additional fields of practice that may be useful in child protection planning, including gang desistance and public health approaches.

**In chapter 4**, Mara Revkin details her multi-method research on the current Syria and Iraq conflicts, which included a regional experts workshop,<sup>46</sup> pilot survey, extensive interviews, and social media analysis. Based on field research in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, Revkin examines a sample of the thousands of distinct NSAGs fighting in the conflict to discern patterns in child recruitment and use and children's pathways into and out of armed groups. As the chapter lays out, all NSAGs in Syria and Iraq appear to use children to some degree, but there are differences in their recruitment methods and messaging. There are also clear distinctions between pathways for Syrian and Iraqi children who lived in conflict theatres, under or in close proximity to armed groups, and the paths of children who came from outside. Inside the war zone, there is often no benefit to or possibility of remaining unaffiliated with one of the parties to conflict. Child association with NSAGs is multi-causal, but in this context, Revkin finds that several factors – including family and social networks, co-opted education (or a lack of education altogether), and child labour – are key to understanding many children's pathways in and towards armed groups. This chapter also examines the role of social media and child- and youth-targeted recruitment typologies. Revkin concludes that many states in the region are treating children who have been associated with NSAGs (as well as many who have not) as national security threats rather than victims of exploitation. This response – to the extent that it disincentivizes children from remaining neutral and exiting groups, and/or generates new or aggravates old grievances – has the potential to further fuel conflict.

**BORNO STATE, NIGERIA**

Children cross a large  
puddle in Bakassi  
IDP camp.  
— August 2017

© UNICEF/Vlad Sokhin



**In chapter 5**, Jaimie Bleck, Marc-André Boisvert, and Boukary Sangaré analyse the recruitment and use of children in the latest Mali crisis based on an expert workshop,<sup>47</sup> a series of focus groups, and interviews in Bamako, Sévaré/Mopti, Douentza, and Gao. As they say, the Mali case proves especially challenging for identifying the parties to conflict, as the distinctions between groups are often fuzzy. The violent extremism narrative – widely used outside Mali to describe the conflict – fails to resonate with locals. This is in part a misread of the alliances between local communities in the north of the country and NSAGs, including those labelled “jihadist”, which are often driven by the communities’ need for protection or out of an interest in advancing conflicts with local rivals over livestock or resources rather than ideological support. In these cases, the authors estimate that large numbers of children – along with their communities – have become members of or associated with these NSAGs. This type of community mobilization is shaped by many of the same factors that influence

individual recruitment, but presents a unique challenge for programming. Bleck, Boisvert, and Sangaré examine structural-, social-, and individual-level factors that are especially important for understanding child recruitment and use in the Mali context, including state retreat, weakness, and corruption (e.g., security and dispute resolution); familial expectations for children to contribute economically to the family; the lack of services for northern and non-sedentary communities (e.g., education); the impact of school closures; and the undermining impact of low economic prospects on one's status in the community (e.g., the inability to marry).

<sup>46</sup> “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence’,” Expert Level Working Meeting, Amman, 15-16 February 2017.

<sup>47</sup> “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence’,” Expert Level Working Meeting, Bamako, 13-14 March 2017.

In chapter 6, Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair, and Chad Hazlett examine the recruitment and use of children by armed groups in Nigeria. The research is based on a regional expert workshop,<sup>48</sup> interviews with key informants, and a pilot survey of internally displaced persons (IDPs) impacted by Boko Haram violence. The authors also pull from interviews with children formerly associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria commissioned by UNU and conducted by the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme. The authors examine the dynamics of children's participation both with Boko Haram and as a part of an array of community defence militias, many of which fall under, or are referred to collectively as, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). They find both similarities and significant differences in patterns of child association in Boko Haram and the CJTF and self-defence militias. With Boko Haram, child recruitment often occurs along a continuum of coercion, with many children abducted or coerced into joining. Recruitment on both sides takes place against the backdrop of structural (e.g., political and economic marginalization) and social factors (e.g., community, familial, and institutional influences). At the individual level, the authors also explore the appeal of material incentives, status, and ideology. They look at the support and combat roles children have occupied within Boko Haram and the CJTF. The chapter concludes with a description of exit processes and post-involvement challenges for children, which can make it impossible for them to remain unaffiliated for long.

In chapter 7, building off an August 2017 workshop UNU held with legal experts, child protection and DDR staff, policy experts, and researchers,<sup>49</sup> Mark Drumbi and Gabor Rona examine the legal challenges and grey areas that practitioners encounter in the field as they work to protect children from armed group recruitment and use and/or reintegrate children after NSAG association in contemporary conflict. Rona and Drumbi provide a review of the international legal obligations relevant to child recruitment and use by armed groups regardless of their designation or characterization. They conclude that the law is rather settled on the topic, but observations from current conflicts suggest there is a growing gap in enforcement, particularly in conflict contexts characterized as terrorist and violent extremist. Drawing from several practical examples of how associated children are being treated in contemporary conflicts, including those featured in chapters 4, 5, and 6, Rona and Drumbi highlight some possible ways forward.

In chapter 8, Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven conclude, reflecting on the key research findings that emerge from the case studies in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria, the analysis of legal and operational challenges faced by practitioners today, and the literatures on child association and use by armed groups. The authors examine the evidence presented in each chapter of the volume and explore common themes across them, including the futility of neutrality in some contexts; the differences between recruitment in conflict zones and outside them; the specific dynamics of community mobilization; the appeal of armed groups, including the potential draw of ideology; and the conceptual, societal, and practical challenges of exiting armed groups. Viewing these findings and themes together, the chapter then addresses the key thrust of this research initiative: Are there differences in child recruitment and use in contemporary conflicts, particularly with regard to groups described as terrorist or violent extremist, or the subset of armed groups that identify as jihadist, that require a new or augmented approach to prevention and release and reintegration programming? The chapter provides an estimation of whether standard approaches to NSAG prevention and release and reintegration programming for children are sufficiently flexible to address the particular dynamics of contemporary conflicts, or whether lessons and approaches from emerging fields of practice offer a way forward (e.g., PVE and CVE). This chapter also details a series of interviews with former child soldiers 15-plus years after their association with armed groups in Sierra Leone. Conducted by a former child soldier, Kabba Williams, these interviews serve as beacons, providing "indications that might set us on the right road to inquiry,"<sup>50</sup> and highlight many of the long-term challenges the children of Syria, Iraq, Mali, Nigeria, and other contemporary conflicts are likely to face in the years to come.

<sup>48</sup> "Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in 'Extreme Violence'"; Expert Level Working Meeting, Abuja, 4-5 July 2017.

<sup>49</sup> "Navigating the Legal Challenges and Grey Areas around Child Protection and the Reintegration of Children Associated with Non-State Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict"; Expert Level Workshop, New York, 14-15 August 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Chapter 8, p. 236.





**DEBAGA CAMP, IRAQ**

Families who escaped the battle in Mosul endure long waits under the hot sun.

— October, 2016

Lea Mandana



# 2

## Trajectories of Children Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups

By Siobhan O'Neil



# 1 Introduction

This chapter examines the existing research on how and why children become associated with non-state armed groups (NSAGs), how and why NSAGs use children, and how and why children leave NSAGs.

## A. METHODOLOGY AND VALUE OF APPROACH

This literature review seeks to innovate on several fronts: First, it examines child trajectories into, use by, and exits from NSAGs from multiple levels of analysis, perspectives, and disciplinary frameworks. Given how few rigorous studies there are on children in this area, this chapter also pulls from research that relies on samples of youth or adults associated with NSAGs. In addition, it draws from the larger literatures on political, organized, and criminal violence from the fields of economics, political science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, criminology, and marketing – including research and disciplines that, despite their relevance, are not always considered in United Nations programmatic discussions.

Second, this literature review is written in a manner to help policymakers and programme managers better navigate the empirical evidence related to child association with NSAGs by differentiating between strong findings and those that are based on problematic methodologies or anecdotal evidence. The chapter clearly distinguishes between robust findings, results that may have limited application, shards of evidence that hold promise, methodologically questionable research, weak findings, and plausible theories. Importantly, this chapter also seeks to illuminate the relationships between disparate pieces of evidence.

Third, as stated in the introduction, demarcating old and new conflict dynamics or those that are “violent extremist” vs. those that are not creates a false dichotomy. In multiparty civil conflicts, evidence shows that children are often involved in more than one group simultaneously or sequentially (i.e., “side-switching”), a reality that undermines the utility of narrow analyses of child trajectories into certain “types” of NSAGs. All the indications are that child association with NSAGs is not driven by a single factor or circumstance. This being the case, this chapter examines the influence of “violent extremism” and the concepts often associated with it – ideology and radicalization – on child trajectories into NSAGs in contemporary conflicts alongside an array of other structural-, social-, and individual-level factors.

## B. EVIDENCE BASE

Despite decades of attention focused on children associated with armed groups, there is a modest evidence base to demonstrate – with confidence – how and why children become associated with, are used by, and leave NSAGs. Robust studies of children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG) are rare due to



**NORTHERN IRAQ**

A machine gun carved into a desk at Hag Ali high school for boys in Northern Iraq, which was later taken over as a collective shelter. — August, 2016

Diego Ibarra Sánchez

lack of access to conflict areas<sup>1</sup> and affected populations,<sup>2</sup> and ethical restrictions on interviewing children. In all, the limited scholarly work on the subject can generally be divided into four categories: compiled reports on child ex-combatants across cases; qualitative single-country studies of child soldiers; quantitative studies on adult ex-combatants at large; and cross-country quantitative studies, of which there exist very few.<sup>3</sup> These studies are largely from the psychology, political science, and public health disciplines, which utilize different assumptions (e.g., rational actor, behaviouralism); approaches (e.g., ethnographic, large-scale surveys); and levels of analysis (e.g., individual vs. group), making comparisons across studies challenging. Given that there are so few robust studies on CAAFAG, it makes sense to draw also on robust related studies on adult and youth populations and the broader literatures on political violence.

Practitioner expertise, which constitutes the bulk of the literature on CAAFAG, known as grey literature, is produced largely by international organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), often for the purpose of advocating for the rights of children and informing policies and programming for children affected by conflict. Grey literature often benefits from these organizations' greater access to CAAFAG,<sup>4</sup> but in many cases it is prone to methodological shortcomings (e.g., selecting on the dependent variable<sup>5</sup>), resulting in "inferences [that] are extrapolated from limited numbers; conclusions [that] are drawn from skewed samples; and guesstimates [that] are often inflated to draw attention to otherwise legitimate issues."<sup>6</sup> The unfortunate result is that "myths get circulated and reproduced to the point that they take on the status of facts and become the foundation for policy."<sup>7</sup>

Even with greater access, both IOs/NGOs and academics have difficulty identifying CAAFAG – a "rare and elusive" population.<sup>8</sup> Thus, there is a "dearth of reliable and valid information about this category of children."<sup>9</sup> Even when researchers gain access to CAAFAG, those who enjoy it do not always collect (or share) systematic data on child trajectories into and out of NSAGs and their experiences that would help further understanding of this phenomenon. Furthermore, bias may be introduced into studies if children are interviewed in circumstances where they cannot speak freely (e.g., with guards present). Many studies suffer from the "NGO effect", a well-documented bias wherein child soldiers are "likely to enhance their victim status in the presence of NGOs."<sup>10</sup> As a result of these inherent challenges, biases, and methodological missteps, the body of literature on child soldiers is limited and of mixed quality. With a few noted exceptions, such statistics on child soldiers must be viewed as "soft or provisional."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Significant security challenges and risks are associated with conducting research on this topic that impact the amount of attention and quality of research on the subject (e.g., physical threat from the conflict environment or from actors who may oppose the study; logistical challenges; ethical and bias concerns from traveling with armed guards or with an NGO/IO). Susan M. Thomson, "Developing Ethical Guidelines for Researchers Working in Post-Conflict Environments: Research Report", Program on States and Security, City University of New York, 2009. Available from <http://conflictfieldresearch.colgate.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Developing-Ethical-Guidelines.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Even when child soldiers can be identified, access or ethical concerns around engaging them often impede research (e.g., risk of being identified and targeted by their former group or the security services). In addition, stringent regulations govern scholarly research on child subjects (e.g., institutional review boards [IRBs]), discouraging scholars from pursuing research on the topic. In the United States, for example, beyond existing protections for human subjects, federal regulations and a wide range of state laws and requirements govern research with children or minors and can make it difficult to get approval for research on child soldiers or may impact the sample studied, thus potentially introducing unintended bias (e.g., parental consent when many child soldiers have lost or been separated from their parents). Given the requirements and potential for harm to child subjects, IRBs are wary to grant permission for such research.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Barry Ames, "Methodological Problems in the Study of Child Soldiers", in Scott Gates and Simon Reich, eds., *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> NGOs/IOs often enjoy greater access to, and are subject to fewer restrictions with, CAAFAG, but they tend to try to limit their engagement to essential service-related interactions to reduce the potential harm to the children.

<sup>5</sup> Selecting on the dependent variable occurs when one chooses cases based on meeting some criterion, and then uses that sample as evidence for the criterion. An example would be interviewing only former child soldiers, identifying a commonality among them, such as poverty, and then declaring that poverty causes children to become associated with armed groups. Without a control group (or comparison group), however, it is impossible to determine if poverty is both necessary and sufficient for explaining child involvement with armed groups. While such a study could show that it is common that child soldiers are impacted by poverty, it cannot make a causal argument that poverty influenced children to become associated with armed groups or that they are more affected by poverty than other unassociated children.

<sup>6</sup> Gates and Reich, *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*; and Tim Allen and Mareike Schomerus, "A Hard Homecoming: Lessons Learned from the Reception Center Process in Northern Uganda – An Independent Study" United States Agency for International Development/UNICEF, 2006, p. 1. Available from [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pnadi241.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadi241.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), "Wounded Childhood: The Use of Children in Armed Conflict in Central Africa", 2003, p. 9. Available from [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed\\_emp/-emp\\_ent/-ifp\\_crisis/documents/publication/wcms\\_116566.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_emp/-emp_ent/-ifp_crisis/documents/publication/wcms_116566.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Afua Twum-Danso, "Africa's Young Child Soldiers: The Co-option of Childhood", Monograph 82, Institute for Security Studies, 2003, p. 9. Available from [www.africaportal.org/publications/africas-young-soldiers-the-co-option-of-childhood](http://www.africaportal.org/publications/africas-young-soldiers-the-co-option-of-childhood).

<sup>10</sup> While in theory scholars might be able to avoid this bias, in reality many of them gain access to CAAFAG and war-affected children through an NGO or IO. Given that local populations may not distinguish a researcher from the facilitating organization, scholars "may often be told what victims think NGOs want to hear...[thus] collecting recurring, recycled, and sometimes exaggerated narratives of victimization," Alcinda Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 15; and Susan Shepler, *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 8–9.



## c. ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

Drawing from multiple perspectives, disciplines, and levels of analysis, the three sections that follow examine what is known about how and why children become associated with, used by, and exit armed groups. This chapter is grounded by four empirically based organizing principles: first, there are no mono-causal explanations for child association with armed groups; second, trajectories appear highly individualized; third, key types of factors include risks, needs, and resilience; and fourth, all analyses of child recruitment, use, and exit must be grounded in the larger conflict and community contexts in which they occur.

Child association with armed groups is clearly a multi-causal phenomenon, but there is no evidence that a particular cocktail of factors sufficiently explains involvement.

### NO MONO-CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS

In instances where children exercise some agency, there is no evidence to suggest that a single factor or motivation drives them to associate with NSAGs.<sup>12</sup> The grey literature on child soldiers has long driven this point home;<sup>13</sup> scholarly work on the subject concurs. Even the few studies that recognize some correlation between a particular factor and involvement with NSAGs find that the association only appears to explain a small minority of cases, suggesting that other factors are at work and cautioning against broad generalizations.

### NO SET COCKTAIL OF FACTORS

Child association with armed groups is clearly a multi-causal phenomenon, but there is no evidence that a particular cocktail of factors sufficiently explains involvement. The relationships between certain factors and child association are complex and even contradictory, sometimes resulting in one factor – broadly speaking – serving as both a push towards, and a resilience factor against, NSAG association (e.g., education). It would therefore be prudent to move away from terminology that suggests a causal relationship (e.g., push and pull factors), as so little research has been able to show concrete evidence of causality. Even when some evidence suggests a particular factor is significant in explaining some cases of association, very little is known about how multiple individual factors interact.<sup>14</sup>

### RISKS, NEEDS, AND RESILIENCE APPROACH

In trying to understand how individual factors interact, it may be useful to apply a risk accumulation framework to child association with armed groups. This approach has been used in developmental psychology and criminology for predicting a range of adverse outcomes. Research from both fields demonstrates how a child's exposure to multiple risk factors (e.g., parental discord, poverty, exposure to violence) can result in a significantly higher likelihood of a range of problematic outcomes, from psychological issues and poor cognitive development<sup>15</sup> to violent offending and street gang affiliation.<sup>16</sup> Across studies, the impact of any one risk factor appeared minimal, but several together dramatically increased the likelihood of adverse outcomes – findings that suggest the existence of a tipping point.<sup>17</sup> As the work on risk accumulation has developed, the additive approach has evolved into more

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, ILO, "Wounded Childhood".

<sup>14</sup> For example, practitioners in Syria found a particular acceptance of children joining IS when they came from a household that was both poor and led by a single female parent. Alone, neither risk factor was viewed by the community as a sufficient justification for joining, but together, they led to a different societal reaction. "Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in 'Extreme Violence'"; Expert-Level Working Meeting, Amman, 15-16 February, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> A study of children from the Isle of Wight found that those with zero or one risk factor (e.g., parental discord, low socioeconomic standing, household overcrowding, paternal criminality, maternal psychiatric disorder, or involvement with foster care) had no greater likelihood of adverse outcomes. When a child accumulated two risk factors, however, the likelihood of adverse outcomes increased fourfold; and at four risk factors, the likelihood jumped exponentially. Michael Rutter, "Protective Factors in Children's Responses to Stress and Disadvantage", in M. W. Kent and J. E. Rolf, eds., *Primary Prevention in Psychopathology, Volume 8: Social Competence in Children* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1979). In another study, four-year-olds exposed to five or more risk factors had a nearly threefold probability of psychological distress as compared to children with one or no risk factors. A. J. Sameroff, R. Seifer, R. Baracos, M. Zax, and S. Greenspan, "Intelligence Quotient Scores of 4-Year-Old Children: Social-Environmental Risk Factors," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 79, Issue 3 (1987).

<sup>16</sup> There is no evidence that a particular cocktail of risk factors fully explains gang affiliation, but criminology research has identified a number of consistent risk factors tied to youth gang membership, including negative life events, poor parental supervision, and delinquent peers. For a systematic review of risk factors, see Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Familial criminality has also been identified as a risk factor, particularly relating to the impacts of multigenerational gang affiliation or current family gang membership. See Martin Sanchez-Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); James Diego Vigil, *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988); and Joan Moore, *Going Down to the Barrio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). The individual risk factors that predict gang membership and violent offending are similar, but research finds that gang-affiliated individuals usually have more risk factors than non-affiliated criminal offenders. Finn-Aage Esbensen, Dana Peterson, Terrance J. Taylor, and Adrienne Freng, "Similarities and Differences in Risk Factors for Violent Offending and Gang Membership," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2009), p. 327.

<sup>17</sup> One study of gang membership found that youth who possessed any six of 18 identified risk factors were nearly 10 times more likely to join a gang than youth who did not have any of the risk factors. When youth accumulated just one more risk factor (seven), their potential to become gang affiliated increased further, making them 20 times more likely to join a gang than youth with no risk factors. Esbensen et al., "Similarities and Differences in Risk Factors"; p. 321.

dynamic models, taking into account the varied intensity of individual factors and recognizing that interactions between them may be multiplicative.<sup>18</sup>

Some researchers have already noted the utility of applying a risk accumulation approach for predicting involvement in “political extremism”<sup>19</sup> and groups involved in political violence;<sup>20</sup> there is reason to believe that this approach would also apply to child association with NSAGs.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in active conflict contexts, where “risks accumulate rapidly, and children typically lack space in which to ‘unpack,’ or think through and come to terms with, the multiple adversities” it is intuitive that this approach may be useful.<sup>22</sup>

While risks are an important focus, the needs and resilience of children are also key elements for understanding how and why they become associated with NSAGs. While some needs – sustenance, for example – may seem like versions of risks (e.g., food insecurity), many human needs do not fit neatly into a risk framework, including identity, a sense of significance, and social bonds. Likewise, resilience factors may counteract the impact of a particular risk or need or their combined effects. In the scholarly literature, resilience is viewed as “positive adaptation despite adversity,”<sup>23</sup> and resilient children are those who “master normative developmental tasks” that let them function at least as well as an average child not exposed to the same type of adversity.<sup>24</sup> Resilience factors can be both individual qualities (e.g., flexibility, tenacity, self-esteem) or external to a child (e.g., parental encouragement, supportive peers and communities).<sup>25</sup>

Resilience factors can be a surplus to a risk factor deficit known to influence child association with NSAGs, or they might be entirely unrelated: To the first point, one study in Nigeria concluded that food insecurity was a risk factor for child and community association with NSAGs.<sup>26</sup> Another study in Sierra Leone found that food security was cited as a reason children did not join an armed group or armed force; that is to say, food security served as a resilience factor against NSAG association.<sup>27</sup> There can also be resilience factors that are unrelated to risk factors (e.g., a sense of humour<sup>28</sup>). While thinking in terms of resilience alongside risks and needs may be useful, it must be noted that resilience factors and processes<sup>29</sup> do not require the presence of significant risk and may be specific to a given context or age.<sup>30</sup>

The burgeoning literature on child resilience factors in armed conflict contexts remains narrowly focused and contains significant knowledge gaps. The existing research on the subject focuses exclusively on how resilience factors lead to better mental health and reintegration outcomes for children exposed to conflict (discussed later in the chapter), not the resilience factors that impede NSAG association. Though counterintuitive, to the extent that NSAG association facilitates survival, it is quite possible that it may actually represent a child’s capacity to cope in difficult circumstances, demonstrative of resilience. It must be mentioned that the factors and processes that help prevent a child from becoming associated with a NSAG are not necessarily the same as those that help a child exit and reintegrate after NSAG association. Lastly, it is important to remember that the focus on resilience assumes that children have some degree of agency and room to manoeuvre, which many do not.

<sup>18</sup> Recently, scholars have proposed that risk-factor interactions may be more dynamic and that some factors may be weighted more than others. Instead, for example, of classifying an individual’s risk in dichotomous terms (a risk factor is present or it is not), newer models describe risk factors in continuous terms or in degrees, allowing for the intensity of risk to be incorporated into the model. For example, instead of dichotomizing poverty into “above the poverty line” and “below the poverty line”, it is possible to measure the risk represented by poverty in degrees (e.g., child’s family came from the lowest 5 per cent income bracket). See, for example, Gary W. Evans, Dongping Li, and Sara Sepanski Whipple, “Cumulative Risk and Child Development,” *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 139, No. 6 (2013).

<sup>19</sup> Daphna Canetti, Brian J. Hall, Carmit Rapaport, and Carly Wayne, “Exposure to Political Violence and Political Extremism,” *European Psychologist*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2013). Although the authors do not address risk accumulation, they argue that “a transformative trigger” can “push[] individuals decisively from the ‘at-risk’ category to actually taking the step of joining” an extremist group. UNDP, “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment”, 2017, p. 5. Available from <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder, “Disarming Youth Combatants: Mitigating Youth Radicalization and Violent Extremism”, *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2011).

<sup>21</sup> This approach may also help anticipate when and why children eventually leave armed groups. Criminology research suggests that members often mature out of gangs or leave due to an accumulation of factors that push and pull them away from the group, including cognitive shifts, disillusionment with gang ideologies, and the pressure of external stigma. Ibid.; Vigil, *Barrio Gangs*; and David C. Pyrooz and Scott H. Decker, “Motives and Methods for Leaving the Gang: Understanding the Process of Gang Desistance”, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2011).

<sup>22</sup> Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> John Fleming and Robert J. Ledogar, “Resilience, an Evolving Concept: A Review of Literature Relevant to Aboriginal Research”, *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Indigenous and Aboriginal Community Health*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2008). Available from [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2956753](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2956753).

<sup>24</sup> Sara R. Jaffee, Avshalom Caspi, Terrie E. Moffitt, Monica Polo-Tomas, and Alan Taylor, “Individual, Family, and Neighborhood Factors Distinguish Resilient from Non-Resilient Maltreated Children: A Cumulative Stressors Model”, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2007), p. 232.

<sup>25</sup> Fleming and Ledogar, “Resilience, an Evolving Concept”, Appendix 1.

<sup>26</sup> The 2016 research was carried out in three states: Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe. The sample consisted of key informant interviews with 24 children formerly associated with JAS (Boko Haram)/CJTF/vigilante groups and 57 leaders of vigilante groups, government officials, CSO representatives, NGOs, religious leaders, and 6 focus groups. Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences of Children Associated with Armed Groups in Northeast Nigeria”, 2017, pp. 6, 9, 14. Available from [www.nsrp-nigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Research-Report-Children-Associated-with-Armed-Groups.pdf](http://www.nsrp-nigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Research-Report-Children-Associated-with-Armed-Groups.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Emily Delap, “Fighting Back: Child and Community-Led Strategies to Avoid Children’s Recruitment into Armed Forces and Groups in West-Africa”, *Save the Children*, 2005, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas A. Kulper, “Humor and Resiliency: Towards a Process Model of Coping and Growth”, *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* (EJOP), Vol. 8, No. 3 (2012).

<sup>29</sup> Theresa Stichick Betancourt and Kashif Tanveer Khan, “The Mental Health of Children Affected by Armed Conflict: Protective Processes and Pathways to Resilience”, *International Review of Psychiatry*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008).

<sup>30</sup> Fleming and Ledogar, “Resilience, an Evolving Concept”.



#### SHADDADI, SYRIA

The view of the playground at Hani Hakuf school, which was hit by an air strike at the end of February 2016.  
—April 2016

Diego Ibarra Sánchez

## CONTEXT

A last organizing principle that is key to navigating the evidence that follows is that risks, needs, and resilience factors must be situated and understood in their context, and the “wider systems of exploitation and violence”<sup>31</sup> in which they are embedded. It bears emphasizing that children living within a conflict theatre will be exposed to different conditions and therefore may be motivated by a different constellation of factors than those who live adjacent to or far away from the fighting. Even within the same conflict, there is likely contextual variation across time, space, and demographics. For example, research on children associated with the Maoists in Nepal revealed significant differences in self-reported motivating factors by gender, geography, and caste.<sup>32</sup> In addition to the structural factors correlated with conflict (e.g., economic collapse, state retreat), war zones create suboptimal conditions under which children (and adults) make decisions. War has been described as “the realm of uncertainty,”<sup>33</sup> where civilians try to optimize their chances of survival with little to no information, as emotions run high and people operate under coercion and duress. This dynamic is compounded by deliberate misinformation campaigns by the parties to the conflict. Any “choices” children make vis-à-vis armed groups, they make under these conditions. For example, there are indications that when many young people join NSAGs, they believe they will be able to leave whenever they want (indeed, NSAGs play up this perception), but once inside the group they are often stuck.<sup>34</sup>

While there are meaningful variations in risks, needs, and resilience factors across conflicts, time, and contexts, opportunities for cross-case learning exist. Indeed, some key factors may be evident across almost all cases, though these parallels must be drawn cautiously. For example, from a human development perspective, the experiences of children across different contexts are likely to display some similarities because they are undergoing the same physical and cognitive stages of development (e.g., the impulsive, risk-accepting behaviour that characterizes adolescence).

<sup>31</sup> Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, p. 55.

<sup>32</sup> For example, girls were much more likely to cite abusive personal situations as a motivating factor for joining the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and boys were more likely to cite financial hardship. Brandon A. Kohrt, Minyoung Yang, Sauharda Rai, Anvita Bhardwaj, Wietse A. Tol, and Mark J. D. Jordans, “Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Nepal: Mental Health Status and Risk Factors for Voluntary Participation of Youth in Armed Groups,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2016), pp. 13–14.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, Indexed Edition, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 101

<sup>34</sup> Rachel Brett, “Adolescents Volunteering for Armed Forces or Armed Groups,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 85, No. 852 (2003), p. 863. Available from [www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/irrc\\_852\\_brett.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/irrc_852_brett.pdf).



## 2 The State of Research on Child Trajectories Into NSAGs

The sections that follow examine what is known about (1) how and why children become associated with NSAGs, (2) how and why NSAGs use children, and (3) how and why children leave NSAGs. These questions are examined in light of different perspectives (e.g., supply/demand), disciplines (e.g., psychology, political science, anthropology, criminology, sociology, economics, and marketing), and levels of analysis (e.g., structural, social, and individual). The following sections present the research on the structural, social, and individual factors that have been shown to be correlated with – and, on rare occasion, appear to cause – child association with armed groups and/or political violence. Structural factors include national-level economic and political conditions, social-level factors include community norms and family dynamics, and individual-level factors include personal traits and experiences. In some cases, a factor may seem to fit into all three categories; grievance, for example, can be widely experienced, as well as community and individual specific. In each section, it can be difficult to establish a hierarchy of factors, as there is insufficient information to rank their comparative importance, with noted exceptions (e.g., existence of conflict and NSAGs that use children). Where appropriate, each section ends with a consideration of how findings and trends vary for specific sub-demographics (e.g., by gender).

### A. STRUCTURAL-LEVEL ANALYSIS: NECESSARY AND CONDUCTIVE CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS

Children do not start wars, adults do. For children to participate in conflict, there must be a conflict. To join armed groups that are party to that conflict,<sup>35</sup> there must be armed groups open to child involvement. Beyond those necessary conditions, certain structural-level security, economic, and cultural factors help explain the environment in which children operate, with all its pressures and expectations. This section examines structural-level (i.e., national/regional/global) conditions that create the backdrop against which child recruitment and use by armed groups occurs.

Children do not start wars, adults do.

#### THE PRESENCE OF CONFLICT

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. Ultimately, “most of the young people who become involved in warfare do so because there is a war. This is so obvious that too little consideration has been given to war itself as a causal factor in their involvement.”<sup>36</sup> The existence of conflict exacerbates existing hardships and dynamics and creates new ones that reduce a child’s options for remaining unaffiliated with an armed group. Moreover, conflicts lead to shifts in social norms around the use of violence. As fighting occurs around them and civilians are targeted, children are directly exposed to atrocities. As a result, violence is increasingly normalized and becomes a valid response to disagreements.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, with the proliferation of weapons that accompanies armed conflict, children inevitably have increased access to and familiarity with weaponry.<sup>38</sup> This familiarity, combined with normative shifts about the use of violence, has a profound impact on how children view the world, their role models, and the manner in which they navigate conflict, as is evidenced when, for example, mock fighting becomes the dominant mode of play in conflict zones.

<sup>35</sup> Inside a conflict theatre, several interconnected dynamics often influence the rise of NSAGs, including state failure and a weak rule of law. Collier and Hoeffler have argued that where it is militarily and financially feasible (aided in part by a geography that provides safe havens), rebellion will occur. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War”, *Oxford Economic Papers*, No. 56 (2004). Fearon and Laitin find that central governments that are weak organizationally, financially, and politically are less likely to be able to control rebellions because of weak institutions and policing and corrupt counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency policies. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (Feb. 2003). “Especially in the Middle East, jihadists’ expansion is more a product of instability than its primary driver.” International Crisis Group, “Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State”, Special Report, 14 March 2016. Available from [www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state](http://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state).

<sup>36</sup> Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), pp. 9–10.

<sup>37</sup> Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, pp. 12–13.

The assertion that proximate conflict is a necessary precondition for child association with NSAGs immediately raises a question: What explains children's travel from outside conflict theatres to join NSAGs? In the Syria and Iraq conflicts, for example, child recruitment and use by NSAGs is exponentially higher inside the conflict zone than in areas adjacent to or outside the conflict, but significant numbers of children and youth (as well as adults) have joined IS and other NSAGs from areas that are nowhere near the conflict. Technology and travel advancements have shrunk the space between foreign lands, peoples, and events, changing how people experience far-off conflicts.<sup>39</sup> The number of young people who have left their home countries to travel to take part in fighting in Syria and Iraq in recent years demonstrates that in a globalized world, interest in and access to foreign conflicts have become easier.

While children living outside the conflict theatre may not experience the conflict in the same way as those in the area, it may provide a lens through which they can understand their own struggles. Even though children further afield from a conflict zone are less likely to have personal connections or run-ins with NSAGs than those closer to the front lines, the Internet – particularly social media – has helped close the distance. Social media platforms have helped facilitate the flow of information from the battlefield and connections with the fighters and victims. For example, a recent study of 43 individuals who had travelled from abroad to Syria intending to join the fight found that 40 per cent described being motivated by “a sense of identity with – and a desire to help – co-religionists”; specifically the Sunni communities who had been “victimised and mistreated” in the region.<sup>40</sup> Other studies present similar findings. Research in Jordan found that virtually all the Jordanians surveyed who had gone to Syria to fight described “a personal and social obligation to protect the weak” – many specifically cited the need to protect Sunni women and children – “and fight non-Muslim aggressors”; motivations that were often cast in the language of jihad.<sup>41</sup> The religious language used to justify involvement is likely in part a sign of IS's success

The recruitment of children represents deliberate choices by armed group leadership.

in casting the Syrian civil war in a sectarian light, thus “combining a religious obligation with a social one,”<sup>42</sup> as well as “an emotional response to a feeling of injustice in their home societies.”<sup>43</sup> Even when those far away from the conflict are able to experience it close up due to technological advances, the context in which they choose to join a NSAG is likely very different from that of those living inside the conflict theatre. While a handful of studies on those who have travelled to join armed groups in Syria examine their profiles or are based on interviews after they return, few have control or reference groups or even contextualize their findings, so it is hard to discern if these fighters have been subject to different conditions or factors than their peers.<sup>44</sup> Further robust research is needed in this area.

### NSAGS THAT RECRUIT AND USE CHILDREN

While an occasional child in the ranks of an armed group may be the result of faulty age assessment, an exception, or indifference, armies full of children do not occur by chance.<sup>45</sup> Rather, the recruitment of children represents deliberate choices by NSAG leadership. There are three demand-side explanations for why NSAGs recruit children: there is utility in using children, certain types of armed groups are more likely to use children, and local norms about childhood and child labour influence NSAG leaders' willingness to use children.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Hegghammer finds that “in absolute terms, the supply of both domestic and foreign fighters appears to have increased from the 1990s to the 2000s”; Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (2013), p. 5. For example, whereas estimates of foreign fighters in Afghanistan from 1978 to 1992 range from 5,000 to 20,000, the estimates for Syria and Iraq since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 are around 25,000. The Afghanistan figures come from Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad”, *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Winter 2010–11), table p. 61. The Syrian war figures come from Hamed El-Said and Richard Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria”, United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNCCT), July 2017, p. 7. Available from [www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/assets/img/Report\\_Final\\_20170727.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/assets/img/Report_Final_20170727.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> The 2015–2016 interviews asked 43 individuals – 77 per cent of whom had gone to Syria but decided to leave, and 23 per cent of whom had tried to reach Syria but were intercepted along the way or turned back – about their motivations. Twenty-six of the interviews occurred in prisons; 17 were held elsewhere. El-Said and Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria”, p. 11. Similarly, narratives about the early wave of European children and youth who went to Syria focused on their desire to assist the humanitarian response to the local population. Rachel Briggs and Tanya Silverman, “Western Foreign Fighters: Innovations in Responding to the Threat?”, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014, p. 14. Available from [www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2784\\_Western\\_foreign\\_fighters\\_V7\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2784_Western_foreign_fighters_V7_WEB.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Mercy Corps, “From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups”, 2015. Available from [www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/From%20Jordan%20to%20Jihad\\_0.pdf](http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/From%20Jordan%20to%20Jihad_0.pdf). This report was based on individual interviews and focus group discussions with 95 Jordanians who had some connection with the conflict in Syria (including friends and family members of fighters who had joined the conflict) as well as focus group discussions with community leaders and civil society organizations.

<sup>42</sup> El-Said and Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria”, p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann, eds., “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats and Policies”, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, April 2016, p. 54.

<sup>44</sup> For example, El-Said and Barrett found that those who attempted to travel to Syria were “disadvantaged economically, lack education and have poor labour prospects, even when they come from Western societies”, but with no reference group or context, it is difficult to know if those conditions were unusual or widespread among their peers. “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria”, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa*, pp. 44–45.



**ALEPPO, SYRIA**

Young boys, armed with their homemade toy guys, imitate the soldiers they see.

— June 2013

ICRC/Hagop Vanesian

**THE UTILITY OF USING CHILDREN:** Researchers identify three main reasons that NSAGs recruit and use children: (1) children are used out of necessity, (2) they are seen as substitutes for adults, or (3) they have particular advantages over adults. To the first point, it is argued that armed groups employ children because fighting-age males are not available, often due to the ravages of prolonged fighting or disease.<sup>46</sup> Observations of certain NSAGs lend credence to this theory: Projecting a long fight, Boko Haram has targeted children to “ensure continuity and succession,”<sup>47</sup> but ultimately the data on this point are mixed. One cross-national study of rebellions found that as the duration of a conflict increases, so does the likelihood of using children,<sup>48</sup> but another failed to identify a strong relationship between war duration and child soldier rates.<sup>49</sup> To the second point, some have theorized that the proliferation of technologically advanced small arms and light

weapons (SALW) enables NSAGs to substitute children for adults,<sup>50</sup> armed with SALW, “even a 10-year-old child can be an effective fighter, a fact not lost on most [NSAG] commanders.”<sup>51</sup> Other scholars are not convinced, citing a lack of evidence and the long history of children in combat,<sup>52</sup> and suggesting that even if children are able to handle SALW they might not be as efficient at operating them<sup>53</sup> – or performing other duties – as adults.<sup>54</sup> The propensity of NSAGs to use children for auxiliary duties, arm adults first, and treat children like “cannon fodder”<sup>55</sup> suggests that children are poor substitutes for adults.<sup>56</sup> Lastly, it has been argued that children have advantages over adults in that they are an ample, cheap,<sup>57</sup> expendable resource.<sup>58</sup> NSAG commanders see them as “very good soldiers ... [because] they obey orders; they are not concerned about getting back to their wife or family; and they don’t know fear.”<sup>59</sup> Others argue that it is not that children are fearless, but rather that they cannot fully grasp the inherent danger of combat,<sup>60</sup> have an underdeveloped sense of right and wrong, and are more easily manipulated.<sup>61</sup> Some NSAGs appear to see children as having unique tactical and strategic advantages because they perform tasks that adults will not or are less able to do.<sup>62</sup> As children are more inconspicuous than adults,<sup>63</sup> armed groups have used them to conduct suicide attacks on key targets (e.g., Al-Shabaab,<sup>64</sup> Boko Haram<sup>65</sup>) or for particular psychological

<sup>46</sup> When the fighting-age male population is ravaged by disease (e.g., AIDS), as was the case in numerous sub-Saharan countries, NSAGs may turn to children for support and military tasks. Twum-Danso, “Africa’s Young Child Soldiers,” p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> The research, carried out from March through May of 2016 in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe, drew on informant interviews and focus groups with 24 children formerly associated with Boko Haram and CJTF/vigilante groups; 57 leaders of vigilante groups; government officials; and civil society, religious, and NGO representatives. NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> This study was conducted with log year values, making it difficult to translate the impact of duration on the likelihood of the presence of child soldiers in easily understood terms (i.e., the likelihood of using child soldiers increases by 105.1 per cent when the duration measure moves from its minimum to maximum value). Trace Lasley and Clayton Thyne, “Secession, Legitimacy, and the Use of Child Soldiers,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2015), p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> Vera Achvarina and Simon F. Reich, “No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers,” *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006), p. 143.

<sup>50</sup> Whereas the weapons of war used in previous eras (e.g., spears in ancient Greece) would be too heavy and cumbersome for children to operate effectively, portable machine guns, grenades, and mortars, it is argued, can be as effectively employed by children as by adults. P.W. Singer, *Children at War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 45–46.

<sup>51</sup> Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> David Rosen, *Armies of the Young* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), pp. 14–16.

<sup>53</sup> Achvarina and Reich, “No Place to Hide,” p. 136.

<sup>54</sup> Some have argued that children can be undisciplined, are unprepared for the hardships of war, and are not effective when confronted by an adult force. Francisco Gutiérrez Sanin, “Organizing Minors: The Case of Colombia,” in Gates and Reich, *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, p. 121.

<sup>55</sup> For example, in Mali, children are used by some groups to shoot at the Malian military, and if the latter retreat, the adult members follow behind to pick up abandoned military hardware, a tactic that puts children at risk, but shields adult fighters. “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence,’” Expert Level Working Meeting, Bamako, Mali, 13–14 March 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Achvarina and Reich, “No Place to Hide,” pp. 136–137. Allen and Schomerus conclude that only after the LRA shifted its area of operations and had less ground to cover did it turn to children, as it no longer needed the assistance of stronger adults in carrying supplies over long distances. Allen and Schomerus, “A Hard Homecoming,” p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> Children may be seen as desirable as long as they are sufficiently cheap to compensate for their lower military efficiency. Achvarina and Reich, “No Place to Hide.”

<sup>58</sup> Romeo Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children: The Global Quest to Eradicate the Use of Child Soldiers* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> “Kalashnikov Kids,” *The Economist*, 8 July 1999.

<sup>60</sup> ICRC, “Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups,” June 2017, p. 4. Available from [https://shop.icrc.org/enfants-associes-aux-forces-armees-ou-aux-groupes-armes.html?\\_store=default](https://shop.icrc.org/enfants-associes-aux-forces-armees-ou-aux-groupes-armes.html?_store=default).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*; and Wessells, *Child Soldiers*.

<sup>62</sup> Save the Children, “Child Soldiers and Other Children Used by Armed Forces and Groups,” 2010, p. 1. Available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/documents/1538.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> As such, children are thought by NSAG commanders to make better spies and lookouts than adults. Susan Shepler, “The Social and Cultural Context of Child Soldiering in Sierra Leone,” paper for the PRIO-sponsored workshop Techniques of Violence in Civil War, Oslo, 20–21 August 2004, p. 14.

<sup>64</sup> In March 2016 in Somalia, Al-Shabaab reportedly demanded two Lower Shabelle villages turn over children eight to 15 years old, which the group was planning to use to conduct suicide bombing(s) around elections. When the villages refused and offered adults in lieu of children, Al-Shabaab abducted 60 to 70 children from Qur’anic schools in the area. United Nations Security Council, “Letter Dated 28 September 2016 from the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Addressed to the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 751 (1992) and 1907 (2009) concerning Somalia and Eritrea,” 31 October 2016, S/2016/919, p. 148. Available from [www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/919](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/919).

<sup>65</sup> Dionne Searcy, “Boko Haram Strapped Suicide Bombs to Them. Somehow These Teenage Girls Survived,” *New York Times*, 25 October 2017. Available from [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/25/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-suicide-bomb.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/25/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-suicide-bomb.html).



**GAO, MALI**

Children play in front of a police station riddled with bullet holes.  
— August 2013

UN Photo/Marco Dormino

impact (e.g., RUF<sup>66</sup>) and propaganda value<sup>67</sup> (e.g., IS<sup>68</sup>). NSAGs with state-building ambitions also see children as the next generation of fighters and citizens.<sup>69</sup> It should be remembered that motivations for recruiting children are unlikely singular. Al-Shabaab, for example, recruits young children to fill immediate operational needs and as part of its long-term strategy to build a loyal, indoctrinated fighting force.<sup>70</sup>

**NSAG GROUP TYPE:** Another group of explanations for why some NSAGs use children focuses on attributes of the armed group itself, namely a group's access to resources and goals. Research finds that NSAGs with access to resource endowments (e.g., mines or oil fields) are less reliant on support from the surrounding population, and are therefore likely to use high levels of coercion and force, including child recruitment.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, in Uganda, a NSAG's access to natural resources was associated with a 6 per cent to 14 per cent increase in the

probability of child soldiering.<sup>72</sup> Other studies find that when NSAGs have access to illicit funds<sup>73</sup> or support from a foreign state,<sup>74</sup> they are more likely to use children. There is some evidence that civil defence organizations affiliated with and rooted in ethnic communities are likely to have children in their ranks, irrespective of resources, although they may be treated and used differently.<sup>75</sup> Another group-type dichotomy explored in the scholarly research is the difference between NSAGs looking to secede from the state vs. those who want to usurp the existing power structure. One study found that separatist rebel groups, who need international recognition to reach their goal, are more likely to adhere to international norms barring the use of child soldiers than NSAGs that seek to overthrow the existing government, who can achieve their objectives through brute force.<sup>76</sup> A last dimension that appears to necessitate more study is whether the desire to control territory leads to personnel demands that NSAGs are likely to fill with children.

**CULTURAL CONTEXT:** The last group of supply-side explanations focuses on the cultural context in which NSAGs operate, particularly norms around child labour and the use of violence,<sup>77</sup> and conceptions of childhood. If children have been raised in a culture where violence is typical or desirable,<sup>78</sup> the psychological transition to engaging in violence and/or belonging to a violent group is greatly eased. More broadly, involvement in NSAGs may also be grounded in norms about child labour and notions of childhood.<sup>79</sup> Where child labour is common<sup>80</sup> (including in

<sup>66</sup> In Sierra Leone, children in the RUF were particularly feared by villagers because they "were pumped up on drugs and had 'that crazy look' in their eyes, which signalled they would kill everything in sight or commit mutilations such as cutting off people's arms and hands." Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, p. 77.

<sup>67</sup> In national wars, the involvement of women and children is seen as a public relations advantage, showing the unequivocal popularity of an armed group's cause. Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, "Organizing Minors: The Case of Colombia," in Gates and Reich, *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, p. 128; and "Applying a Brand Marketing Lens for Analysing Non-State Armed Groups That Employ Extreme Violence," workshop, 16 January 2017, New York, NY.

<sup>68</sup> IS featured four-year-old Isa Dare in a February 2016 video in which he helped blow up a car with three captured men inside – a video aimed to "shock" Western audiences. Lizzie Dearden, "ISIS Propaganda Video Shows British Four-Year-Old Isa Dare 'Blowing Up Car' with Prisoners Inside in Syria," *Independent*, 11 February 2016. Available from [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-execution-video-shows-british-four-year-old-isa-dare-blowing-up-car-with-prisoners-inside-a6866626.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-execution-video-shows-british-four-year-old-isa-dare-blowing-up-car-with-prisoners-inside-a6866626.html).

<sup>69</sup> For example, Boko Haram. NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences," p. 19.

<sup>70</sup> S/2016/919, p. 147.

<sup>71</sup> Weinstein creates an original data set compiled from newspaper reporting on four rebel groups in Mozambique, Uganda, and Peru. Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>72</sup> The natural resource impact was smaller and weaker than expected, perhaps due to "the diversity of natural resource wealth (some resources are not easily looted without the cooperation of local civilians)," Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion," p. 99.

<sup>73</sup> Lasley and Thyne's study uses a cross-country data set of 103 rebellions clustered in 45 countries from 1998 to 2008. Lasley and Thyne, "Secession, Legitimacy, and the Use of Child Soldiers."

<sup>74</sup> Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion," p. 100.

<sup>75</sup> Shepler highlights that whereas the RUF put children on the front lines and used them as human shields, CDF often used children to follow behind armed adults, and they were instructed to finish off injured enemy combatants, suggesting different degrees of protective posturing for children by group. Shepler, *Childhood Deployed*, p. 138. Conversely, anecdotal evidence from the Mai Mai self-defence groups finds that boys went to the front line, girls were directly behind, and adult combatants covered the back for defence. Some of those interviewed mentioned going to school in the morning and working for the group in the afternoon (e.g., looting, collecting tax), although it must be noted that the sample size is unknown. The research is based on interviews with primary sources (victims, eyewitnesses, and perpetrators) and secondary ones (relatives, child protection actors, peacekeeping staff). MONUSCO, "Invisible Survivors: Girls in Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2009 to 2015," 25 November 2015, pp. 15–16. Available from <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/151123-Girls-in-Armed-Groups-2009-2015-Final.pdf>.

<sup>76</sup> Lasley and Thyne, "Secession, Legitimacy, and the Use of Child Soldiers."

<sup>77</sup> Edward Miguel, Sebastián M. Saiegh, and Shanker Stayanath, "Civil War Exposure and Violence," *Economics and Politics*, Vol. 23, Issue 1 (2011).

<sup>78</sup> Cultural violence can be grounded in ideology, religion, art, and language. "Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right or at least not wrong." Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3. (1990), p. 291.

<sup>79</sup> Despite the international legal regime establishing childhood until 18 years of age, "notions of childhood are culturally constructed and vary across societies." Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, p. 5. Rosen agrees, arguing, "Like ethnicity, age categories such as 'child,' 'youth,' and 'adult' are situationally defined within a larger system and cannot be understood without consideration of conditions and circumstances." Rosen, *Armies of the Young*, p. 10.

<sup>80</sup> Andvig and Gates, "Recruiting Children for Armed Conflict," in Gates and Reich, *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, pp. 80–81. In addition, Shepler identifies three other key cultural norms – fostering, apprenticeship, and rites of manhood – as central to understanding child soldiering in Sierra Leone. Shepler, *Childhood Deployed*, pp. 30–44.

state forces),<sup>81</sup> children are more likely to be recruited by NSAGs.<sup>82</sup> It is intuitive that NSAG commanders would be shaped by local norms and their own experiences: Where it is normal for children to work in peacetime, it is likely that NSAGs will employ them in wartime.

### STRUCTURAL KNOCK-ON EFFECTS FROM CONFLICT AND THE PRESENCE OF NSAGS

Once these two *necessary* conditions are met, the continuation of conflict creates conditions that nurture NSAGs (e.g., state decline/retreat/failure), but are terrible for most of the population, particularly children. War serves as a “multiplier effect”, exacerbating existing economic, social, and political problems (e.g., food insecurity)<sup>83</sup> and creating new ones. Large academic literatures explore how civil conflict undermines rule of law, property rights, and economic growth, and exacerbates poverty.<sup>84</sup> Given that this research exists mostly at the structural level, it is difficult to draw causal conclusions about the relationship between structural-level conditions and individual child association with NSAGs. For example, variations in national-level poverty rates do not explain differences in child soldier levels.<sup>85</sup> That said, structural-level conditions serve as the backdrop in which child recruitment and us by armed groups occurs, creating additional pressures on civilians, exacerbating needs, and highlighting and amplifying existing societal cleavages and tensions. As conflict erodes institutions that provide support services, state retreat is hastened, leaving NSAGs to command elevated status in communities.

### PHYSICAL AND ECONOMIC INSECURITY, STATE RETREAT, NSAG ELEVATION

Conflict contributes to a host of detrimental economic effects, including slowed economic growth and exacerbated poverty.<sup>86</sup> The impact on the economy reverberates throughout society: Undernourishment increases, people migrate or engage in dangerous work to provide for their basic needs, and children are often forced to leave school. A “major episode of violence, unlike natural disasters or economic cycles, can wipe out an entire generation of economic progress” for a country.<sup>87</sup> There is evidence that recruitment increases significantly with exogenous shocks to the economy – either from conflict or natural disasters. For example, a high-level commander who defected from Al-Shabaab reported that the group saw an increase in recruits in 2011 and 2012 after a major drought caused a severe food crisis across East Africa.<sup>88</sup>

Like poverty, a lack of employment may result in unmet basic needs (e.g. food, shelter). It also means that people do not benefit from the many less tangible benefits of a job, which boosts individual self-worth, keeps people from being idle, and can give them hope in the future. Public opinion surveys regularly find popular support for the idea that unemployment (particularly for youth) serves as a motivation for joining rebel groups, but the data is mixed and many studies have “consistently failed to find any correlation between unemployment and violence, perhaps because data are poor or because the link is indirect rather than direct.”<sup>89</sup> One study found that the likelihood of a NSAG’s using child soldiers drops significantly as youth employment increases,<sup>90</sup> bolstering hypotheses that link child soldiering to children’s curtailed earning potential outside armed groups.<sup>91</sup> In contrast, research in Colombia found that many FARC members had been employed and were earning above the national wage average before they became associated with the group.<sup>92</sup> There is not enough evidence to draw strong conclusions about the relationship between unemployment and child association with NSAGs,<sup>93</sup> but child recruitment often occurs against the backdrop of economic devastation, including high unemployment.

Just as conflict leads to economic decline, so too does it hasten state decline. Conflict often breaks out where states are already weak, but insecurity furthers state weakness, retreat, and even collapse, providing space for

<sup>81</sup> As highlighted by McKay and Mazurana, use of girls by state armed forces is often correlated with widespread child soldiering in NSAGs. Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana, *Where Are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique – Their Lives During and After War* (Montreal: International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>82</sup> Scott Gates and Simon Reich, “Introduction”, in Gates and Reich, *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, p. 7.

<sup>83</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, p. 80.

<sup>84</sup> For example, see Paul Collier, “On the Economic Consequences of Civil War”, *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1999).

<sup>85</sup> Achvarina and Reich, “No Place to Hide”, p. 134.

<sup>86</sup> World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2011). Available from [https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011\\_Full\\_Text.pdf](https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011_Full_Text.pdf).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with high-level Al-Shabaab defector, Somalia, September 2017, provided by a local researcher.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>90</sup> The authors find that the likelihood a NSAG uses child soldiers dropped by 43.1 per cent when the ratio of employed youth (15- to 24-year-olds) rose from its minimum 16.2 per cent to the maximum 77.1 per cent rate. Lasley and Thyne, “Secession, Legitimacy, and the Use of Child Soldiers”, p. 13.

<sup>91</sup> See Beber and Blattman, “The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion”; and Andvig and Gates, “Recruiting Children for Armed Conflict”.

<sup>92</sup> Sanin, “Organizing Minors”, p. 26.

<sup>93</sup> Although membership and attacks may not be influenced by unemployment in the same way, one study of adults found that reducing unemployment in locations with active insurgencies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Philippines did not decrease the rate of insurgent attacks against government, allied forces, and civilians. Eli Berman, Michael Callen, Joseph H. Felter, and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Do Working Men Rebel? Insurgency and Unemployment in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 55, Issue 4 (2011).

## One of the most significant but overlooked fault lines in conflict societies is generational.

NSAGs to operate. As NSAGs move into ceded territory, they enjoy increased proximity to, status with, and control over the civilian population. Conflict raises the possibility that children will have direct interactions with NSAGs and their fighters, which in turn increases their risk for recruitment. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, children formerly associated with Mai-Mai Nyatura knew the group's recruiters, and saw them in their community long before they became associated with the group.<sup>94</sup> When NSAGs are proximate, association may be gradual, as children run errands for fighters for a small fee, only to move on to bigger jobs, spending more time with the group, until they are indistinguishable from the other members,<sup>95</sup> as is the case with Nigeria's Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).<sup>96</sup>

As the state retreats, NSAGs often step in to fill the void, providing security, dispute resolution, and sometimes social services, among other functions. The promise of such services may be part of the appeal of NSAGs. One study found that if dispute resolution institutions are weak, civilians are unlikely to have a strong interest in defending them, or the governing institutions of which they are a part, from NSAG challenges.<sup>97</sup> Even armed groups that outsiders view as extremely brutal (e.g., Boko Haram and IS) are often initially welcomed by local populations when their version of dispute resolution is based on clear rules and dispassionately administered. Once

NSAGs have taken over the dispute resolution function, they are well positioned to consolidate their social control over a population and strengthen their legitimacy.<sup>98</sup> When armed groups become the only source of employment and goods in an area, they "increase the relevance of informal networks [which NSAGs often infiltrate and exploit] to people's survival strategies."<sup>99</sup> When it assumes control over other state functions, an armed group is no longer outside the norms of society, but comes to enjoy enhanced social standing. Fighters become role models for children just at the time when other role models are absent (e.g., teachers due to closed schools). In conflict settings, fighters are elevated to hero status,<sup>100</sup> offering children a clear narrative for understanding and responding to their chaotic environment.

### EXACERBATED SOCIETAL CLEAVAGES AND GRIEVANCES

Conflict exacerbates existing cleavages – ethnic,<sup>101</sup> but also socio-economic, rural/urban, and generational – which are often exploited by NSAGs that seek to capitalize on these ready-made divisions and coalitions to recruit and motivate supporters. It is worth examining two types of cleavages – religious and intergenerational – in more detail. Some have argued that religious identity, in contrast with other ethnic divisions (e.g., linguistic) that are more malleable, is indivisible and non-negotiable in character and, as such, contributes to prolonged<sup>102</sup> or particularly intense<sup>103</sup> conflicts. Certainly, some armed groups instrumentalize religion as logistical and military challenges intensify,<sup>104</sup> because it is bound to identity and is associated with feelings of duty, accountability, and judgement.

<sup>94</sup> The Group of Experts on the DRC drew their conclusions from data on 1,125 boys and girls who left 22 different armed groups in 2014, between 11 and 17 years of age (143 girls and 982 boys). Daniel Fahey, Victry Anya, Frans Barnard, Zobel Behalal, Gora Mbaye, and Emilie Serralta, "Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo," United Nations Security Council, November 2014, S/2015/19, p. 28.

<sup>95</sup> ILO, "Wounded Childhood," p. 34.

<sup>96</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences," p. 6.

<sup>97</sup> More than other functions, dispute resolution embodies the quality of governance, is essential for a society to function, reinforces conflict resolution norms, and thus impacts civilians' daily lives. Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 69.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>99</sup> Findings based on a qualitative field study including 14 key informant interviews and six focus group discussions with over 60 participants in Pumwani and Eastleigh in Nairobi; and Likoni, Old Town, Kisauni, and Majengo in Mombasa. International Alert/KMYA, "We Don't Trust Anyone: Strengthening Relationships as the Key to Reducing Violent Extremism in Kenya," 2016, p. 27. Available from [www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Kenya\\_ViolentExtremism\\_EN\\_2016.pdf](http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Kenya_ViolentExtremism_EN_2016.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> ILO, "Wounded Childhood," p. 34.

<sup>101</sup> Some have argued that ethnic cleavages – deep, long-standing cultural divides (i.e., "ancient hatreds") – cause intra-state conflict. To understand the argument, see Stephen Schwartz, "Beyond Ancient Hatreds," *Policy Review*, 1 October 1999. Available from [www.hoover.org/research/beyond-ancient-hatreds](http://www.hoover.org/research/beyond-ancient-hatreds). Most scholars disagree, arguing that ethnic identities are social constructs, not rigid demarcations, and economic and political factors, rather than ethnic identity, cause civil conflict. For example, see James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," and "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Autumn 2000).

<sup>102</sup> If at least one party to conflict (governments or rebel groups) makes explicit religious claims, it creates a feeling of indivisibility, thus negatively affecting the prospects for a negotiated settlement and prolonging the duration of conflicts. Isak Svensson, "Fighting with Faith: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol 51, No. 6 (2007).

<sup>103</sup> Data from 278 conflicts (1946–2001) lends support for arguments about the intensity of religious conflicts. Susanna Pearce, "Religious Rage: A Quantitative Analysis of the Intensity of Religious Conflicts," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 17, Issue 3 (2005). Another empirical study found that societies divided by religion are more prone to intense conflict than those with other considerable ethnic divisions. Marta Reynal-Querol, "Ethnicity, Political Systems, and Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2002).

<sup>104</sup> Isaacs argues that the aforementioned work suffers from methodological problems, and instead cites empirical evidence that an organization's prior use of religious rhetoric does not increase the likelihood it will engage in violence, but past participation in violence makes an organization more likely to adopt religious rhetoric for mobilization. Matthew Isaacs, "Sacred Violence or Strategic Faith? Disentangling the Relationship between Religion and Violence in Armed Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2016).



**DAMASCUS, SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC**

“Syria is sad that her people are killing each other,” says the 11-year-old artist holding up her drawing of a map of Syria crying, at the Bakri Kaddoura school.  
— December 2016

© UNICEF/Ranim Al-Malek

Religion can also be correlated with other identities or grievances (e.g., political exclusion), which may actually be drivers of conflict.<sup>105</sup> In Kenya, for example, research suggests that grievances over land, unemployment, and resource access underlay intercommunal animosities, particularly when correlated with religious identity.<sup>106</sup> This importance of disentangling religion from institutions, grievances, and other factors is exemplified by recruitment in Somalia, where only 4 per cent of former Al-Shabaab members cited religion as a motivating factor in joining the group, but more than a quarter (27 per cent) were introduced to the group at mosques, which were used by recruiters.<sup>107</sup>

Long overlooked, one of the most significant fault lines in conflict societies is generational. As societies go through transitions, traditional hierarchies are challenged or undermined, creating the potential for the emergence

of generational fault lines. For example, a 2016 study in Kenya found that migration, urbanization, demographic growth, and reduced economic opportunities and land access had exacerbated tensions between youth and traditional political and religious authority figures, serving as both a motivating factor for youth involvement with and an exploitable wedge for NSAGs.<sup>108</sup> In conflict contexts, youth often see armed groups as providing opportunities for social mobility and recognition unavailable to them in civilian life, a perception commanders actively foster.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, “generation” has come to represent “an especially fertile site into which class anxieties are displaced.”<sup>110</sup> IS is essentially a “generational revolt” steeped in youth culture that is pitted not just against the West, but against previous generations of political Islam and even Islamist terrorist predecessors (e.g., Al-Qaida).<sup>111</sup>

Grievances can operate at the national, community, or individual level; whole populations can feel aggrieved, particular communities may feel persecuted, and individual children may be motivated in part by personal grievances. Conflict exacerbates existing grievances and creates new ones. In Nigeria, research suggests that poor economic conditions, lack of development, and poverty are exacerbated by perceived government corruption, reinforcing a feeling of injustice and grievances against the state, which Boko Haram taps into with its recruitment campaigns.<sup>112</sup> As states respond to insecurity with military and law enforcement measures, they risk exacerbating old grievances or generating new ones. At the individual level, the grey literature is replete with anecdotes of children and youth who self-report that such grievances drove their participation in conflict. In Mali, for example, youth cited perceived abuses by the security forces and being labelled as “jihadis” or “terrorists” by the government in order to diminish valid ethnic group grievances as reasons for supporting armed groups.<sup>113</sup> These experiences are echoed in other contexts. Recent interviews with nearly 500 adults who were former or current members of “extremist organizations” – namely, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram – suggest that state repression was key to their involvement; 71 per cent cited “government action”, including the killing or arrest of a family member or friend, as the trigger that sparked their involvement.<sup>114</sup> This was further elucidated by a high-level Al-Shabaab commander who, after he defected, reported that it was easy to recruit new members to the group in areas that had been hit by drone strikes or where the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) or the Somali National Army had killed civilians.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Basedau et al. claim that the overlap of religion and other identities such as religious groups’ grievances or religious leaders’ calls for violence fuels armed conflict. Their work supports academic scholarship that points to religion pushing actors towards violence. Their data set covers 130 developing countries for the period 1990 to 2010. Matthias Basedau, Birte Pfieffer, and Johannes Vüllers, “Bad Religion, Collective Action, and the Onset of Armed Conflict in Developing Countries”, *Journal of Conflict Research*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2016). Research in Kenya suggests that some NSAG networks operating out of mosques in Mombasa and Nairobi leverage the “narrative of Muslim ‘victimisation’ within a country dominated by Christians” to recruit new members and raise funds. International Alert/KMYA, “We Don’t Trust Anyone”, p. 16.

<sup>106</sup> International Alert/KMYA, “We Don’t Trust Anyone”, p. 17.

<sup>107</sup> Based on 88 respondents interviewed, plus 7 off the record, including former Al-Shabaab fighters. Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, “Radicalisation and Al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia”, Institute for Security Studies and Finn Church Aid, September 2014, p. 6. Available from <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Paper266.pdf>.

<sup>108</sup> International Alert/KMYA, “We Don’t Trust Anyone”, pp. 21–22.

<sup>109</sup> Mana Faroghi and Louisa Vaughn, “They Treat Us All Like Jihadis’: Looking Beyond Violent Extremism to Building Peace in Mali”, International Alert, 2016, p. 4. Available from [www.international-alert.org/publications/they-treat-us-all-like-jihadis-en](http://www.international-alert.org/publications/they-treat-us-all-like-jihadis-en).

<sup>110</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming”, in Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, eds., *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 16.

<sup>111</sup> Olivier Roy, “Who Are the New Jihadis?” *Guardian*, 13 April 2017. Available from [www.theguardian.com/news/2017/apr/13/who-are-the-new-jihadis](http://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/apr/13/who-are-the-new-jihadis).

<sup>112</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences”, p. 10.

<sup>113</sup> Vaughn and Faroghi, “They Treat Us All Like Jihadis’”, p. 4.

<sup>114</sup> The report concludes that these findings indicate state action serves as a “tipping point” for joining extremist groups. Based on the information available, however, it is unclear if state action is better understood as a powerful motivating factor, if it actually plays a more transformative role, or if – particularly when people are jailed by the state (especially relevant here, as only 4 per cent of the sample was not detained at the time of the interview) after association with an armed group – grievances against the state take on greater influence in retrospect. UNDP, “Journey to Extremism in Africa”, p. 73.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with high-level Al-Shabaab defector, Somalia, September 2017.

The literature on terrorism has also raised the issue of whether someone must be personally aggrieved or if sympathy and identification with an aggrieved group is powerful enough to drive participation. Although little empirical evidence supports this theory,<sup>116</sup> there has been renewed attention,<sup>117</sup> especially with participation in conflicts in Syria and Iraq by outsiders, to the role of “relative deprivation” – unjust treatment in relation to another group – as a possible explanation for why relatively well-off people engaged in political violence on behalf of those who are not.<sup>118</sup>

In assessing the structural factors that provide the context for child recruitment and use, the outbreak of armed conflict and the rise of armed groups open to children’s involvement are necessary factors for child recruitment and use. Related structural factors – including insecurity, economic decline, state retreat, ethnic cleavages, and grievances – help us anticipate how children, their families, and their communities might be impacted by the conflict. While national-level conditions may not tell us much about why a particular child becomes involved with a NSAG, these conditions create the context necessary to situate the social- and individual-level factors outlined in the next section.

## B. SOCIAL-LEVEL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CHILD TRAJECTORIES INTO NSAGS

The next section explores the social-level (i.e., group) factors – particularly community, peer networks, and family – that influence and contextualize child association with armed groups.<sup>119</sup>

### FAMILY

The relationship between family and child association with armed groups is complex. In some cases, family serves as a motivating or facilitating factor for NSAG association, while in others, a poor relationship with or absence of family can leave children vulnerable to recruitment. Yet a strong family environment can also serve as protection against NSAG association.

**FACILITATING INVOLVEMENT:** There are numerous examples where family members encouraged their children to join a NSAG or to be involved in the broader support movement.<sup>120</sup> A study in the Congo found a correlation between associated family members and child involvement in armed groups.<sup>121</sup> A few studies have concluded that familial relationships were also key to involvement with terrorist groups.<sup>122</sup> In conflict contexts, children often become associated with NSAGs incrementally by accompanying a family member who is already associated with or conducting activities on behalf of an armed group. Some psychologists argue it is not familial encouragement per se, but often children’s desire to reduce perceived conflicts with affiliated family members, that leads them to associate with armed groups.<sup>123</sup>

Families also send children to NSAGs under varying degrees of duress. The Taliban, LTTE, UNITA, Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and other armed groups use or have used quotas,<sup>124</sup> requiring a certain number of children from each family or village to join under threat of attack.<sup>125</sup> Sometimes families can pay the group instead of sending a child or pay another family to provide two children.<sup>126</sup>

**FAMILY VIOLENCE:** Poor family relationships or lack of support may also be important in understanding some child trajectories into armed groups.<sup>127</sup> As civil conflict frays relationships from the personal to the community level, violence seeps into family life, where it “becomes a microcosm of the violence permeating the wider society.”<sup>128</sup>

<sup>116</sup> See James A. Piazza, “Rooted in Poverty? Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 18 (2006).

<sup>117</sup> Roy, “Who Are the New Jihadis?”

<sup>118</sup> Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Fortieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. xi.

<sup>119</sup> Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, “Demobilization and Reintegration,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2007).

<sup>120</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>121</sup> 57 per cent of ex-CAAFAG had a brother/father who was a member of an armed group vs. 27 per cent of the control group. ILO, “Wounded Childhood,” p. 36.

<sup>122</sup> An analysis of the lives and associations of 172 “salafi jihadis” found that many joined a terrorist group or NSAG through kin as well as friends. Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Another study concluded that family relations, friends, and/or romantic partners were key to facilitating membership in the Italian Red Brigades (citing Weinberg and Eubank, 1987), Basque ETA (citing Reinares, 2001), and PIRA (citing Horgan, 2005). Arie W. Kruglanski and Shira Fishman, “Psychological Factors in Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Individual, Group, and Organizational Levels of Analysis,” *Social Issues and Policy Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2009), p. 17.

<sup>123</sup> Kruglanski and Fishman, “Psychological Factors in Terrorism and Counterterrorism,” p. 17.

<sup>124</sup> The KIA has apparently enforced a “one-recruit-per-family” quota system for more than five decades. Child Soldiers International, “A Dangerous Refuge: Ongoing Child Recruitment by the Kachin Independence Army,” 2015, pp. 21–22. Available from [www.child-soldiers.org/Shop/a-dangerous-refuge-ongoing-child-recruitment-by-the-kachin-independence-army](http://www.child-soldiers.org/Shop/a-dangerous-refuge-ongoing-child-recruitment-by-the-kachin-independence-army).

<sup>125</sup> Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>127</sup> Although he does not provide figures, Wessells has the same impression from his field research on child soldiers. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.



Domestic violence soars in conflict zones.<sup>129</sup> Across contexts, children cite domestic violence and oppressive family environments<sup>130</sup> as motivating factors for joining NSAGs. This is true for both boys and girls, but girls often have fewer options when they run away to escape domestic abuse.<sup>131</sup> Others have blamed certain family scenarios where children get less attention and resources: For example, some have argued that polygamy among the poor in northeast Nigeria is responsible in part for Boko Haram’s recruitment success, as many children there have parents who are not able to adequately supervise or support them financially.<sup>132</sup> In contrast, one study found that while childhood unhappiness (associated with parental involvement) was a strong factor in determining who joined an extremist group, the impact of one’s father having more than one wife was inconclusive.<sup>133</sup>

**SEXUAL ABUSE:** Several studies present findings to suggest sexual abuse of girls may have a significant impact on their trajectories into armed groups.<sup>134</sup> In Nepal, girls often cited abusive marriages (or an effort to avoid arranged marriages) as a reason for joining the Maoists.<sup>135</sup> Statements from female members of the LTTE suggest they were motivated to join the group because of “past sexual victimization or fear of rape ... to protect themselves or avenge their enemies,”<sup>136</sup> a motive deliberately exploited by LTTE recruiters.<sup>137</sup> Other NSAGs<sup>138</sup> have played on women’s vulnerability and the stigma of sexual assault to recruit women and girls to be suicide attackers.<sup>139</sup> In different contexts, armed groups may represent a mechanism to escape, protect against, or avenge sexual violence, or may present the only option after sexual assault.

**SEPARATION, ORPHANS, AND IDPS/REFUGEES:** Associated children self-report that lacking a strong family unit (with its concomitant economic benefits and physical protection) or being displaced (with or without their families) raises vulnerability to NSAG recruitment.<sup>140</sup> Grey literature suggests a high percentage of child soldiers were separated from their families at the time of recruitment: In Congo, 45 per cent of associated children were separated from their families at the time of their recruitment and most were in a situation of distress (e.g., in need of food).<sup>141</sup> In Sierra Leone, a third of child soldiers joined a NSAG shortly after becoming separated from their families.<sup>142</sup> One meta-study across nearly 40 conflicts found that girls often come to be associated with armed forces and armed groups by being abducted as orphans.<sup>143</sup> Abduction is a larger issue that affects many children, but there is concern that certain subsets or concentrations of children are particularly vulnerable. There

**JORDAN**

A view of the Zaatari Refugee Camp, where nearly 80,000 Syrian refugees are living.  
— March, 2017

UN Photo/Sahem Rababah



<sup>129</sup> Ibid. In addition, those exposed to civil conflict are more likely to be perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. Italo A. Gutierrez and Jose V. Gallegos, “The Effect of Civil Conflict on Domestic Violence: The Case of Peru,” Working Paper, RAND, September 2016. Available from [www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working\\_papers/WR1100/WR1168/RAND\\_WR1168.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/WR1100/WR1100WR1168/RAND_WR1168.pdf).

<sup>130</sup> For example, see Anjana Shakya, “Experiences of Children in Armed Conflict in Nepal,” *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 33, Issue 4 (2011), p. 562.

<sup>131</sup> Brett suggests that this abuse was often related to alcohol abuse or issues with stepparents. Brett, “Adolescents Volunteering for Armed Forces or Armed Groups,” p. 862.

<sup>132</sup> This observation is supported by the statements of the Emir of Kano, Muhammad Sanusi. BBC, “Why Does a Nigerian Muslim Leader Want to Restrict Polygamy?” 22 February 2017. Available from [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39038459](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39038459).

<sup>133</sup> UNDP, “Journey to Extremism in Africa,” pp. 36–37.

<sup>134</sup> The sample and methodology are problematic, but this study finds that a high incidence of girls say that domestic violence and exploitation was the sole or main reason they joined. Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, p. 89. According to UNHCR, girls “frequently” join to escape sexual violence and discrimination. “Action Sheet 5: Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups” in Global Protection Cluster Working Group (GPCWG), *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2010), p. 204. Available from [www.unhcr.org/4794b3782.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/4794b3782.pdf).

<sup>135</sup> Brandon Kohrt, “Recommendations to Promote Psychosocial Well-Being of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG) in Nepal,” Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) – Nepal, 14 May 2007, p. 15.

<sup>136</sup> Alisa Stack-O’Connor, “Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: How and Why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Employs Women,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 19, p. 55.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>138</sup> Female victims of rape in Chechnya who felt their prospects for marriage, children, and acceptance were bleak after their assault, or were threatened with blackmail about the assault, often viewed conducting a suicide attack as their only option. It should be noted that these were victims of attacks by both Russian soldiers and Chechen fighters, and in the latter case, there were examples of women who were raped only to be blackmailed into conducting attacks by the very men who attacked them. Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 62–63.

<sup>139</sup> Rape victims – often assaulted by the insurgents themselves – are particularly vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation. Mia Bloom, “Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 136, No. 1 (Winter 2007), p. 102.

<sup>140</sup> Based on interviews with 298 children (102 of whom were CAAFAG) and 211 adults (109 of whom were related to or responsible for CAAFAG) in six communities in Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Delap, “Fighting Back,” p. 13.

<sup>141</sup> ILO, “Wounded Childhood,” p. 30.

<sup>142</sup> Delap, “Fighting Back,” p. 10.

<sup>143</sup> McKay and Mazurana drew from reporting by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Refugees International, Women’s Commission, and the United Nations, among other sources. The authors examined 39 countries – spanning six continents – where girls were present in armed forces and groups in situations of armed conflict. There was no effort to weight or quantify the prevalence of the various factors influencing association. McKay and Mazurana, *Where Are the Girls?*, pp. 21–22. Another cross-country study of 59 intrastate conflicts between 1975 and 2002 found no correlation between national orphan rates and the rate of child soldiering, but given the level of analysis employed, it is impossible to establish a causal relationship between the two. Achvarina and Reich, “No Place to Hide.”



are many reports of NSAGs targeting orphanages,<sup>144</sup> schools,<sup>145</sup> and other places children congregate.<sup>146</sup> Some research suggests that unaccompanied street children can be particularly vulnerable to NSAG recruitment because they lack physical protection and their abductions are unlikely to prompt public outcry.<sup>147</sup>

Insecure IDP/refugee camps may also be breeding grounds for child recruitment and abduction by both armed groups and armed forces.<sup>148</sup> One grey literature study cited poor conditions and failure to protect civilians at the United Nations camp in Bentiu, South Sudan, as contributing to child engagement in armed forces.<sup>149</sup> Girls may be particularly vulnerable, as they often perform chores (e.g., collecting water) outside camps without accompaniment or protection in unfamiliar places.<sup>150</sup> While such findings are intuitive, there is conflicting evidence, including cases where children were safer in certain IDP camps than outside them: In Uganda, 30,000 “night commuter” children travelled long distances (sometimes from less-protected IDP camps further afield) to sleep in IDP camps to avoid abduction by the LRA, abuse, and exploitation.<sup>151</sup>

**FAMILY AS A SOURCE OF RESILIENCE:** Across disciplines, research suggests that strong family units can guard against all manner of negative outcomes (e.g., drug use, gang affiliation). In conflict zones, research indicates that parents’ capacity to cope with war stress serves as a “protective shield” for their children.<sup>152</sup> Protection may extend beyond psychosocial well-being to physical protection: In Syria, for example, there are cases where family members prevented their children’s association or pulled children out of NSAGs.<sup>153</sup> In Sierra Leone, one grey literature study found that parents who warned, hid, and occupied their children, or negotiated their release, were key in preventing or ending their children’s recruitment by NSAGs.<sup>154</sup> There were also indications that a breakdown of the family unit was a catalyst for recruitment.<sup>155</sup>

It would be highly improbable that a child could stand up to her/his community and resist the pressure to align or join the anointed armed group.

## COMMUNITIES

Like families, communities have significant influence over child trajectories into and out of armed groups. For instance, in Sudan, community groups that protected and sometimes raided cattle in peacetime served as precursors to involvement with NSAGs and incubators for self-defence groups once conflict broke out.<sup>156</sup> In numerous contexts, children become aligned with a NSAG not out of any decision of their own, but because their community leaders align themselves with a party to the conflict. NSAG leaders play on community fears and paint participation as “a moral duty to one’s community,” leading those who try to opt out to be labelled as traitors.<sup>157</sup> This is particularly true for self-defence groups, which typically operate as an extension of the community. In Sierra Leone, many youth joined the Kamajors – defence units based on existing hunter guilds – either out of a sense of duty or on orders of their village chief.<sup>158</sup> In all of these cases, it would be highly improbable that a child could stand up to her/his community and resist the pressure to align or join the anointed NSAG.

<sup>144</sup> The potential for press ganging of orphans was particularly acute in countries with large numbers of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS. For example, at the end of 2001, Mozambique had 420,000 children and Uganda had 880,000 children between birth and 14 years of age who were thought to be orphaned due to AIDS. Citing UNICEF data, McKay and Mazurana, *Where Are the Girls?*, p. 83.

<sup>145</sup> For examples from Nigeria, see BBC, “Nigeria Chibok Abductions: What We Know,” 8 May 2017. Available from [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32299943](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32299943).

<sup>146</sup> This practice is not confined to NSAGs. In Sudan, for example, the Government had a history of rounding up “street children” – many of whom were actually living with their families but were just in the wrong place at the wrong time – and placing them in work camps, from which the army forcibly recruited. Human Rights Watch, “Children in South Sudan: Street Children and Child Soldiers,” September 1995. Available from [www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Sudan.htm](http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Sudan.htm).

<sup>147</sup> Singer, *Children at War*, p. 59.

<sup>148</sup> Sarah Kenyon Lischer, “War, Displacement, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” in Gates and Reich, eds., *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, p. 145.

<sup>149</sup> Based on 2014–2015 interviews with Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk children (mostly 15 to 17 years old, with some as young as 13) from Unity, Jonglei, and Upper Nile. Skye Wheeler, “‘We Can Die Too’: Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in South Sudan,” Human Rights Watch, 14 December 2015, p. 20. Available from [www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/14/we-can-die-too/recruitment-and-use-child-soldiers-south-sudan](http://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/14/we-can-die-too/recruitment-and-use-child-soldiers-south-sudan).

<sup>150</sup> “Action Sheet 5,” in GPCWG, *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, p. 204.

<sup>151</sup> Amnesty International, “Uganda: Child ‘Night Commuters’,” 26 March 2011. Available from [www.amnestyusa.org/reports/uganda-child-night-commuters](http://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/uganda-child-night-commuters).

<sup>152</sup> Salman Elbedour, Rogert Ten Bensel, and David T. Bastien, “Ecological Integrated Model of Children of War: Individual and Social Psychology,” *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. 17, No. 6 (1993), p. 810.

<sup>153</sup> Based on a sample of 311 young Syrians, their families, and community members in Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey. Meg Aubrey, Rosie Aubrey, Frances Brodrick, and Caroline Brooks, “Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and Resilience to Recruitment by Violent Extremist Groups in Syria,” Research Summary, International Alert, 2016, p. 13. Available from [www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Syria\\_YouthRecruitmentExtremistGroups\\_EN\\_2016.pdf](http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Syria_YouthRecruitmentExtremistGroups_EN_2016.pdf).

<sup>154</sup> Delap, “Fighting Back,” p. 10.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Wheeler, “‘We Can Die Too,’” p. 21.

<sup>157</sup> ILO, “Wounded Childhood,” p. 25.

<sup>158</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), p. 79.

## PEER NETWORKS

Peers can be at least as influential as family and community members in a child's NSAG recruitment. Peers serve as role models and signal social norms, thus exerting a powerful influence on behaviour.<sup>159</sup> In studies of formerly associated children and youth in Nigeria,<sup>160</sup> Jordan,<sup>161</sup> and Somalia,<sup>162</sup> peers influenced association with armed groups, including over family opposition. This trend appears stable inside conflict zones and outside of them. An estimated three-quarters of the Europeans who have left to fight in Syria in recent years joined NSAGs through peers.<sup>163</sup> Recognizing that even after they'd joined an armed group, recruits stayed in touch with their networks, recruiters in Syria started targeting charismatic and well-connected people whom they thought would encourage their friends back home to join them.<sup>164</sup>

Psychology research suggests peer networks also exert unique influence on adolescent decision-making. Peers prime adolescents to seek immediately available rewards,<sup>165</sup> leading to risk-taking behaviour. While adolescents are often smart, logical, and just as capable as adults in many ways, they have more trouble inhibiting impulsive responses, particularly in the presence of peers.<sup>166</sup> The impulsivity, risk-seeking behaviour,<sup>167</sup> drive for autonomy, and tendency to buck authority<sup>168</sup> common in adolescence and amplified by peer networks may influence NSAG association. Indeed, armed groups try to capitalize on these impulses: IS, for example, has tried to exploit domestic discord and encourage teenagers to rebel against their parents by joining the group.<sup>169</sup> Just as peer networks facilitate entry, they also have the potential to facilitate and support children leaving armed groups, or dissuade them from joining in the first place.<sup>170</sup>

## VIRTUAL NETWORKS

Of late, a great deal of attention has focused on the role of virtual networks in the online recruitment of children and youth by armed groups. It is unclear if online networks can act as a substitute for personal connections or whether online engagement only works when it is bolstered by human interaction, particularly when it comes to encouraging and facilitating association in armed conflict.<sup>171</sup> There are few studies that compare the quality of online and in-person relationships.<sup>172</sup> The potential influence of the Internet – web magazines, chat rooms, online video games, social media platforms, etc. – on recruitment appears to vary drastically across conflicts. In places where children and youth are unlikely to have regular online access, it obviously plays far less of a role. Children and youth from the West who have travelled to Syria and Iraq to live under or fight for IS are often portrayed as having been drawn in through online engagement. Media stories often suggest that adolescents who are lonely, friendless, and unhappy with their lives are particularly vulnerable to the sophisticated online grooming techniques honed by IS and other armed groups.<sup>173</sup> Most of the analyses of online recruitment, however, examine it in a silo, failing to place such NSAG recruitment efforts into the context of armed group strategic communications.

Examining the wider array of communications from armed groups provides a fuller picture not just of why particular young people may be vulnerable to online entreaties, but also why armed groups may be attractive to a broader audience. Islamic State provides a good case study, as the group's brand identity is viewed by its opponents as one of uncompromising brutality and terror, while many supporters view the group as representing "strength,

<sup>159</sup> Laurence Steinberg and Kathryn C. Monahan, "Age Differences in Resistance to Peer Influence", *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (2007).

<sup>160</sup> Of a sample of 24 children formerly associated with both Boko Haram and CJTF: NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences", p. 11.

<sup>161</sup> A study of 23 Jordanians who left to fight in Syria concludes that familial, peer, and community networks determine who goes to fight and which groups they join. Mercy Corps, "From Jordan to Jihad".

<sup>162</sup> A study of almost 100 former members of Al-Shabaab found that 64 per cent joined with friends, over family opposition. Note: It is unclear if the responses of the seven interviewed off the record were included in this calculation. Botha and Abdile, "Radicalisation and Al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia", p. 9.

<sup>163</sup> Scott Atran, "The Role of Youth in Countering Violent Extremism and Promoting Peace", Address to the UN Security Council, 23 April 2015. Also see Sageman's study of 172 mujahedin, in which he identifies social bonds (friendship, kinship, and discipleship) as being key to understanding who joined Salafi terrorist groups. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*.

<sup>164</sup> Mercy Corps, "From Jordan to Jihad".

<sup>165</sup> Dustin Albert, Jason Chein, and Laurence Steinberg, "The Teenage Brain: Peer Influences on Adolescent Decision Making", *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2013).

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Betty Jo Casey and Kristina Caudle, "The Teenage Brain: Self Control", *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2013).

<sup>168</sup> Christopher J. Bryan, David S. Yeager, Cintia P. Hinojosa, Aimee Chabot, Holly Bergen, Mari Kawamura, and Fred Steubing, "Harnessing Adolescent Values to Motivate Healthier Eating", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States (PNAS)*, Vol. 113, No. 39 (2016).

<sup>169</sup> Mara Revkin, presentation to the "Applying a Brand Marketing Lens for Analysing Non-State Armed Groups that Employ Extreme Violence" workshop, 16 January 2017, New York, NY.

<sup>170</sup> Delap, "Fighting Back", p. 15.

<sup>171</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 116.

<sup>172</sup> Gustavo Mesch, "A Study of Adolescents' Online and Offline Social Relationships", Research Report No. 8, Oxford Internet Institute, November 2005. Available from [www.oii.ox.ac.uk/archive/downloads/publications/RR8.pdf](http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/archive/downloads/publications/RR8.pdf).

<sup>173</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS and the Lonely Young American", *New York Times*, 27 June 2015. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html).

solidarity, ... and a utopian paradise of an autonomous Sunni Muslim state with global jurisdiction.<sup>174</sup> The messages of strength, meaning, and acceptance may be widely appealing to adolescents who are looking for purpose in their lives and meaningful group identities.<sup>175</sup> In addition, the way IS markets its brand is designed to be particularly attractive to young people. Rather than top-down, “marketing to” techniques, IS has adopted a decentralized, “marketing with” approach that allows for officially approved messages, narratives, and memes to be adapted and personalized by a viral chain of supporters<sup>176</sup> that has verged on fandom.<sup>177</sup> This approach is particularly attractive to young people; digital natives, conversant with multimedia technology from an early age,<sup>178</sup> avoid traditional advertising,<sup>179</sup> preferring to use peer-to-peer communication – particularly via social media – as a “collective filter” to determine which products to consume.<sup>180</sup>

As increasing numbers of young people live part of their lives online, more research is needed to better understand if and how their virtual lives and relationships motivate decision-making, including around joining armed groups. More needs to be understood about how online engagement can contribute not only to armed group recruitment, but also to the group processes that generate cohesion, establish group identity, and socialize and mobilize members to violence.<sup>181</sup> Recent research from other street gang contexts examined how social media is used by youth as a forum to claim affiliations and foster collective identities.<sup>182</sup> Predictive models of how gang-affiliated youth communicate and conflicts escalate online are being examined for potential application to armed conflict contexts.<sup>183</sup>

### c. INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CHILD TRAJECTORIES INTO NSAGS

The preceding sections help to establish the context in which individual-level factors that influence child association with armed groups can be situated. The following section reviews the research on how and why individual children come to be associated with NSAGs, occasionally drawing from research on adult samples and political violence more broadly. There is still a lot to learn about the hierarchy of the individual factors that influence a child’s association with armed groups. Questions remain about if and how factors accumulate or interact, amplifying the effects of others or creating unique pressures and tipping points. In the section that follows, in the rare instances where there appears to be some hierarchy to the individual factors, that is noted.

#### SURVIVAL

In war zones, children – like adults – frequently become associated with an armed group because doing so appears to be the best way to survive. Oftentimes, a NSAG represents the only opportunity for physical security and basic needs provision. For example, a 2014–2015 study in South Sudan noted that the reason children cited most often for joining an armed group or armed force was improving their chances of surviving the war.<sup>184</sup> In addition, in cases where everyone is assumed to be affiliated with one faction or another, there is no benefit to maintaining neutrality, and indeed the potential drawbacks to doing so are significant. In Aleppo, Syrian Government forces reportedly assumed that all adolescent boys were associated with the anti-Syrian forces, and treated them as such if captured. The drive for survival is likely an extremely strong motivator, but alone it does not appear to be necessary and sufficient to explain child association with armed groups; many children in similar circumstances chose other paths (e.g., migration).

<sup>174</sup> Amanda E. Rogers, “Viewing Non-State Armed Groups through a Brand Marketing Lens: A Case Study of Islamic State,” State of Research Brief, United Nations University, 2017, p. 3. Available from [http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6292/unu\\_briefs\\_Branding\\_WEB.pdf](http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6292/unu_briefs_Branding_WEB.pdf).

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>176</sup> Gina S. Ligon, Mackenzie Harms, John Crowe, Leif Lundmark, and Pete Simi, “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Branding, Leadership Culture and Lethal Attraction,” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2014, p. 25. Available from [www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_ISIL%20Branding%20Leadership%20Culture%20and%20Lethal%20Attraction\\_Ligon\\_Nov2014.pdf](http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_ISIL%20Branding%20Leadership%20Culture%20and%20Lethal%20Attraction_Ligon_Nov2014.pdf).

<sup>177</sup> Brigitte L. Nacos, “Young Western Women, Fandom, and ISIS,” *E-International Relations*, 5 May 2015. Available from [www.e-ir.info/2015/05/05/young-western-women-fandom-and-isis](http://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/05/young-western-women-fandom-and-isis).

<sup>178</sup> It is worth noting that the generational gap between youths’ and their elders’ rates of media/technological familiarity does not differ substantially between the West and the Arab world. Juan Cole, “Arab Millennials Will Be Back,” *Nation*, 30 June 2014. Available from [www.thenation.com/article/arab-millennials-will-be-back](http://www.thenation.com/article/arab-millennials-will-be-back). William O’Connor, “What Do Arab Millennials Want?” *Daily Beast*, 1 July 2014. Available from [www.thedailybeast.com/what-do-arab-millennials-want](http://www.thedailybeast.com/what-do-arab-millennials-want). T. J. Raphael, “Millennials Are on the Rise in the Middle East – and Bring Their Own Agenda,” *PRJ*, 2 July 2014.

<sup>179</sup> Millennial distrust of traditional advertisements demonstrates a dislike for “the pushy, disingenuous nature of commercials and [they] will do anything within their power to skip, fast forward, and even block any content that even hints at advertising,” Lauren Friedman, “Millennials and the Digital Experience: Getting Your Digital Act Together,” *Forbes.com*, 8 February 2017. Available from [www.forbes.com/sites/laurenfriedman/2017/02/08/millennials-and-the-digital-experience-getting-your-digital-act-together/#77851d5a730d](http://www.forbes.com/sites/laurenfriedman/2017/02/08/millennials-and-the-digital-experience-getting-your-digital-act-together/#77851d5a730d).

<sup>180</sup> Daniel Newman, “Research Shows Millennials Don’t Respond to Ads,” *Forbes.com*, 28 April 2015. Available from [www.forbes.com/sites/danielnewman/2015/04/28/research-shows-millennials-dont-respond-to-ads/#56c54f615dcb](http://www.forbes.com/sites/danielnewman/2015/04/28/research-shows-millennials-dont-respond-to-ads/#56c54f615dcb).

<sup>181</sup> Scott Decker and Janet Lauritsen, “Leaving the Gang,” in Ronald Huff, ed., *Gangs in America* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002).

<sup>182</sup> Desmond Patton, Robert Eschmann, and Dirk Butler, “Internet Banging: New Trends in Social Media, Gang Violence, Masculinity and Hip-Hop,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (2013).

<sup>183</sup> “How Can Recent Research on Crime and Gang Prevention and Desistance Inform Understanding of Child Trajectories Into and Out of Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in Extreme Violence?” State of Research Workshop, New York, NY, 9 December 2016.

<sup>184</sup> Wheeler, “We Can Die Too,” p. 20.

POVERTY

Poverty is closely related to survival.<sup>185</sup> While poverty can be viewed as a structural factor contextualizing child recruitment, this section addresses poverty at the individual level. An abundance of anecdotal accounts,<sup>186</sup> bolstered by two robust studies on adults, suggests poverty contributes to NSAG association. One small-sample, cross-context study<sup>187</sup> concluded that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to NSAG financial offers because of “their low economic status ... [and] the fact that most of them come from families that are already poor or have been impoverished because of war.”<sup>188</sup> In conflict theatres, joining NSAGs may be one of only a few options for young people to generate income<sup>189</sup> or cover their basic needs.<sup>190</sup> In Nigeria, one study found that the most common self-reported reason for joining Boko Haram was poverty, often exacerbated by lack of employment or education, or complicated by an inability to repay a loan from the group.<sup>191</sup> Robust studies on adult ex-combatants in Sierra Leone<sup>192</sup> and Liberia<sup>193</sup> found that poverty was one of the determinants of participation and that combatants are often motivated by money. Poverty and the basic needs it exacerbates likely affect children as much as, if not more than, adults,<sup>194</sup> suggesting the findings from adult studies would apply to children.

In cases where everyone is assumed to be affiliated with one faction or another, there is no benefit to maintaining neutrality.

Proximity to conflict may interplay with economic conditions: One study in Syria, where unemployment is as high as 90 per cent in some areas, found that economic incentives, particularly NSAG salaries, resources, and regularity of payment, were central to many children’s decisions to engage with armed groups, while at most ideology played “a secondary role in driving recruitment.”<sup>195</sup> This was very different from the dynamic in neighbouring Jordan, where individual poverty did not appear to drive youth participation in Syrian NSAGs, which actually cost volunteers a lot of money (e.g., travel and payments to smugglers).<sup>196</sup> As this example highlights, financial need is not a necessary condition for NSAG involvement, but for many children – especially those most directly impacted by conflict – it does appear to be part of their trajectory into a NSAG.

There is also anecdotal evidence that families that have means are better able to protect their children from armed groups either by providing for basic needs and thus removing a key NSAG enticement and/or by paying penalties when NSAGs demand support.

Some research has cast the draw of financial incentives in terms of greed or opportunism,<sup>197</sup> including for children.<sup>198</sup> Interestingly, however, lab studies on children (largely carried out in the West) have found that they are more influenced by non-pecuniary benefits than adults.<sup>199</sup> Even when children report having been attracted by NSAG salaries, they often do not receive promised benefits,<sup>200</sup> and yet many remain within their group. Focusing solely

<sup>185</sup> There are issues with focusing on objective measures of poverty as a driver of political violence. Rather, an opportunity-cost approach may be more useful. For people living in poverty, it is not necessarily about the value of the material incentives a NSAG offers, but the low opportunity costs for joining. Collier and Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War.” Similarly, incentives must be viewed in the context of living standards. Barbara Walter, “Does Conflict Beget Conflict? Explaining Recurring Civil War,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2004).

<sup>186</sup> For example, see ILO, “Wounded Childhood”; Twum-Danso, “Africa’s Young Child Soldiers”; p. 27; and Guy Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohn, *Child Soldiers: The Role of Children in Armed Conflict* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 33.

<sup>187</sup> For this research, 53 ex-CAAFAG boys and girls from Afghanistan (refugees in Iran), Colombia, the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and the UK were interviewed. Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, p. 2.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

<sup>189</sup> Kai Chen, *Comparative Study of Child Soldiering on Myanmar-China Border: Evolutions, Challenges and Countermeasures*, Springer Briefs in Criminology (Singapore: Springer, 2014), p. 65.

<sup>190</sup> ILO, “Wounded Childhood”; p. 30.

<sup>191</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences”; pp. 9, 12.

<sup>192</sup> Humphreys and Weinstein, “Demobilization and Reintegration?”

<sup>193</sup> A randomized control trial during the 2011 Ivorian electoral crises found when there are future economic incentives locally, there is little interest in pursuing mercenary opportunities outside the village. Blattman and Annan, “Can Employment Reduce Lawlessness and Rebellion?”

<sup>194</sup> There are questions about whether poverty is felt evenly across families. Brett and Specht’s study raises the possibility that birth order may have an impact, as eldest children may experience more social pressure to provide. Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, p. 93.

<sup>195</sup> Aubrey et al., “Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight”; p. 8.

<sup>196</sup> The authors conclude there is little evidence that children or their families were compensated by NSAGs in Syria. Mercy Corps, “From Jordan to Jihad.”

<sup>197</sup> Collier and Hoeffler test a “greed” theory against a “grievance” theory and find that at the structural level civil wars appear largely caused by opportunistic factors. Their “greed” theory views rebellion as an industry that profits from looting and the potential to profit from looted resources. Collier and Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War.” At the individual level, a survey in Liberia found that adult mercenary recruitment for the 2011 Ivorian conflict was opportunistic, and concluded that Liberian men would consider joining a conflict on either side if offered at least \$1,000. Christopher Blattman and Jeannie Annan, “Can Employment Reduce Lawlessness and Rebellion? A Field Experiment with High-Risk Men in a Fragile State,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol 100, No. 1 (2016).

<sup>198</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, pp. 66–67; ILO, “Wounded Childhood”; p. 47.

<sup>199</sup> Andvig and Gates, “Recruiting Children for Armed Conflict.”

<sup>200</sup> In DRC and Burundi, 85 per cent and 94 per cent of children associated with armed groups, respectively, never saw payment. ILO, “Wounded Childhood”; p. 47.

on financial incentives is too narrow a conceptualization of opportunism (e.g., settling unrelated scores).<sup>201</sup> While greed and opportunism suggest dark, selfish desires, in conflict zones opportunism may be more innocuous. With no other options, children may see joining a NSAG as their only opportunity to meet basic needs, defend their communities, or gain access to education or skills.

## MENTAL ILLNESS

Most of the research on individual psychological factors and political violence focuses on adults joining terrorist groups. It is reasonable to assume that many of the identified psychological factors – or lack thereof – will be broadly similar for children in armed group contexts,<sup>202</sup> although certain traits or issues may be especially pronounced or salient at earlier stages of development. Common wisdom has long held that terrorists are mentally ill (e.g., psychotic disorder) and do not understand right from wrong, or sociopathic (e.g., personality disorders) and understand the difference, but engage in antisocial behaviour anyway.<sup>203</sup> There is no evidence that terrorists exhibit higher rates of mental illness or personality disorders.<sup>204</sup> Ultimately, the “systematic quest for a terrorist psychopathology[, traits,<sup>205</sup> or for a unique terrorist personality profile has yielded disappointing results,”<sup>206</sup> leading many researchers to conclude that ultimately “personality traits are useless as predictors for understanding why people become terrorists”<sup>207</sup> and likely members of other NSAGs.<sup>208</sup> This is not to say that personality traits are irrelevant for NSAG association,<sup>209</sup> but any influence they have would be part of some larger constellation of individual, group, and organizational processes or factors.<sup>210</sup>

## TRAUMA

Much of the research on the relationship between trauma and child soldiering focuses on the traumatic impact of involvement with an armed group,<sup>211</sup> rather than trauma as a predictor of involvement. Some research suggests that trauma, particularly in conflict zones, could be related to child association with NSAGs. A recent study in Kenya found that losing a relative or a job may influence support for violence to achieve religio-political objectives.<sup>212</sup> Other research in Chechnya and Palestine drew similar conclusions, but questions remain about the validity of these findings.<sup>213</sup> The precise causal relationship between trauma and armed group association remains unclear: Some researchers have suggested that trauma leads to a desire for revenge,<sup>214</sup> while others suggest it heightens the need for significance.<sup>215</sup> As mentioned earlier in the chapter, it is not just trauma but repeated and prolonged exposure to multiple stressors that can accumulate, putting children at risk for adverse outcomes, including, potentially, NSAG association.

<sup>201</sup> At the individual level, there is some evidence that individuals and groups take advantage of civil conflict to settle private conflicts. Stathis N. Kalyvas, “The Ontology of ‘Political Violence’: Action and Identity in Civil Wars,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2003).

<sup>202</sup> Terrorist groups are a subset of NSAGs; given the potential direction of bias, it can be assumed that mental illness plays little role in explaining trajectories into other types of NSAGs.

<sup>203</sup> Jeff Victoroff, “The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2005), p. 12.

<sup>204</sup> Most of the studies are retrospective or psychiatric examinations. Research on left-wing German terrorists, the Algerian Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN), the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), Hizbullah, and “global Salafi mujahedin” does not find significant rates of either clinical mental disorders or sociopathy. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–14. This does not hold true, however, for individuals who commit acts of political violence outside the structure of a group (often called lone wolves), for whom there is some evidence of higher rates of mental illness. Hamm and Spaaij found that of 98 lone wolves in the United States, approximately 40 per cent displayed signs of mental illness. Mark Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism: A New History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). Gruenewald et al. found that 40 per cent of right-wing lone wolves charged with ideologically motivated homicides had a reported history of mental illness, compared to only 8 per cent of right-wing extremists who killed as part of groups. Jeff Gruenewald, Steven Chermak, and Joshua D. Freilich, “Distinguishing ‘Loner’ Attacks from Other Domestic Extremist Violence: A Comparison of Far-Right Homicide Incident and Offender Characteristics,” *Criminology and Public Policy*, Vol. 12, Issue 1 (2013), p. 77.

<sup>205</sup> For example, aggression or excitability. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, p. 45.

<sup>206</sup> Kruglanski and Fishman, “Psychological Factors in Terrorism and Counterterrorism,” p. 7.

<sup>207</sup> John Horgan, “The Search for a Terrorist Personality,” in Andrew Silke, ed., *Terrorists, Victims, and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and Its Consequences* (West Sussex: Wiley, 2003), p. 114.

<sup>208</sup> One study concluded that “frustration and resentment against society seems to be the only ‘psychological’ trait that is regularly shared” by radicals. Olivier Roy, “What Is the Driving Force Behind Jihadist Terrorism? A Scientific Perspective on the Causes/Circumstances of Joining the Scene,” BKA Autumn Conference, Mainz, Germany, 18–19 November 2015.

<sup>209</sup> Kruglanski and Fishman, “Psychological Factors in Terrorism and Counterterrorism,” p. 8.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>211</sup> For example, see Theresa S. Betancourt, Ivelina Borisova, Timothy P. Williams, Sarah E. Meyers-Onki, Julia E. Rubin-Smith, Jeannie Annan, and Brandon A. Kohrt, “Research Review: Psychosocial Adjustment and Mental Health in Former Child Soldiers – A Systematic Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Future Research,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (January 2013).

<sup>212</sup> The small subsamples prevented the findings from reaching statistical significance, but the coefficients suggested a large impact. Anselm F. Rink and Kunaal Sharma, “The Determinants of Religious Radicalization: Evidence from Kenya,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, December 2016.

<sup>213</sup> Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, “Talking to Terrorists,” *Journal of Psychohistory*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Fall 2005), p. 129.

<sup>214</sup> For example, Speckhard and Akhmedova cite interviews with 18-year-old Mustafa, who described his willingness to carry out suicide attacks on Israeli targets to avenge the treatment he and others received in an Israeli jail. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>215</sup> Personal loss can diminish one’s sense of significance, which is likely to motivate significance restoration. Arie W. Kruglanski, Xiaoyan Chen, Mark Dechesne, Shira Fishman, and Edward Orehek, “Fully Committed: Suicide Bombers’ Motivation and the Quest for Personal Significance,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2009), pp. 348–349.



## REVENGE

It is often assumed that negative emotions such as anger or hatred for another group are central to involvement with armed groups. Revenge is often cited in the grey literature as a motivation in joining a NSAG (e.g., for the death of a loved one).<sup>216</sup> In one study, almost all of the South Sudanese boys interviewed cited revenge as a key motivation for fighting.<sup>217</sup> Other studies cite revenge as a key motivator, but do not differentiate between whether subjects were motivated to join armed groups or armed forces.<sup>218</sup> In contrast to these findings, social science research suggests that children primarily have positive and prosocial motivations for joining armed groups, including a need to belong, protect their in-group, or gain a sense of significance in their lives.

## QUEST FOR PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE

The quest for significance – self-actualization attained by serving a cause higher than the self – is a pervasive motivational force in human behaviour.<sup>219</sup> Armed groups provide potential recruits with opportunities to generate public goods (e.g., equal political rights), thus creating individual psychological gains, such as contributing to a greater good,<sup>220</sup> solidarity,<sup>221</sup> and status. Fighting in a conflict – including, counterintuitively, conducting suicide attacks – can be seen as providing “a path to legitimacy and, for some, social rehabilitation.”<sup>222</sup> Numerous NSAGs have exploited feelings of humiliation and frustration – and promoted their roles in creating significance – to recruit young people. For example, Hizbullah and Hamas promote martyrdom as a way of gaining significance to their Imam al Mahdi Scouts (ages 8 to 16) and kindergarteners, respectively.<sup>223</sup> Some research suggests the need for personal significance is heightened by trauma, which magnifies the urge to embrace one’s culture and ideology, and enhances willingness to defend them through violence.<sup>224</sup> While few rigorous studies focus specifically on the relationship between trauma and political violence, extensive research connects childhood trauma with an array of adverse adult outcomes (e.g., mental health issues, substance abuse).<sup>225</sup>

People are primarily driven by their love for their own group, rather than hatred for another group.

## PROSOCIALITY

While children and adults may view joining a NSAG as offering personal benefits (e.g., providing significance) it would be wrong to blanketly characterize these motivations as selfish. Social science research suggests the people who join armed groups are prosocial; that is, they engage in behaviour intended to benefit other people or society as a whole. Contrary to public discourse on the subject, which assumes a total disregard for the well-being of others, in intergroup conflict contexts, people are primarily driven by their love for their own group, rather than hatred for another group.<sup>226</sup> This “in-group love” is closely related to prosociality, and it drives behaviour that will help the in-group survive and thrive. Once there is an “us vs. them” dynamic, however, people behave in ways to help “us,” which often ends up hurting “them.”<sup>227</sup>

<sup>216</sup> There is some academic work that touches on revenge as a motivation for terrorism. For example, see Assaf Moghadam, “Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2003).

<sup>217</sup> Wheeler, “We Can Die Too”.

<sup>218</sup> Delap, “Fighting Back”, p. 12.

<sup>219</sup> The quest for significance encompasses several potentially important influences: collective identity, trauma, fear of mortality, and social pressures. See Arie Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi, and Rohan Gunaratna, “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism”, *Advances in Political Psychology*, Vol. 35, Suppl. 1 (2014), and Arie W. Kruglanski and Edward Orehek, “The Role of the Quest for Personal Significance in Motivating Terrorism”, chapter in J. Forgas, A. Kruglanski, and K. Williams, eds., *The Psychology of Social Conflict and Aggression* (New York: Psychology Press, 2011), p. 154.

<sup>220</sup> Eli Berman, David D. Laitin, “Religion, Terrorism and Public Goods: Testing the Club Model”, NBER Working Paper No. 13725, January 2008.

<sup>221</sup> Scott Gates and Ragnhild Nordas, “Recruitment, Retention, and Religion in Rebel Groups”, prepared for the Peace, Conflict, and Development Workshop, Oslo, Norway, 2015.

<sup>222</sup> Mercy Corps, “From Jordan to Jihad”, p. 6.

<sup>223</sup> Kruglanski and Fishman, “Psychological Factors in Terrorism and Counterterrorism”, p. 14.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11; and Kruglanski et al., “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization”, pp. 78–79.

<sup>225</sup> For example, see Kristen W. Springer, Jennifer Sheridan, Daphne Kuo, and Molly Carnes, “The Long-Term Health Outcomes of Childhood Abuse: An Overview and a Call to Action”, *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, Vol. 18, No. 10 (2003).

<sup>226</sup> Marilyn B. Brewer, “The Psychology of Prejudice: In-group Love or Outgroup Hate?” *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 55, Issue 3 (1999).

<sup>227</sup> Naomi Ellemers, “The Group Self”, *Science*, Vol. 336, Issue 6083 (2012).

There is evidence that armed groups use social appeals to tap into prosocial sentiments and an individual's need for significance to recruit and motivate members to engage in violence.<sup>228</sup> Such appeals are likely to find receptive audiences in war-torn populations, as the need for prosocial bonds may be heightened after war has broken down society's social structures.<sup>229</sup> With their greater tendency towards altruism and group bonding,<sup>230</sup> children are attractive recruits for NSAGs. Recent empirical work suggests children often value the prosocial benefits of NSAG involvement so much that they counteract the challenges of living in an armed group. Despite poor living conditions, threats to their lives, and the horrors of conflict, a majority of associated children in Nepal and Cote d'Ivoire described the atmosphere in their armed groups as "good or even very good."<sup>231</sup> Even when a child does not join a NSAG voluntarily, the group processes once he or she is inside could lead to dynamics that the child views as positive.

### COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Human beings are social creatures who seek out opportunities to connect with others and need to belong to meaningful groups.<sup>232</sup> This is particularly the case when people feel bad or uncertain about who they are and where they fit in the world or are faced with their own mortality.<sup>233</sup> Children, particularly adolescents, struggle to figure out who they are, what they want out of life, and where they belong. NSAGs provide a ready-made community, identity, and significance that is particularly attractive to youth. This may be especially true in conflict contexts, where armed groups provide human connection when other social bonds have frayed and allow some semblance of control over one's life in a context where almost everything is out of control.<sup>234</sup>

Similar to adults, children have existing identities when they join a NSAG, but those identities are not as entrenched, making it easier to impose a new identity on a child. For example, when children are given a novel, arbitrary identity in a laboratory setting (e.g., the "blue group"), they immediately adopt and enforce group norms, breathing life into the group's narrative.<sup>235</sup> Once a child joins an armed group, he or she may easily take on the group's identity. A study of child soldiers in Uganda found that even when children were abducted into the LRA, they eventually felt an allegiance to the group and its leader, a devotion that grew dramatically with time.<sup>236</sup>

### STATUS, MARRIAGE, ROMANCE, SEX

Armed groups can provide young people with a way to transcend the structures and restrictions of their society to gain status or achieve milestones or transcend the limitations of the social status of their ethnic group. To the first point, in some contexts, boys and young men are enticed to join NSAGs because of the promise of wives. In places where the cultural requirements for marriage are prohibitive for some young men and boys (e.g., bride price), the prospect of a wife can be attractive.<sup>237</sup> There are also cases of girls and women who are enticed to join NSAGs with promises of romance, matches with virtuous husbands, and the ability to occupy a key role in society as a mother to the next generation of fighters.<sup>238</sup> While NSAGs differ in the degree to which they represent or deviate from accepted sexual and relationship mores, those that make "romantic" appeals to adolescents, who are grappling with changing hormones and are curious about sexual relationships, may find a receptive audience. To the second point, groups like Al-Shabaab that claim to transcend clan hierarchy,<sup>239</sup> which dictates one's status in society, may prove attractive because they allow individuals to bypass externally imposed limits on their aspirations and achieve a higher status.<sup>240</sup>

<sup>228</sup> Gilligan et al. tested their "prosocial hypothesis" with Maoist rebels in Nepal and Ivorian rebels using behavioural games. They found that NSAGs use prosocial motivations to attract recruits. The study found that the longer someone is part of a NSAG, the more prosocial traits (e.g., willingness to sacrifice for their peers) a member demonstrates. Michael J. Gilligan, Prabin B. Khadka, and Cyrus Samii, "Social Incentives in State and Non-State Armed Groups", working paper, 16 June 2017.

<sup>229</sup> Aubrey et al., "Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight," pp. 10–11.

<sup>230</sup> Lab studies have shown children are more influenced by non-pecuniary benefits than adults. Jens Christopher Andvig and Scott Gates, "Recruiting Children for Armed Conflict", address, The Hague, Netherlands, 22 June 2006.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p. 47. Studies have examined this paradox specifically in relation to girls and concluded that it can be explained by the enhanced respect girls experience while in the group. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, p. 98.

<sup>232</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 117, No. 3 (1995).

<sup>233</sup> M. A. Hogg, Z. P. Hohman, and J. E. Rivera, "Why Do People Join Groups? Three Motivational Accounts from Social Psychology," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, Vol. 2 (2008).

<sup>234</sup> Aubrey et al., "Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight," p. 13.

<sup>235</sup> Andrew Scott Baron and Yarrow Dunham, "Representing 'Us' and 'Them': Building Blocks of Intergroup Cognition," *Journal of Cognition and Development*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (2015).

<sup>236</sup> Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion," pp. 87–88.

<sup>237</sup> Delap, "Fighting Back," p. 14.

<sup>238</sup> Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, "'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part': Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon", Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015. Available from [www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Till\\_Martyrdom\\_Do\\_Us\\_Part\\_Gender\\_and\\_the\\_ISIS\\_Phenomenon.pdf](http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf).

<sup>239</sup> Stig Jarle Hansen, "An In-Depth Look at Al-Shabab's Internal Divisions," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (24 February 2014), p. 10.

<sup>240</sup> In Somalia, interviews with former Al-Shabaab fighters found that the overwhelming majority were attracted to the group because it was feared and respected – a version of status – and not due to its ideology or interests. Once armed by the group, the former fighters reported having felt respected. Botha and Abdile, "Radicalisation and Al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia", p. 11.



**KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA,  
PAKISTAN**

Female students at their school in Nowshera, which was attacked in December 2012.  
— March 2017

Diego Ibarra Sánchez

## EDUCATION

The relationship between education and NSAG association is complex. In some cases, education may act as a bulwark against child recruitment and use by NSAGs; in others, the education system actually facilitates child association. The various relationships between the two require further unpacking.

One long-held assumption is that a lack of access to education can influence a child's trajectory into a NSAG and/or support for violence. There are several intuitive arguments for how education reduces support for violence: First and foremost, education occupies children's time,<sup>241</sup> thus reducing their potential interactions with NSAGs.<sup>242</sup> Second, education broadens children's worldviews and encourages them to consider different opinions and to coexist with those with whom they disagree.<sup>243</sup> Third, education promotes critical thinking and civic engagement.<sup>244</sup> Thus, some scholars have argued that the higher the educational attainment, the less likely a child is to become involved with a NSAG or promote political violence.<sup>245</sup> The evidence in this regard is mixed: One study of CAAFAG in Colombia found that 84 per cent never finished their primary studies, and 8 per cent had no formal schooling at all.<sup>246</sup> Research in Africa suggests that those who joined extremist groups had on average less secular and religious education than their peers.<sup>247</sup> Counterintuitively, several studies on largely adult samples of terrorist groups in Palestine<sup>248</sup> and Lebanon<sup>249</sup> suggest that, on average, members of terrorist groups are better educated than the general population.<sup>250</sup> Fourth, others argue that education is important not for the values or perspectives it inculcates, but for the opportunities for

<sup>241</sup> In Congo, more than half of the children who had been associated with a NSAG were out of school when they were recruited. ILO, "Wounded Childhood", p. 24.

<sup>242</sup> "Boko Haram massively recruited students and out-of-school youths in Borno and parts of Yobe and Adamawa states." Mausi Segun, "'They Set the Classrooms on Fire': Attacks on Education in Northeast Nigeria", Human Rights Watch, 2016. Available from [www.hrw.org/report/2016/04/11/they-set-classrooms-on-fire/attacks-education-northeast-nigeria](http://www.hrw.org/report/2016/04/11/they-set-classrooms-on-fire/attacks-education-northeast-nigeria).

<sup>243</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), "Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military", 29 July 2002. Available from <https://d2071andvip0wi.cloudfront.net/36-pakistan-madrasas-extremism-and-the-military.pdf>.

<sup>244</sup> Ratna Ghosh, Ashley Manuel, W. Y. Alice Chan, Maihemuti Dilimulati, and Mehdi Babaeli, "Education and Security: A Global Literature Review of the Role of Education in Countering Violent Religious Extremism", Tony Blair Faith Foundation, February 2016. Available from [https://institute.global/sites/default/files/inline-files/IGC\\_Education%20and%20Security.pdf](https://institute.global/sites/default/files/inline-files/IGC_Education%20and%20Security.pdf).

<sup>245</sup> While it should be remembered that supporting hypothetical violence is not the same as participating in violence, a 2016 study of attitudes across 27 developing countries found that those who had an elementary level of education or less were far more likely to justify violence against civilians. Of those who thought such attacks were completely justifiable, 63 per cent had received elementary education or less. Despite some regional variation, overall education remains a robust and statistically significant predictor of justification of violence against civilians. Kiendrebeogo and Ianchovichina, "Who Supports Violent Extremism in Developing Countries?", p. 12.

<sup>246</sup> Sanin, "Organizing Minors", p. 35.

<sup>247</sup> UNDP, "Journey to Extremism in Africa", pp. 39, 49.

<sup>248</sup> Using a comparison of 335 largely adult Palestinian terrorist biographies published by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) (only 3 per cent of subjects whose age was known were under 18) with a matched sample of the Palestinian population, Berrebi finds that on average Hamas and PIJ members were more educated than their non-member peers. Claude Berrebi, "Evidence about the Link between Education, Poverty and Terrorism among Palestinians", *Peace Economics, Peace Science, and Public Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Article 2 (2007). Hassan came to similar conclusions after interviewing nearly 250 people involved with Hamas and PIJ in the Gaza Strip from 1996 to 1999. Nasra Hassan, "An Arsenal of Believers: Talking to the 'Human Bombs'", *New Yorker*, 19 November 2001.

<sup>249</sup> An analysis of 129 deceased Hizbullah fighters ranging from 15 to 38 years old found Hizbullah fighters were more likely to have attended secondary school than the general population, and given the slight differences in the age of the two samples, the authors estimate the differences would be even greater if the comparison group were not age restricted. The same model implies that a 30-percentage-point increase in the secondary school or higher attendance rate is associated with an 8 per cent decrease in participation in Hizbullah. Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, "Education, Poverty, Political Violence and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" NBER Working Paper 9074, National Bureau of Economic Research, July 2002, pp. 23–25.

<sup>250</sup> To explain this, some have argued that political activity is costly, so only the well-off and educated can afford to devote the time to it. Alexander Lee, "Who Becomes a Terrorist? Poverty, Education, and the Origins of Political Violence", *World Politics*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (April 2011), p. 204. Others suggest that the education level of members will fluctuate with market conditions: When there are few well-paying jobs, terrorist groups are able to attract more mature, highly educated recruits. Efraim Benmelech, Claude Berrebi, and Esteban F. Klor, "Economic Conditions and the Quality of Suicide Bombings", NBER Working Paper 16320, National Bureau of Economic Research, August 2010.





**SHADDADI, SYRIA**  
Hundreds of textbooks burned by ISIS  
at the Hani Hakuf School.  
— April, 2016

Diego Ibarra Sánchez









#### CENTRAL REGION, MALI

Men praying at the Great Mosque of Djenné in the central region.  
— March 2015

UN Photo/Marco Dormino

advancement – or perhaps protection – it provides. Those with the skills and knowledge to improve their situation are less likely to be drawn to armed groups.<sup>251</sup> Two caveats must accompany these findings: First, few studies like the ones mentioned herein utilize control groups, so it is difficult to draw strong conclusions, and second, being out of school or having low educational attainment may be a proxy for another key factor – poverty, which could provide greater motivation for joining an armed group.

The focus on access and attainment fails to recognize the influence of different types of education on NSAG association. In some cases, educational institutions promote ideologies and norms that justify or encourage political violence. Some have argued that strictly religious education may lead to constrained worldviews<sup>252</sup> and entrenched exclusivist and sectarian identities, thus planting the seeds of conflict.<sup>253</sup> Others have argued that it is not religious education per se, but an underfunded or dead-end education that fails to lead to employment, that leaves children vulnerable to NSAG association. In Nigeria, children who attend poorly financed Qur’anic schools often end up begging in the street to support themselves or pay exploitative teachers, leaving them ripe for recruitment by Boko Haram.<sup>254</sup> There are also numerous examples of NSAGs targeting or co-opting existing educational systems – or creating their own – to facilitate recruitment and indoctrination. In Pakistan, “radical groups” have used madrasas to “exert and extend their influence”<sup>255</sup> In Somalia, Al-Shabaab provided education – which included military training – to children for a fee.<sup>256</sup> Whether or not armed groups take over or target schools, the degradation and exploitation of the education system in conflict reduces the alternative sources of information children have access to, reinforces ethnic segregation, stokes sectarian divisions, and promotes divisive narratives.<sup>257</sup>

### IDEOLOGY

There has been a renewed focus on the influence of ideology on individual trajectories into armed groups and NSAG decision-making. The focus on ideology is in part driven by the widely held belief that “one does not readily massacre innocents, or sacrifice one’s own life[,] unless one ha[s] an unshakeable belief in an ideology that legitimizes and requires this.”<sup>258</sup> While it is true that violence is aversive to most humans and that ideology could play a role in removing prohibitions on violence, ideological fervour does not appear to be a sufficient and necessary predictor for NSAG involvement or political violence. There are certainly many examples of people who have engaged in extreme violence under coercive pressure, for instrumental reasons or personal advancement, or due to peer dynamics without adhering to an ideology. That is not to say that ideology does not play a potential role in armed group association, but there are indications that it often becomes important during the indoctrination stage and/or after engagement in violence.

Particular media and policy attention of late has been paid to the influence of religious ideology on engagement with NSAGs, especially those listed as terrorist or characterized as violent extremist or jihadist. Some scholars agree that “not all ideologies were born equal, and some ideologies are more powerful sources of inspiration than

<sup>251</sup> Becker advanced the theory that rising education or wage rates increased the cost of engaging in criminal activity (e.g., lost wages/opportunity). Gary S. Becker, “Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach,” *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (1968). Subsequent work suggests that the relationship between education and crime differs depending on the type of crime: Unskilled crimes (e.g., drug dealing) should be negatively correlated with education, while that need not be true for skilled crimes (e.g., embezzlement). Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and Uniform Crime Reports support the idea that older, more educated adults commit fewer unskilled crimes, whereas white-collar crime does not necessarily decline with increased education or age. Lance Lochner, “Education, Work, and Crime: A Human Capital Approach,” NBER Working Paper No. 10478, National Bureau of Economic Research, May 2004.

<sup>252</sup> ICG, “Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military.”

<sup>253</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Sectarianism in Pakistan: The Radicalization of Shia and Sunni Identities,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (1998), p. 698.

<sup>254</sup> For example, there are estimated to be millions of children – some as young as four years old – who were sent to Qur’anic schools in Nigeria’s northeast and who receive little instruction and are exploited by their tutors for cash, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by Boko Haram, as well as traffickers and criminal groups. “Education in Northern Nigeria: Mixing the Modern and the Traditional,” *The Economist*, 26 July 2014. Some informants also said that “some of the children that joined JAS were Islamic school pupils who were sent by their parents (or in some cases were abandoned by their parents as they could not afford to care for them) to attend such schools.” NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 11.

<sup>255</sup> Zaman, “Sectarianism in Pakistan,” p. 698.

<sup>256</sup> S/2016/919, p. 148.

<sup>257</sup> Aubrey et al., “Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight,” p. 16.

<sup>258</sup> Arie Kruglanski, “Inside the Terrorist Mind,” paper presented to annual meeting of the National Academy of Science, Washington, D.C., 29 April 2002, pp. 9–10.

other[s]”<sup>259</sup> Those ideologies that are populist, tied to a community, and deeply appealing because they are related to grievances (both religious and nationalist ideologies as compared to Marxism, for example), offer a chance for glory, and provide clarity and closure are more likely to inspire action than those that are narrowly oriented and unaligned with community.<sup>260</sup> Many armed groups cast themselves as the vanguards of religious tenets and practice, but they may do so for tactical and strategic reasons rather than out of deep devotion. Indeed, one study concludes that religious rhetoric does not predict an organization’s use of violence, but rather an organization’s use of violence predicts use of religious rhetoric for mobilization.<sup>261</sup> There are indications that armed groups employ religious ideology (and ethno-nationalist claims) as part of their indoctrination and justification for violence, imbuing their cause with “cosmic dimensions”<sup>262</sup> rendering violence a “sacramental act or divine duty” to faith and community, and removing any moral restraints on its employment.<sup>263</sup>

While there are benefits for armed groups in adopting a religious mantle, it is unclear whether, at the individual level, ideology is a motivating factor for joining, or if it is more likely to become salient during indoctrination and/or after violence to justify behaviour. This is due in part to the difficulty of disentangling religious ideology from other factors related to religion (e.g., community) and isolating when it became important. To the first point, even in the studies where children cite religious motivations,<sup>264</sup> numerous factors are at play and it is difficult to untangle religious belief from the community with which it is associated or the personal significance it can confer.<sup>265</sup> This is often due to how the issues are studied: Inquiries on the impact of religion on political violence are often cast either too generally<sup>266</sup> or too narrowly;<sup>267</sup> focused entirely on beliefs, to the detriment of understanding how they are held,<sup>268</sup> or else based on post-involvement self-reporting. To the latter point, several studies have found those who cited religious motivations for joining “extremist groups” lacked basic knowledge of the religion on behalf of which they claimed to fight.<sup>269</sup> Such studies have left analysts to conclude that “jihadists” appeared to have transferred “their hatred into the spiritual realm”; suggesting Islam provided a rationale for the violence they had already decided to pursue.<sup>270</sup> In such cases, religious ideology did not appear to be a motivating factor, but rather a post facto justification. Various strands of research suggest a narrow or simplistic approach to understanding the motivational role of religion or ideology may be counterproductive when trying to understand why people are motivated to commit political violence.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., pp. 5–6.

<sup>261</sup> Isaacs argues that the aforementioned work suffers from methodological shortcomings and cites empirical evidence that an organization’s prior use of religious rhetoric does not increase the likelihood it will engage in violence, but past participation in violence makes an organization more likely to adopt religious rhetoric for mobilization. Isaacs, “Sacred Violence or Strategic Faith?”

<sup>262</sup> Jean-Francois Mayer, “Cults, Violence and Religious Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 24 (2001), p. 369.

<sup>263</sup> Bruce Hoffman, “Holy Terror: The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1995), p. 272.

<sup>264</sup> For example, a study of 124 children associated with armed groups in Iraq found that children self-reported that money (42 per cent); defending or liberating their community/country (39 per cent); and religious motivations mainly linked to a fatwa urging all Iraqis to fight IS (30 per cent) had motivated their NSAG association. The sample included 124 children (3 girls, 121 boys) associated or formerly associated with NSAGs, mostly from al-Hashd ash-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces [PMF]), an umbrella organization of some 40 primarily pro-state, primarily Shiite, Iraqi militias, which since 2016 have been increasingly integrated into the Iraqi military. Transition International, “Assessment of the Push and Pull Factors of Child Association with Armed Groups in Iraq, Opportunities and Capacities to Support Reintegration and Prevention,” March 2017, p. 32.

<sup>265</sup> For example, in this study, 85 per cent of the children who cited religion as a motivating factor specifically mentioned the fatwa issued in 2014 by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani – the most senior Shia cleric in Iraq – calling on all able-bodied Iraqis to take up arms against IS. Interestingly, this fatwa was non-sectarian and was directed at all Iraqis, Christians included. Parents were encouraged to urge their sons to fight for the “sanctity of this country [Iraq] and its citizens”, a rather nationalist – as compared to religious – appeal. Ali al-Sistani, “دعوة المواطنين الذين يتكثرون من حمل السلاح ومقاتلة الإرهابيين دفاعاً عن بلدنا وشعبنا”، 13 June 2014. Available from [www.sistani.org/arabic/n-news/24908](http://www.sistani.org/arabic/n-news/24908). C. J. Chivers, “Answering a Cleric’s Call, Iraqi Shiites Take Up Arms,” *New York Times*, 21 June 2014. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2014/06/22/world/middleeast/iraq-militia.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/22/world/middleeast/iraq-militia.html).

<sup>266</sup> One study in Pakistan broke out religious practice, support for political Islam, and a conception of jihad as an external violent struggle (as compared to an internal struggle to be pious) and found that only the latter was correlated with support for violent groups. Using a stratified random sample of 6,000 adult Pakistani men and women from Punjab, Sindh, KPK, and Balochistan, Fair et al. found “those who believe that jihad entails the non-state use of violence exhibit 2.3 percentage points greater support for militant groups than those who do not.” C. Christine Fair, Neil Malhotra, and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Faith or Doctrine? Religion and Support for Political Violence in Pakistan,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (2012), p. 708

<sup>267</sup> The research on sacred values suggests there is a broader category of issues that “people refuse to treat as fungible with material or economic goods” – which can be religious, but often are not – that influence how they respond to conflict. For example, those who hold sacred values experience past and anticipated conflict events as if they were temporally closer and are less amenable to social influence and conflict exit strategies. Hammad Sheikh, Jeremy Ginges, and Scott Atran, “Sacred Values in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: Resistance to Social Influence, Temporal Discounting, and Exit Strategies,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 1299 (2013), p. 12.

<sup>268</sup> Some researchers challenge the focus on the content of beliefs, arguing that instead it is how beliefs are held that is the key for understanding political violence. Luke Galen, “Review: The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, Vol. 21 (2011), p. 237. A group of psychologists have argued that a “fundamentalist mindset” can “fin[d] expression in a variety of human institutions, including religion but by no means restricted to it.” Charles B. Strozier and David Terman, “Introduction,” in Charles B. Strozier, David M. Terman, and James W. Jones, with Katherine A. Boyd, eds., *The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 3–4. A fundamentalist mindset is characterized by “paranoia and rage in a group context; an apocalyptic orientation that incorporates distinct perspectives on time, death, and violence; a relationship to charismatic leadership; and a totalized conversion experience.” Charles B. Strozier and Katharine Boyd, “Definitions and Dualisms,” *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>269</sup> In a study of individuals interviewed in Africa who “voluntarily joined violent extremist groups” of the 40 per cent who cited “religious ideas” and the 13 per cent who cited “believed my religious leader” as motivations, there were gaps in basic religious knowledge and understanding. The sample included 495 who joined voluntarily and 78 who were recruited by force, and was largely comprised of individuals held in Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, and Kenya in detention facilities. (Only 4 per cent of the sample was not in detention at the time of the interview.) Of those interviewed, 52 per cent had been involved with Al-Shabaab and 27 per cent with Boko Haram. A reference group of 145 people from Nigeria, Somalia, and Kenya who were not involved with violent extremist groups were also interviewed. UNDRP, “Journey to Extremism in Africa,” sample info p. 18, religious data pp. 45–50. A study of “jihadists” in French prisons concluded that those who represented “radical Islamization” had mostly transferred “their hatred into the spiritual realm ... Usually, they lack the elementary notions of Islam, [and] do not know how to perform daily prayers.” Farhad Khosrokhavar, “Prisons and Radicalization in France,” *OpenDemocracy*, 19 March 2015. Available from [www.opendemocracy.net/farhad-khosrokhavar/prisons-and-radicalization-in-france](http://www.opendemocracy.net/farhad-khosrokhavar/prisons-and-radicalization-in-france).

<sup>270</sup> Khosrokhavar, “Prisons and Radicalization in France.”

## “RADICALIZATION”

The concept of radicalization has come to be closely associated with ideology. While radicalization is increasingly discussed in media and policy circles, this concept is conceptually and empirically problematic.<sup>271</sup> There is no agreed-upon definition of radicalization, nor is there consensus about whether it constitutes a particular set of beliefs, norms, or actions, some combination thereof, or a shift in beliefs, norms, or actions. The term “radicalization” is also problematic due to its relativity, linear and causal assumptions, and lack of relevance to many of the cases to which it is often applied.

First, the term is relative, defined in relation to mainstream ideas or norms, which vary across context and time. What is radical today may be perceived as customary and ordinary years from now, and what is considered “radical” behaviour in one society may be normative in another.

The concept of radicalization often lacks resonance in the very places to which it is applied.

Second, radicalization often is perceived as a process or series of processes through which someone comes to condone, support, or pursue violence to achieve one or more political, religious, social, economic, or ideological goals.<sup>272</sup> Radicalization is often described as an incremental process,<sup>273</sup> alternatively conceptualized as a process of winnowing options that leaves only violence as a way forward<sup>274</sup> or identity solidification with a group or cause that requires violence.<sup>275</sup> Such approaches may conflate disparate processes<sup>276</sup> – i.e., shifts in feelings, beliefs, or actions<sup>277</sup> – and often assume linearity. There are potentially significant differences between coming to hold different beliefs; seeing violence as normative, justifiable, required, or instrumentally useful; and engaging in violent behaviour. The assumption that radicalization occurs

before someone engages in political violence is also problematic, as research suggests that engagement with an armed group or violence often precedes “radicalized” beliefs.<sup>278</sup> How then can radicalization be distinguished from indoctrination or post facto justification? In addition, the assumed ideological component of radicalization fails to capture instrumental or emotive uses of violence. Contrary to conventional wisdom, beliefs are not a good predictor of whether someone will actually engage in political violence. Many around the world express support for political violence, but few engage in it.<sup>279</sup> Moreover, there are examples of people who engage in extreme violence who do not appear to hold extremist beliefs.<sup>280</sup> Indeed, some studies have shown that support for militant violence is actually higher among those who hold what are assumed to be more peaceful beliefs (e.g., support for democracy).<sup>281</sup>

Third, the term “radicalization” often lacks resonance in the very places to which it is applied. In Mali, local languages have no equivalent terms for radicalization, and the concept “obscures important local dynamics [especially the

<sup>271</sup> For example, at a UNU-hosted workshop, 15 scholars from anthropology, sociology, political science, and developmental, social, and clinical psychology unanimously rejected the concept, feeling it was an ill-defined category of practice rather than an agreed-upon category of analysis. “How Can Recent Scholarly Work Inform Understanding of Child Trajectories Into and Out of Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in Extreme Violence?” Research Workshop, New York, NY, 21 October 2016.

<sup>272</sup> For example, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines “violent extremism” as “encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals.” FBI website, available from <https://cve.fbi.gov/whatis>. The UK Government defines extremism more broadly: “the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs” including calling for the death of members of the armed forces, and distinguishes between violent and non-violent extremism. See HM Government, “Counter-Extremism Strategy,” Command Paper (Cm 9148), October 2015, p. 9.

<sup>273</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008), p. 249.

<sup>274</sup> Moghadam describes an ever-narrowing staircase to terrorism wherein with each step, the individual increasingly perceives that there is no other option but violence. Fathali M. Moghadam, “Staircase to Terrorism,” *American Psychologist*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2005).

<sup>275</sup> Brent L. Smith, David A. Snow, Kevin Fitzpatrick, Kelly R. Dampousse, and Paxton Roberts, “Identity and Framing Theory, Precursor Activity, and the Radicalization Process,” National Criminal Justice Reference Service, January 2016. Available from [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249673.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249673.pdf).

<sup>276</sup> Khalil rejects the incremental or winnowing conceptualizations and instead offers three disparate paths to radicalization. James Khalil, “The Three Pathways (3P) Model of Violent Extremism: A Framework to Guide Policymakers to the Right Questions about Their Preventive Countermeasures,” *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 162, No. 4 (September 2017).

<sup>277</sup> McCauley and Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization,” pp. 428–429.

<sup>278</sup> James M. Olson and Mark P. Zanna, “Attitudes and Attitude Change,” *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 44 (1993).

<sup>279</sup> For example, one survey found that 33.7 per cent of the population in Djibouti believed that attacks on civilians were “morally justified”, but very few people from Djibouti actually engage in political violence and/or join NSAGs involved in such attacks. Youssouf Kiendrebeogo and Elena Ianchovichina, “Who Supports Violent Extremism in Developing Countries? Analysis of Attitudes Based on Values Survey,” Policy Research Working Paper No. 7691, World Bank Group, June 2016. Available from <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/227321468196730079/pdf/WPS7691.pdf>. It is hard to accurately estimate the number of citizens of Djibouti who have joined violent groups, but it is telling that with regard to the Syrian conflict, there is very little evidence of involvement from Djibouti despite involvement from surrounding countries. For examples of involvement by country see The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, December 2015. Available from [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf).

<sup>280</sup> Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter 2011), p. 9.

<sup>281</sup> A survey of 6,000 men and women in Pakistan (Punjab, Sindh, KPK, and Balochistan) found that, contrary to conventional wisdom, people who hold liberal democratic values (e.g., free speech) are more likely to support militant groups (e.g., Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, Al-Qaida, and sectarian militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi). C. Christine Fair, Neil Malhotra, and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Democratic Values and Support for Militant Politics: Evidence from a National Survey of Pakistan,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 58, No. 5 (2014).

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>282</sup> For example, a study of the causes for male Malian youth involvement in conflict yielded no references to radicalization as a motivational factor, leading the researchers to assume that their research methodology was flawed. Follow-up focus groups, however, confirmed that the concept did not resonate with Malian experiences.<sup>283</sup>

In light of the conceptual problems with the term, a few social scientists have tried to parse out causal processes often associated with common understandings of radicalization.<sup>284</sup> Recent efforts to understand how an individual comes to justify, advocate, or engage in political violence tend to focus on three main factors – significance quest, peer networks, and identity. To the first point, a group of psychologists developed a model of radicalization wherein individuals, motivated by a desire for personal significance, develop an ideology that justifies violence and then look for others who share in their ideology and engage in violence.<sup>285</sup> Other research focuses on the role of peer networks,<sup>286</sup> suggesting radicalization is better explained by inter- and intra-group dynamics than psychological or ideological explanations.<sup>287</sup> Additionally, there is some research that predicts that an individual who develops a “salient and pervasive identity that justifies extreme violence [is] more inclined to commit acts of terrorism.”<sup>288</sup> A few empirical studies have found that personal uncertainty, injustice, perceived group threats,<sup>289</sup> psychological trauma, religious identification, and exposure to radical networks<sup>290</sup> were associated with support for terrorist violence. While the aforementioned studies were focused on terrorist violence, the factors they identified are thought to facilitate membership in all manner of violent groups (e.g., gangs), not just NSAGs. Ultimately, there is little support for the idea that radicalization is a necessary and sufficient condition for predicting political violence or NSAG association.

## DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

Certain individual-level factors may vary in relation to a child’s gender, age, and location.

**GENDER:** Gender may influence children’s trajectories into NSAGs. The scope of the involvement of girls varies dramatically from group to group and from conflict to conflict. In just about every case, however, NSAGs are more likely than government forces to use girls.<sup>291</sup> When NSAGs use them, women and girls are always a minority of the participants,<sup>292</sup> but in some cases not by much: Shining Path in Peru and the LTTE in Sri Lanka boasted high percentages of women and girls in their ranks (40 per cent<sup>293</sup> and 33 per cent,<sup>294</sup> respectively).<sup>295</sup> Today, the Kurdish Women’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin [YPJ]) comprise 35 per cent to 40 per cent of Kurdish armed group forces.<sup>296</sup>

While children associated with armed groups are already a difficult population to observe, associated girls are even harder to identify; thus, projections of their involvement are often unreliable.<sup>297</sup> For example, in the DRC, only 8 per cent

<sup>282</sup> Based on interviews with 63 previously involved youths, including 19 in jail. Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni, and William Assarvo, “Mali’s Young ‘Jihadists’: Fuelled by Faith or Circumstance?,” Policy Brief 89, Institute for Security Studies, 26 August 2016, p. 6. Available from <https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/malis-young-jihadists-fuelled-by-faith-or-circumstance>. Louisa Waugh and Mana Farooqi, “‘They Treat Us All Like Jihadis’: Looking Beyond Violent Extremism to Building Peace in Mali,” Policy Brief, International Alert, December 2016, p. 6. Available from [www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Mali\\_TheyTreatUsAllLikeJihadis\\_EN\\_2016.pdf](http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Mali_TheyTreatUsAllLikeJihadis_EN_2016.pdf).

<sup>283</sup> Anne Moltès, remarks at the launch event for “Beyond Ideology and Greed – Trajectories of Young People towards New Forms of Violence in Côte d’Ivoire and Mali”, Interpeace, Dakar, November 2016.

<sup>284</sup> One model of radicalization – “the process of supporting or engaging in activities deemed (by others) as in violation of important social norms (e.g., the killing of civilians)” – sees individuals motivated by a desire for significance, developing an ideology that identifies violence as an appropriate means for achieving this goal, and then networking with others who share in their ideology and engage in violence. Kruglanski et al., “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization”, p. 69.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Or differentiates between group and individualized radicalization. McCauley and Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization”.

<sup>287</sup> McCauley and Moskalenko define “radicalization” as “beliefs, feelings, and behaviours in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the in-group”; and identify 12 mechanisms to explain how groups and individuals move towards violence. Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Smith et al., “Identity and Framing Theory, Precursor Activity, and the Radicalization Process”.

<sup>289</sup> The sample was comprised of “Islamic youth” in the Netherlands. The authors argued these factors were associated with adopting a belief system (e.g., viewing state authorities as illegitimate, feelings of in-group superiority) that was conducive to terrorism. Bertjan Doosje, Annemarie Loseman, and Kees van den Bos, “Determinants of Radicalization of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands: Personal Uncertainty, Perceived Injustice, and Perceived Group Threat”, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 69, Issue 3 (2013).

<sup>290</sup> A study of Christians and Muslims in Kenya. Rink and Sharma, “The Determinants of Religious Radicalization”.

<sup>291</sup> Twum-Danso, “Africa’s Young Child Soldiers”, p. 37.

<sup>292</sup> This is not the case for female-only units, like the Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women’s Protection Units [YPJ]) – the sister organization to the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People’s Protection Units [YPG]).

<sup>293</sup> Nathaniel C. Nash, “Lima Journal: Shining Path Women: So Many and So Feroocious”, *New York Times*, 22 September 1992. Available from [www.nytimes.com/1992/09/22/world/lima-journal-shining-path-women-so-many-and-so-ferocious.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/22/world/lima-journal-shining-path-women-so-many-and-so-ferocious.html).

<sup>294</sup> Peng Wang, “Women in the LTTE: Birds of Freedom or Cogs in the Wheel?”, *Journal of Politics and Law*, Vol. 4, No. 1, March 2011, p. 102.

<sup>295</sup> While it is not possible to break out the percentage that are under 18, it is quite likely that this level of female involvement suggests significant participation by girls, given the widespread use of children by both groups.

<sup>296</sup> “Syria’s Women: Policies & Perspectives”, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 7 November 2017. Available from <https://timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/SyriasWomenSecurityForces.pdf>.

<sup>297</sup> The ILO ran into this problem in Rwanda and Congo, where neither sample included girls. There were very few in Burundi (7 per cent) and in DRC (10 per cent). ILO, “Wounded Childhood”, p. 19. In many other cases, girls do not meet the metric to be considered combatants by those who run DDR programmes (e.g., have a gun), and thus are not counted. For example, see Shepler, *Childhood Deployed*, pp. 147–154.



**SNUNE, IRAQ**

A young female member of a Yazidi self-defense group, the Sun Brigade, stands guard at a check point located near Snune, Iraq.  
— August 2016

*Diego Ibarra Sánchez*





of child DDR participants were girls, but interviews suggest that girls actually comprised 30 per cent to 40 per cent of all CAAFAG there.<sup>298</sup> That said, from the limited research available it is clear that the factors that influence girls' association with NSAGs often differ from boys' trajectories into and out of armed groups.

In some conflicts, girls and women join because their husbands are affiliated with a NSAG.<sup>299</sup> In DRC, 72 per cent of girls associated with Mai Mai Kata Katanga said they joined to be with boyfriends, husbands, or family members.<sup>300</sup> In some societies with highly differentiated gender roles, boys join armed groups to fulfil societal expectations, while girls join to dash them.<sup>301</sup> The vulnerability and loss of control that the population feels in a conflict zone combined with the norms of masculinity may create a potent compound for young men living there that heightens the appeal of joining a NSAG.<sup>302</sup> A study of over 300 young Syrians and their families found that engagement in the conflict was widely seen as a male duty to protect the honour of women, children, and the land.<sup>303</sup> By comparison, girls often join groups to escape gender expectations or the hardships peculiar to their gender. In Nepal, girls were twice as likely as boys to report joining the Maoists voluntarily, a difference that appears fuelled in part by efforts to escape a forced marriage or domestic violence and the Maoist critique of the marginalization of women in Nepalese society.<sup>304</sup> Even in NSAGs that appear to reinforce gender roles, there are often subtle challenges to convention or larger shifts that occur over time out of necessity.<sup>305</sup>

**AGE/URBANITY:** Some limited evidence suggests children's age and geography are factors. Research in Liberia, for example, finds that compared to adults, child soldiers were more likely to come from the capital over rural areas.<sup>306</sup> Additionally, there are age discrepancies across conflicts,<sup>307</sup> including differences by gender,<sup>308</sup> and examples of some groups recruiting and using extremely young children.<sup>309</sup> Unfortunately, there is rarely enough information to help explain such variations, but they may be products of supply (e.g., if particular regions are harder hit economically) and demand factors (e.g., if a NSAG has territory or influence in one area).

## 3 Child Use and Experiences within NSAGs

There are real limits to the current state of knowledge about how children are used by armed groups: This is in part because of the trauma and stigma children feel about their participation. For example, sexual violence against children while they were part of a NSAG is drastically underreported because of the stigma children fear they will face from their communities if they share their ordeals.<sup>310</sup> Moreover, as a coping mechanism, children may suppress their recollections of traumatic events, or their brain's response to such events may result in fragmented and incomplete memories.<sup>311</sup> In addition, children, like adults, have been known to shift their stories depending on to whom they are talking. Often NGO workers receive a stock, scripted answer about a child's time with a NSAG.<sup>312</sup> As a result, the picture of children's experiences within NSAGs is limited, but some trends do emerge. Working with the available information, the following section examines the roles children play, their broader experiences in armed groups, and the differences across sub-demographics of children, particularly by gender, age, and mode of entry.

<sup>298</sup> MONUSCO, "Invisible Survivors".

<sup>299</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences".

<sup>300</sup> MONUSCO, "Invisible Survivors", p. 15.

<sup>301</sup> Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, pp. 91–93.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>303</sup> Aubrey et al., "Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight", p. 17.

<sup>304</sup> Kohrt et al., "Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Nepal", p. 17.

<sup>305</sup> To this point, there has been heated debate about whether the apparent use of female suicide bombers by IS in the Battle of Mosul in 2016–2017 represented a formal recasting of gender roles or was driven by tactical necessity. See Ayemnn Jawad al-Tamimi, "ISIS' Female Suicide Bombers Are No Myth: How the Group Thinks about Women in Combat", *Foreign Affairs*, 22 September 2017. Available from [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-09-22/isis-female-suicide-bombers-are-no-myth](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-09-22/isis-female-suicide-bombers-are-no-myth).

<sup>306</sup> That said, there does not appear to have been a control group, so these results are problematic. James B. Pugel, "Disaggregating the Causal Factors Unique to Child Soldiering: The Case of Liberia", in Gates and Reich, eds., *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, p. 168.

<sup>307</sup> For example, a 2003 study in Congo, DRC, and Rwanda found that the majority of children used were between 12 and 14 years of age; but in Burundi, the majority of the children were older, between 15 and 18 years old. ILO, "Wounded Childhood", p. 37. From the supply side, it is also possible that the demands or needs of children of different ages – or a particular birth order (e.g., oldest boys) – may influence involvement. In South Sudan, for example, the youngest volunteers cited basic needs (e.g., food) as a motivation for joining NSAGs. Wheeler, "We Can Die Too", p. 21.

<sup>308</sup> In DRC, one study found 56 per cent of the girls recruited by NSAGs were under 15 years old at the time of recruitment, whereas only 28 per cent of boys were that young. MONUSCO, "Invisible Survivors", p. 7.

<sup>309</sup> Groupe des Patriotes in the Central African Republic used children as young as nine. Ruben de Koning, Luis Benavides, Romain Esmenjaud, Paul-Simon Handy, and Mélanie De Groof, Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2262 (2016), United Nations Security Council, December 2016, S/2016/1032, p. 178. Available from [www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/1032](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/1032).

<sup>310</sup> Report of the Secretary General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, 15 April 2007, S/2017/249, p. 6.

<sup>311</sup> James Hopper and David Lisak, "Why Rape and Trauma Survivors Have Fragmented and Incomplete Memories", *Time*, 9 December 2014.

<sup>312</sup> Shepler, *Childhood Deployed*, p. 14; and Allen and Schomerus, "A Hard Homecoming", p. 3.

## A. ROLES

In many NSAG contexts, children's roles are largely dictated by NSAG commanders. In others, children's roles are also impacted their own choices and abilities.<sup>313</sup> Child testimonies, for example, suggest that after a transitional imprisonment period following their abduction by Boko Haram, children were forced to choose roles, often cooking, cleaning, collecting water and firewood, transporting combatants, or guarding other abductees.<sup>314</sup> Given the paucity of studies and the quality of data available, it is extremely difficult to substantiate the roles played by children within armed groups. One rare study that examined data on 1,125 boys and girls who left NSAGs in DRC in 2014 found 51 per cent of girls had been cooks or labourers, 27 per cent were combatant wives, and 22 per cent were soldiers, compared to 70 per cent of boys who performed combatant functions (30 per cent were labourers).<sup>315</sup> This snapshot-like study suggests that children are assigned to particular posts, but across cases, children rarely play singular or static roles.<sup>316</sup> Children who perform military functions may also serve as scouts, man checkpoints, work as porters, collect intelligence or taxes, and cook and clean for a group, sometimes performing multiple functions within a single day. This fluidity renders the distinction between a "child soldier" and other children associated with armed groups largely meaningless. As highlighted later in this section, there is evidence that demographic differences – particularly gender – can influence roles within particular armed groups.

## B. INDOCTRINATION AND GROUP PROCESSES

The roles children play explain only part of their lives with armed groups. It is necessary to examine group processes, which facilitate NSAG recruitment, group identity,<sup>317</sup> cohesion, and violence<sup>318</sup> to understand the totality of their experiences. In NSAGs, group processes prime individuals to engage in violence by providing authorization for violent acts (e.g., explicit orders from a commander); creating the social norms that legitimize and reward violence;<sup>319</sup> routinizing violence; and dehumanizing its targets.<sup>320</sup> While the inclusion, order, and importance of each component may vary, most armed groups who use children engage in some version of an induction or initiation process; conduct, physical, or military training; ideological instruction; and vexations or invulnerability rites.<sup>321</sup> For example, Joseph Kony used spiritual practices in an attempt to create social bonds between and instil a sense of belonging among children abducted by the LRA.<sup>322</sup> Group-led indoctrination processes, which combine many of these elements, are intended to cause "isolation from alternative belief systems, delegitimation and dehumanization of potential targets, intolerance of doubt or dissent, [and] adoration of the leader."<sup>323</sup>

Two aspects of group processes deserve particular attention: social norms and dehumanization. Individual behaviour can be heavily influenced by social norms,<sup>324</sup> which are perceptions of what is typical or desirable in one's social group.<sup>325</sup> Within armed groups, violent behaviour is often common and encouraged, which may lead members (particularly children who are especially keen to adopt and enforce group norms<sup>326</sup>) to view violence as typical and desirable group behaviour. Despite media representations of violence as exciting or cathartic, research from military history and moral psychology suggests that committing violence is quite aversive.<sup>327</sup> People tend to avoid harming others, even at personal cost, and they experience physiological and psychological distress when

<sup>313</sup> Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, p. 72.

<sup>314</sup> No sample or research methodology outlined. UNICEF, "Silent Shame: Bringing Out the Voices of Children Caught in the Lake Chad Crisis", 10 April 2017, p. 9. Available from <https://weshare.unicef.org/Packages/ZAMZIFLJWE2A>.

<sup>315</sup> S/2015/19, p. 27.

<sup>316</sup> ILO, "Wounded Childhood".

<sup>317</sup> Özerdem and Podder, "Disarming Youth Combatants", p. 70; Malcolm Klein, *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence and Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>318</sup> Even though there are significant differences between NSAGs and street gangs, there appear to be similarities in the basic group processes across these groups. See Scott Decker and David 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*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2015). Evidence from street gangs suggests group processes increase the scope and degree of offending by individuals. Rachel Gordon et al., "Antisocial Behavior and Youth Gang Membership: Selection and Socialization", *Criminology*, Vol. 42 (2004); Terence P. Thornberry, Marvin D. Krohn, A. J. Lizotte, and Deborah Chard-Wierschem, "The Role of Juvenile Gangs in Facilitating Delinquent Behavior", *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1993); Uberto Gatti, Richard E. Tremblay, Frank Vitaro, and Pierre McDuff, "Youth Gangs, Delinquency and Drug Use: A Test of the Selection, Facilitation and Enhancement Hypotheses", *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 46, No. 11 (2005); and Chris Melde and Finn Esbensen, "Gang Membership as a Turning Point in the Life Course", *Criminology*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2011).

<sup>319</sup> The group processes inside gangs have been shown to influence youth to internalize certain modes of behaviour while helping them develop a sense of importance and self-esteem. One way to attain status within a gang, and to project the necessary identity and reputation, is through violence. James Vigil, *Barrio Gangs*.

<sup>320</sup> Neil J. Kressel, *Mass Hate: The Global Rise of Genocide and Terror*, updated edition (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press Books, 2002), p. 172.

<sup>321</sup> Vexations – abusing the children. Invulnerability rites – rituals meant to make an individual impervious to danger. ILO, "Wounded Childhood", p. 39.

<sup>322</sup> Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion", p. 87.

<sup>323</sup> Kruglanski, "Inside the Terrorist Mind", p. 4.

<sup>324</sup> Margaret Tankard and Elizabeth Levy Paluck, "Norm Perception as a Vehicle for Social Change", *Social Issues and Policy Review*, Vol. 10 (2016).

<sup>325</sup> Tankard and Paluck, "Norm Perception as a Vehicle for Social Change".

<sup>326</sup> Marco F. H. Schmidt and Michael Tomasello, "Young Children Enforce Social Norms", *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2012).

<sup>327</sup> Dave Grossman, *On Killing*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1996).

they do engage in violence.<sup>328</sup> In an intergroup context such as a NSAG, one way that people overcome this aversion is to dehumanize their enemies.<sup>329</sup> For example, a series of studies found that participants who were experimentally manipulated to feel more socially connected were more likely to dehumanize members of other social groups, and in turn more likely to recommend harsh punishments for those they dehumanized.<sup>330</sup> NSAG efforts to make violence normative and dehumanize outside enemies are key to understanding how previously non-violent individuals can come to engage in violence on behalf of an armed group.

### C. DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

For children in a number of contexts, their experiences in armed groups include drug and alcohol use. In some cases, imbibing is part of the group culture. In many others, drugs and alcohol are embedded into an organization's group processes; they are forced on children or ritualized by commanders to reduce fear and inhibitions in combat, dull the effects of violence, and create dependence on the group's leadership in order to deter defection.<sup>331</sup> The RUF frequently gave the children in its ranks drugs and alcohol,<sup>332</sup> and research found that nearly 40 per cent of all children associated with armed groups in Sierra Leone had been regularly forced to take drugs, often with the intent of curbing their inhibitions for violence.<sup>333</sup> In other cases, drug and alcohol use is forbidden by NSAGs. Islamic State views intoxicants as prohibited by Islam, strictly prohibits narcotics or alcohol, and physically punishes individuals accused of using either.<sup>334</sup> The group may be involved in the amphetamine trade in the region, but there is little evidence that it drugs or encourages drug use to facilitate attacks, despite earlier reports to the contrary.<sup>335</sup> This prohibition does not hold for other groups that wear an Islamist mantle; there are claims that use of tramadol in Boko Haram is rampant and "enabl[es] atrocities" in the conflict.<sup>336</sup>

### D. IDENTITY

Related to group processes is the issue of group identification. As previously discussed, children are known for strong adhesion to group identity, which may influence their capacity to aggress on behalf of a group.<sup>337</sup> A series of lab experiments – albeit on adults – found that those with the strongest bonds to their group (referred to as

"identity fusion") were significantly more likely to endorse sacrificing their lives in order to save those of their countrymen and women.<sup>338</sup> There is also evidence that those individuals with the strongest association with their group identity are the most likely to act violently against a perceived threat. For example, one study of Libyan rebels found that those who exhibited bonds with their battalions that were family-like were more likely to risk their lives by fighting on the front lines.<sup>339</sup> Survey work conducted across the Middle East and Asia has found that those who identify as a member of their religion or nation above their individual identity were more likely to express support for terrorism against the West.<sup>340</sup> A study of the LRA found that those

Those individuals with the strongest association with their group identity are the most likely to act violently against a perceived threat.

<sup>328</sup> Molly J. Crockett, Zeb Kurth-Nelson, Jenifer Z. Siegel, Peter Dayan, and Raymond J. Dolan, "Harm to Others Outweighs Harm to Self in Moral Decision Making", *PNAS*, Vol. 111, No. 48 (2014); Fiery Cushman, Kurt Gray, Allison Gaffey, and Wendy Berry Mendes, "Simulating Murder: The Aversion to Harmful Action", *Emotion*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2012); and Shira Maguen, Barbara A. Lucenko, Mark A. Reger, Gregory A. Gahm, Brett T. Litz, Karen H. Seal, Sara J. Knight, and Charles R. Marmar, "The Impact of Reported Direct and Indirect Killing on Mental Health Symptoms in Iraq War Veterans", *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2010).

<sup>329</sup> Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan, "Dehumanization and Infrahumanization", *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 65, No. 5 (2014).

<sup>330</sup> Adam Waytz and Nicholas Epley, "Social Connection Enables Dehumanization", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2012). Consistent with this last finding, another study found that Christian subjects who dehumanized Muslims reported more willingness to torture Muslim prisoners of war. G. Tendayi Viki, Daniel Osgood, and Sabine Phillips, "Dehumanization and Self-Reported Proclivity to Torture Prisoners of War", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2013).

<sup>331</sup> For example, see Lotte Vermeij, "'The Bullets Sound Like Music To My Ears': Socialization of Child Soldiers within African Rebel Groups", doctoral thesis submitted at Wageningen University, January 2014, p. 151; and Rosen, *Armies of the Young*.

<sup>332</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Coercion and Intimidation of Child Soldiers to Participate in Violence", 16 April 2008. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2008/04/16/coercion-and-intimidation-child-soldiers-participate-violence](http://www.hrw.org/news/2008/04/16/coercion-and-intimidation-child-soldiers-participate-violence).

<sup>333</sup> Madeline Drexler, "Life After Death: Helping Former Child Soldiers Become Whole Again", *Harvard Public Health Review*, Fall 2011. Available from [www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/magazine/child-soldiers-betancourt](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/magazine/child-soldiers-betancourt).

<sup>334</sup> Flora Drury, "The Horrifying Moment ISIS Extremists Throw a Man from a Roof for Being Gay – Then Watch as He Is Stoned to Death by the Baying Mob Below", *Daily Mail*, 2 May 2015. Available from [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3065283/Drugs-alcohol-counselling-ISIS-style-Addict-drunk-whipped-Islamic-State.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3065283/Drugs-alcohol-counselling-ISIS-style-Addict-drunk-whipped-Islamic-State.html).

<sup>335</sup> Jack Moore, "Breaking the Myth of Captagon, the 'Jihadi Pill' Made Famous by ISIS", *Newsweek*, 31 July 2017. Available from [www.newsweek.com/breaking-myth-captagon-jihadi-pill-made-famous-isis-642792](http://www.newsweek.com/breaking-myth-captagon-jihadi-pill-made-famous-isis-642792).

<sup>336</sup> International Alert, "How Drug Use Affects Conflict in Nigeria", 27 March 2017. Available from [www.international-alert.org/news/how-drug-use-affects-conflict-nigeria](http://www.international-alert.org/news/how-drug-use-affects-conflict-nigeria).

<sup>337</sup> Eduardo A. Vasquez, Brian Lickel, and Karen Hennigan, "Gangs, Displaced, and Group-Based Aggression", *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, Vol. 15 (2010).

<sup>338</sup> W. B. Swann Jr., A. Gómez, M. D. Buhrmester, L. López-Rodríguez, J. Jiménez, and A. Vázquez, "Contemplating the Ultimate Sacrifice: Identity Fusion Channels Pro-Group Affect, Cognition, and Moral Decision-Making", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 106, No. 5 (2014).

<sup>339</sup> Sample of 179 revolutionaries who fought in Libya in 2011. Harvey Whitehouse, Brian McQuinn, Michael Buhrmester, and William B. Swann Jr., "Brothers in Arms: Libyan Revolutionaries Bond Like Family", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 111, No. 50 (2014).

<sup>340</sup> Citing Edward Orehek, Shira Fishman, Arie W. Kruglanski, Mark Dechesne, and Xiaoyan Chen, "The Role of Individualistic and Collectivistic Goals in Support for Terrorist Attacks," unpublished data, University of Maryland (2010); Kruglanski and Orehek, "The Role of the Quest for Personal Significance in Motivating Terrorism," p. 155.





**MOSUL, IRAQ**

The library of the University of Mosul, which was burned and destroyed during a battle with Islamic State militants. The University now bears the scars of its use as an ISIS facility, including thousands of burned books and manuscripts.

— April 2017

*Diego Ibarra Sánchez*







who committed violence as part of their indoctrination increased identification with the group.<sup>341</sup> Taken together, these findings suggest there may be a dangerous cycle at work whereby the more that people identify with a group, the more likely they are to engage in violence to defend or promote it, and once they commit violence on behalf of the group, the more they identify with it.

## E. TRAUMA

Many children associated with armed groups are repeatedly exposed to violence as witnesses, participants, and victims. Research from Sierra Leone found that 66 per cent of child soldiers witnessed intimidation, beatings, or torture; 60 per cent witnessed violent deaths; 65 per cent witnessed rape; 95 per cent witnessed amputation; and 48 per cent witnessed massacres.<sup>342</sup> Even though boys were more likely than girls to have been trained for combat (42 vs. 28 per cent), both were equally exposed to abuse and violence.<sup>343</sup> A majority (53 per cent) of Ugandan youth abducted by the LRA reported they “were ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ forced to beat or kill new arrivals”, and 8 per cent were forced to kill a family member or friend.<sup>344</sup> There are debates about the long-term impact of these violent experiences, but across cases it is clear that associated children experience high rates of trauma due to their association with NSAGs.

## F. DIFFERENCES BY DEMOGRAPHICS

Within – and, in some contexts, across – armed groups, children are used and treated differently based on their gender, their age, and/or how they became associated with the group.

**GENDER:** Gender roles within armed groups often both represent the different socialization processes for girls and boys in wider society and challenge them. Historically, in nationalist conflicts where groups espoused a socialist agenda, women’s liberation was often considered part and parcel of the larger struggle.<sup>345</sup> NSAGs like the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers Party [PKK]), the Maoists in Nepal, Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Mozambique Liberation Front [FRELIMO]), and the LTTE in Sri Lanka have used girls and women in military roles. Data on child recruitment in the Syrian conflict suggest that 63 per cent of girls associated with Kurdish groups performed combat roles.<sup>346</sup> In contrast, other NSAGs strictly limit military roles to boys, but still either abduct or try to recruit women and girls for other roles. In many NSAGs, girls, like boys, assume a number of overlapping roles, and it is often very difficult to make clear distinctions among them.<sup>347</sup> In at least one case – Nigeria – some of the focus on girls appears to be reactive to the actions of enemy groups: Some research suggests CJTF targets girls for recruitment so they can work to find female Boko Haram members.<sup>348</sup> Al-Shabaab similarly recruited girls for the purpose of searching other women – as well as domestic duties and specific and limited combat and combat support functions (e.g., suicide bombings and intelligence collection, respectively).<sup>349</sup>

Girls associated with NSAGs appear to suffer sexual abuse at higher rates than boys. For example, 44 per cent of girls who had been child soldiers in Sierra Leone reported having been raped, compared to 5 per cent of boys in their cohort.<sup>350</sup> Another study with a small sample of 40 found that 95 per cent of girls who had been abducted by the RUF had been subjected to repeated sexual violence.<sup>351</sup> Sexual violence can be more narrowly targeted to a subset of girls and women: IS built an entire bureaucratic structure to manage the sexual slavery of Yazidi women and girls abducted by the group.<sup>352</sup> Sexual violence against girls can have long-term mental,<sup>353</sup> social, and physical

<sup>341</sup> Rebecca Littman, “Perpetrating Violence Increases Identification with Violent Groups: Survey Evidence from Former Combatants,” working paper, 2017.

<sup>342</sup> Theresa S. Betancourt, Ivelina I. Borisova, Marie de la Soudière, and John Williamson, “Sierra Leone’s Child Soldiers: War Exposures and Mental Health Problems by Gender,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2011), p. 24.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, Table 1.

<sup>344</sup> Blattman and Annan, “On the Nature and Causes of LRA Abduction,” pp. 140–141.

<sup>345</sup> Maria Nzomo, “Gender, Governance and Conflicts in Africa,” Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2002, p. 7.

<sup>346</sup> “Kurdish groups” primarily refers to the YPG/YPJ and Asayish units under the Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD) umbrella. The Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, “Summary of MRM4Syria Verification of Recruitment and Use of Children by Parties to the Conflict in Syria, January 2014–March 2017.”

<sup>347</sup> McKay and Mazurana, *Where Are the Girls?*, p. 24.

<sup>348</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 17.

<sup>349</sup> Interview with high-level Al-Shabaab defector, Somalia, September 2017.

<sup>350</sup> Theresa S. Betancourt, Ivelina I. Borisova, Marie de la Soudière, and John Williamson, “Sierra Leone’s Child Soldiers: War Exposures and Mental Health Problems by Gender,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 49, Issue 1 (July 2011), p. 4.

<sup>351</sup> Defined as gang or individual rape, or rape with objects. Myriam Denov and Richard MacLure, “Engaging the Voices of Girls in the Aftermath of Sierra Leone’s Conflict: Experiences and Perspectives in a Culture of Violence,” *Anthropologica*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2006), p. 77.

<sup>352</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape,” *New York Times*, 13 August 2015. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html)

<sup>353</sup> A study in Sierra Leone found that having been raped during one’s time with an armed group led to “higher baseline levels of internalizing problems” (e.g., anxiety, depression). Theresa Betancourt, Robert Brennan, Julia Rubin-Smith, Garrett M Fitzmaurice, and Stephen Gilman, “Sierra Leone’s Former Child Soldiers: A Longitudinal Study of Risk, Protective Factors, and Mental Health,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, Vol. 49 (2010), p. 612.



**GAO, MALI**

A Malian child waits to receive a free consultation at a MINUSMA-run medical clinic. — May, 2014

UN Photo/Marco Dormino

health implications, especially if they bear children as a result or develop sexually transmitted infections that lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, cervical cancer, and adverse birth outcomes, including still birth.<sup>354</sup> While statistics on sexual violence rates against men and boys in conflict settings are scarce, there is some evidence that the rates of abuse are much higher than often assumed. Since 2000, instances of sexual violence against men and boys have been documented in at least 25 conflicts.<sup>355</sup> A 2008 study in Liberia found that 42 per cent of female combatants as compared to 33 per cent of male combatants reported exposure to sexual violence.<sup>356</sup> As sexual violence against boys is underreported,<sup>357</sup> male victims receive less attention and even fewer services in response.<sup>358</sup>

It is important to note that in some conflicts there was less sexual abuse within the NSAG than there was outside it. In Nepal, data suggest that girls were often safer from sexual violence with the Maoists than outside the group.<sup>359</sup> This also appears to be a factor in recruitment and retention of girls with the YPJ. Even though YPJ signed a Deed of Commitment in 2014 to demobilize child soldiers, few returned to their families. For many, particularly girls, going home was not an option due to safety concerns, poverty, lack of schooling, and domestic violence.<sup>360</sup>

**AGE:** While there is very little information to go on, there are indications that some NSAGs differentiate roles by age. This makes sense given potential differences in decision-making and strength at different stages of child development. Interviews with six children once associated with the Nduma Defence of Congo (NDC) suggest the group used young children (12 years old and younger) as porters to carry ammunition and “magic talismans,” while children over 12 years of age were more likely to work as tax collectors at the mines, cooks, farmers, or bodyguards or armed escorts.<sup>361</sup> A study of associated children in Congo, DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda found that NSAGs were more likely to arm older boys than younger ones, raising the possibility that older children had age-differentiated roles.<sup>362</sup> Sadly, being unarmed does not necessarily mean that children are not occupying military roles. There are many reports of armed groups that use children for military roles without arming or sufficiently training them. For example, M23 in the DRC used boys “as cover for advancing units, often after a week of training.”<sup>363</sup>

<sup>354</sup> World Health Organization, “Sexually Transmitted Infections,” Fact Sheet, August 2016. Available from [www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs110/en](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs110/en).

<sup>355</sup> Office of the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, “Report of Workshop on Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Conflict Situations,” 5 December 2013, p. 5. Available from <http://files.osgode.yorku.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Report-of-Workshop-on-Sexual-Violence-against-Men-and-Boys-Final.pdf>.

<sup>356</sup> Kristen Johnson, Jana Asher, Stephanie Rosborough, Amisha Raja, Rajesh Panjabi, Charles Beadling, and Lynn Lawry, “Association of Combatant Status and Sexual Violence with Health and Mental Health Outcomes in Postconflict Liberia,” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 300, No. 6 (2008).

<sup>357</sup> The All Survivors Project found “significant confusion around the issue and a tendency to conflate sexual violence against men and boys with homosexuality,” which, along with stigma and shame, has led to widespread underreporting, denial, and silence about the topic in many conflicts. All Survivors Project, “Brief Note on Prevalence of Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Situations of Conflict and Displacement,” briefing provided to UNU on 30 May 2017.

<sup>358</sup> Twum-Danso, “Africa’s Young Child Soldiers,” p. 30.

<sup>359</sup> “For example, Maoists – including Maoist women – emphasized that girls were safer from sexual violence when part of the armed group than when in the community. Qualitative research supports this, with the finding that girls were vulnerable to sexual violence from police, the Royal Nepal Army, and from relatives and community members ... Within the Maoists there was reportedly strict enforcement of only consensual sexual relationships, and Maoist men who raped women were publicly punished. Moreover, girls reported that joining the Maoists allowed them to escape child marriages and relationships with marital rape.” Kohrt et al, “Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Nepal,” p. 10.

<sup>360</sup> Geneva Call, “Syria: Monitoring the Prohibition of Child Soldiers by Kurdish Armed Forces,” 7 October 2014. Available from <https://genevacall.org/syria-monitoring-prohibition-child-soldiers-kurdish-armed-forces>.

<sup>361</sup> S/2015/19, p. 28.

<sup>362</sup> ILO, “Wounded Childhood,” p. 43.

<sup>363</sup> Steven Hege, Nelson Alusala, Ruben de Koning, Marie Plamadiala, Emilie Serralta, and Steven Spittaels, Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, United Nations Security Council, November 2012, S/2012/843, p. 39. Available from [www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/843](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/843).

**MODE OF ENTRY:** Across contexts, children who joined armed groups voluntarily appear to have been treated better than those who were abducted or forced into service. In Sierra Leone, some children reported better treatment and some material gains over their abducted peers.<sup>364</sup> A study on the LRA found that younger recruits (the overwhelming majority of whom were abducted) were more likely to be punished and received fewer positive inducements than adults.<sup>365</sup> For example, 61 per cent of abducted youth reported being severely beaten as compared to only 23 per cent of non-abducted youth.<sup>366</sup> The manner in which a child becomes associated may influence their experience and duration within the group, and these factors combined likely impact if, why, and how a child leaves a NSAG and her/his prospects for reintegration.

## 4 How and Why Children Exit NSAGs

A very limited amount of work has been done on how and why children (or adults) exit armed groups.<sup>367</sup> From the evidence available, it appears that there are some commonalities across contexts, but exit trajectories are likely to be very group and/or conflict specific. Additionally, why children leave a NSAG is likely impacted by how they became associated with the group in the first place and what their experience was like in the group. The following section focuses primarily on children exercising some agency in their exit from armed groups, but there are other ways in which their participation can come to an end (e.g., the group abandons them or tells them to leave, is defeated, disbands, or transforms into a non-violent entity).

### A. DESISTANCE AND DISENGAGEMENT

Before examining the existing evidence about child trajectories out of armed groups, it is important to consider what exiting a group entails. Most of the existing work on the topic treats exiting a NSAG as an event. However, research on exiting other types of groups (e.g., gangs) suggests that leaving an armed group is likely a process or, more accurately, two interrelated processes: desistance (the process of ceasing violent and/or illegal activity) and disengagement (the process of disembedding from the group and de-identifying as a member). Given the similar group processes across group type and the barriers group leaders erect to prevent exit, leaving a NSAG, like leaving a gang, may not be a “cold turkey” event.<sup>368</sup> Indeed, there is evidence across cases that children who leave armed groups often return<sup>369</sup> or become associated with another one.<sup>370</sup> As with street gangs, where the decision to disengage often comes after an accumulation of several different events or motives that run counter to group membership (e.g., exposure to violence and increased victimization),<sup>371</sup> NSAG departure is likely multi-causal. Furthermore, the process of desisting from gangs has been found to be highly dependent on the strength of an individual’s gang ties<sup>372</sup> and his/her embeddedness within the group,<sup>373</sup> a perspective that may be fruitful in understanding how children exit from armed groups.

### B. HOW?

It is essential to recognize that a child’s manner and point of exit exist along a continuum of agency and coercion. In some contexts, a child may choose to no longer associate with a NSAG, but most NSAGs work to prevent defection and escape. For example, M23 in DRC executed those who attempted to leave the group, including

<sup>364</sup> Delap, “Fighting Back”, p. 15.

<sup>365</sup> Beber and Blattman, “The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion”, p. 90.

<sup>366</sup> Blattman and Annan, “On the Nature and Causes of LRA Abduction”, p. 140.

<sup>367</sup> Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism: Themes and Approaches”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2013), p. 99.

<sup>368</sup> Pyrooz et al. find 57 per cent of gang members return to the group at some point. David Pyrooz, Gary Sweeten, and Alex Piquero, “Continuity and Change in Gang Membership and Gang Embeddedness”, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2013). Thornberry et al. conclude the intermittency rate is 57 per cent to 66 per cent. Terence Thornberry, Marvin Krohn, Alan Lizotte, Carolyn Smith, and Kimberly Tobin, *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>369</sup> For example, see discussion of the LTTE and Vanni LTTE in Human Rights Watch, “Sri Lanka: Tamil Tigers Forcibly Recruit Child Soldiers”, 11 November 2004. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2004/11/11/sri-lanka-tamil-tigers-forcibly-recruit-child-soldiers](http://www.hrw.org/news/2004/11/11/sri-lanka-tamil-tigers-forcibly-recruit-child-soldiers).

<sup>370</sup> For example, see Michael Wessells’s discussion in *Child Soldiers* of child demobilization in Liberia and Uganda.

<sup>371</sup> Others have argued that there are critical turning points within a gang member’s life course that can facilitate an exit from the group, including family commitments, interactions with law enforcement, periods of gang disruption, or violent incidents. Scott Decker and David Pyrooz, “Leaving the Gang: Logging Off and Moving On”, Council on Foreign Relations, November 2011, p. 13; Scott Decker and Janet Lauritsen, “Breaking the Bonds of Membership: Leaving the Gang”, in C. Ronald Huff, ed., *Gangs in America III* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc., 2002), p. 58; and Vigil, *Barrio Gangs*

<sup>372</sup> David C. Pyrooz, Scott H. Decker, and Vincent J. Webb, “Ties that Bind: Desistance from Gangs”, *Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (2014).

<sup>373</sup> Pyrooz et al., “Continuity and Change in Gang Membership and Gang Embeddedness”; Scott Decker, David Pyrooz, and Richard Moule, “Disengagement from Gangs as Role Transitions”, *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2014), p. 7; and Gary Sweeten, David Pyrooz, and Alex Piquero, “Disengaging from Gangs and Desistance from Crime”, *Justice Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2013), p. 491.



reportedly burying alive children who had tried and failed to escape – sending a chilling message to others who hoped to exit.<sup>374</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, a child may exit the group willingly or unwillingly due to external intervention: Children are encountered during military operations (e.g., captured on the battlefield), released due to the intervention of parents or community leaders, and abandoned by the NSAG. For example, a 2017 study of 24 children formerly associated with armed groups in Nigeria identified three exit trajectories: escape; capture by the Nigerian military or CJTF; or abandonment by Boko Haram due to supply shortages, sickness, or injury.<sup>375</sup>

### C. WHY?

From the limited data available on child motivations for leaving armed groups, a few common themes recur: disillusionment with the group’s leadership or cause, other options (including joining another NSAG), violence, and family. According to a 2003 study conducted in DRC, Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda, children self-reported leaving their armed groups because they felt deceived and cheated with financial promises; they were frustrated that their involvement did not lead to a job; they felt they would be in danger if they stayed; or they saw a comrade wounded or killed and realized the promises of protection (especially magical ones) were not real or enough.<sup>376</sup> In an assessment of 16 studies on why adults left extremist groups, three primary self-reported motivations emerge: losing faith in militant ideology, disillusionment with group leadership, and changes in circumstances that increase the costs of continued involvement.<sup>377</sup> There are no clear clusters or trends across member type (e.g., newcomers/long-time members, leaders/foot soldiers). Individuals often leave very different types of groups for similar reasons: Individuals who have exited right-wing extremist groups and those who have left Islamist groups cite similar motivations, particularly regarding disappointment and disillusionment with group leaders and internal group dynamics (e.g., bickering, self-serving behaviour, backstabbing).<sup>378</sup> Reports from Syria suggest children and youth often have similar motivations for switching groups.<sup>379</sup> Other adults have reported leaving an extremist group because its worldview, ideology, or justification of violence no longer made sense. In some cases, this shift occurred after they came into contact with the “enemy”, including agents of the state,<sup>380</sup> and that person(s) did not treat them badly or conform to the stereotype they were expecting.<sup>381</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests children have similar revelations.<sup>382</sup>

### D. WHY DIDN'T THEY LEAVE?

The question of why children stay with armed groups is as relevant for designing interventions as understanding why and how children leave. Interviews with children who were eventually captured or released from armed groups reveal that there are often real or perceived obstacles to a child’s exit from a NSAG. Across contexts, NSAG commanders create logistical obstacles to deter children from leaving: When the LRA abducted children, for example, it would take them on long marches that zigzagged through the bush in a deliberate effort to disorient them<sup>383</sup> and then locate them at bases in Sudan, putting long distances and hostile forces between them and their homes.<sup>384</sup> NSAG commanders often feed children misinformation to dissuade defection, suggesting their communities will reject them or that they are ineligible for DDR benefits. With the LRA, as with many other NSAGs, children were threatened with death if they attempted escape. Children who have been associated with armed groups in Angola, Colombia, Uganda, Syria, and elsewhere have testified that children captured while trying to escape were summarily executed, often at the hands of other children in the group who were forced to serve as executioners by their commanders, dramatically raising the costs of escape attempts.<sup>385</sup>

<sup>374</sup> S/2012/843.

<sup>375</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences”.

<sup>376</sup> ILO, “Wounded Childhood” p. 49.

<sup>377</sup> This review examined 16 studies (1990–2013) comprising 216 interviews with exiting extremists. As the author acknowledges, this data is problematic (i.e., it is not randomly generated, no controls). Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism”, p. 102.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>379</sup> Aubrey et al., “Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight”, p. 9; Peter R. Neumann, “Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors”, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2015. Available from <http://icrj.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ICSR-Report-Victims-Perpetrators-Assets-The-Narratives-of-Islamic-State-Defectors.pdf>.

<sup>380</sup> Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism”, p. 100.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106. As Powell points out, many NSAGs exist in ghettoized environments; increased contact with the outside world helps to undermine NSAG narratives. Jonathan Powell, “The Case for Talking with Terrorists”, interview, Council on Foreign Relations, 2 July 2015. Available from [www.cfr.org/interview/case-talking-terrorists](http://www.cfr.org/interview/case-talking-terrorists).

<sup>382</sup> Sebastian Meyer, unpublished interviews with detained youth accused of IS affiliation, Kurdish Iraq, 2015.

<sup>383</sup> Beber and Blattman, “The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion”, p. 87.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> For example, see Human Rights Watch, “Coercion and Intimidation of Child Soldiers”.

In addition, there are often real (or perceived) obstacles to finding alternatives outside the group. In conflict-affected areas, there may be few, if any, employment, education, or skills-development opportunities open to young people other than the NSAG. From a reintegration perspective, children often fear they will be rejected by their families and communities because of their NSAG association. Many group leaders actively cultivate this fear by forcing children to commit violence against their own families and communities and by constantly reminding children that they will never be welcomed home.<sup>386</sup>

The identity and the social bonds with peers that deepen with time likely make it more difficult for children to leave armed groups.

In addition to the risks associated with leaving, there are often real and perceived benefits for staying with a NSAG. A sample of former Al-Shabaab fighters cited a sense of belonging as the central reason they stayed with the group, along with money, responsibility, and fear.<sup>387</sup> The identity and the social bonds with peers – and even commanders – that deepen with time likely make it more difficult for children to leave armed groups. This can be particularly true for girls who are forced into “bush marriages” within a NSAG. Many have reasons to remain in the relationship even if they are able to leave the group (e.g., “material benefits and enduring protection in the face of poverty and rejection by the local community”).<sup>388</sup> One study in Sierra Leone found that even girls who had gone through formal demobilization and reintegration processes often continued to spend time with their “bush husbands.”<sup>389</sup> Girls who have borne children from these “marriages” may find it logistically and socially difficult to leave armed groups. Based on interviews with associated

children in Congo, one study concluded that girls may be less willing or able to endure the physical and security challenges of escaping, especially if they are pregnant or trying to bring their children.<sup>390</sup> Others may worry that it will be difficult to hide their association with an armed group from their communities, thus enhancing their risk of rejection and stigma, if they return with children.

## E. RECIDIVISM / SIDE-SWITCHING

The aforementioned challenges of leaving an armed group and the benefits of remaining with an armed group lead to significant recidivism and side-switching. Children exiting an armed group in conflict areas 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). Even when there is a ceasefire, conditions such as poverty, marginalization, and trauma are likely to endure and make children vulnerable to re-recruitment.<sup>391</sup> The assumption that children in active conflict contexts can remain unaffiliated is deeply flawed, as conflict dynamics can make neutrality nearly impossible. Moreover, a child’s time with a NSAG may have created or exacerbated certain conditions that make recidivism likely. For example, one study in DRC found that 7 per cent of children once associated with a NSAG re-joined their old unit or a new NSAG because of reintegration challenges (e.g., stigmatization, security threats because of previous affiliation).<sup>392</sup>

Even when they’ve left a NSAG because they are disillusioned with its leadership or unhappy with conditions in the group, this type of disillusionment does not necessarily translate into desistance. Rather, children and youth are likely to find another group that better aligns with their values and goals. In other cases, side-switching is more transactional. There are reports from Syria<sup>393</sup> and Mali,<sup>394</sup> for example, of children who have switched groups

<sup>386</sup> Recognizing this impediment, villages in northern Uganda used messages broadcast from helicopters, flyers dropped in the bush, and a local radio programme to provide not only information on how to surrender, but also promises of forgiveness from the community to entice children to leave the LRA. Lindsay Branham, “Come Out and Live among Us: How Zande Communities Can Influence the Combatants to Surrender from the LRA,” *Discover the Journey*, 2013. Available from [www.dti.org/pdf/DTI\\_ComeOutAndLive.pdf](http://www.dti.org/pdf/DTI_ComeOutAndLive.pdf). James Palmer, “The Power of Radio Helps to End Uganda’s Long War,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 September 2004. Available from [www.csmonitor.com/2004/0921/p07s01-waaf.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0921/p07s01-waaf.html).

<sup>387</sup> Botha and Abdile, “Radicalisation and Al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia,” p. 12.

<sup>388</sup> Johanna MacVeigh, Sarah Maguire, and Joanna Wedge, “Stolen Futures: The Reintegration of Children Affected by Armed Conflict,” *Save the Children*, 2007, p. 25. Available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/2639/pdf/2639.pdf>.

<sup>389</sup> Citing the 2002 Women’s Commission, p. 61, in MacKay et al., *Where Are the Girls?*, p. 57.

<sup>390</sup> MONUSCO, “Invisible Survivors,” p. 10.

<sup>391</sup> Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, p. 28.

<sup>392</sup> S/2015/19, p. 27.

<sup>393</sup> Aubrey et al., “Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight,” p. 9.

<sup>394</sup> “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in Extreme Violence,” Expert Level Working Meeting, Bamako, Mali, 13-14 March 2017.



because of salary differentials. For others, side-switching is key to reintegration. In Sierra Leone, many of the children who were demobilized from the RUF or Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) joined the Civilian Defence Forces (CDF) immediately upon returning home.<sup>395</sup> While on its face this type of side-switching appears to undermine the goals of DDR, some children were motivated to do so precisely to facilitate their reintegration back into their communities. In Sierra Leone, joining the CDF signalled that children were no longer affiliated with the RUF, “a most powerful ‘reintegration’ into their local community ... [whose concern] was clearly not that they were child soldiers, but that they had been fighting for the wrong faction.”<sup>396</sup>

## 5 Conclusion – Prospects for Reintegration

This chapter has reviewed the academic and grey literature on how and why children become associated with, used by, and exit non-state armed groups. Despite the paucity of rigorous data, the research available suggests that children become associated with armed groups for multiple, interrelated reasons. Structural and social factors help explain the environment in which children operate, with all its pressures and expectations. Individual-level factors that influence child association with armed groups must be situated against this backdrop. As this chapter has detailed, there are bits of evidence on a variety of factors – which can be classified as needs, vulnerabilities, and resilience factors/processes – that interact to influence child trajectories towards armed groups. There is still a lot to learn about how certain factors accumulate or interact, amplifying the effects of others or creating unique pressures and tipping points, as well as the hierarchy of the individual factors that influence a child’s association with armed groups.

By reviewing what is known about child association across conflicts, this chapter helps provide context for the findings about child recruitment and use by, and exit from, armed groups in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria detailed in chapters 4, 5, and 6, respectively. This review also provides a baseline from which to examine the programmatic response. In the chapter that follows, Kato Van Broeckhoven provides a landscape of the international community’s programmatic response to child recruitment and use in armed conflict.

<sup>395</sup> Shepler, *Childhood Deployed*, p. 138.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

**IRAQ**

Displaced families who fled villages south of Mosul line up in Ibrahim Khalil, Ninewa Governorate, to receive emergency aid.

—September 2012

© UNICEF/Lindsay Mackenzie



# 3

## **A Complex Programming Landscape**

The Prevention of and  
Response to Child  
Association with  
Non-State Armed  
Groups

By Kato Van Broeckhoven



# 1 Introduction

This chapter provides a selective overview of the international community's existing programmatic efforts to prevent and respond to child association with non-state armed groups (NSAGs). It will look at some of the standard interventions mounted by the United Nations and its partners, and what is known about the impact of these types of interventions. In addition to looking at traditional programmes such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), this chapter will

examine the emerging fields of practice in preventing and countering violent extremism (PVE and CVE), which are tailored to particular subsets of armed groups. Lastly, it touches upon insights from other fields of practice that – although not explicitly oriented towards “violent extremists” or even armed groups – might be relevant for programming related to children associated with NSAGs in contemporary conflicts. Ultimately, this chapter provides a

landscape of existing approaches to preventing and responding to child association with NSAGs that serves to ground the analysis in the concluding chapter of this volume, which examines whether the international community's approach to programming requires a reassessment of the nature of contemporary conflicts and the groups fighting them.

**BUUR-HAKBA, SOMALIA**  
AMISOM soldiers hand out biscuits to Somali children in the town of Buur-Hakba, the day after its recapture from Al-Shabaab.  
—February 2013

UN Photo/Stuart Price





Before continuing, it is important to provide three essential caveats. First, compiling an overview of the state of knowledge about the impact of interventions and programming on children and NSAGs is complicated by the dearth of quality data. Evaluations are often anecdotal,<sup>1</sup> are not always publicly available, and tend to be focused on a programme's reach rather than its impact. Second, this chapter inevitably emphasizes programmes organized by the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), due to the availability of data and evaluations, and the visibility of their interventions, though the author acknowledges the existence of many valuable local initiatives by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs). Third, regardless of the availability of information and the quality of data, it can be challenging to draw conclusions across diverse programmes, local contexts, and different times in history.

## 2 A Selective Overview of the Prevention and Release and Reintegration Programming Landscape

Children in armed conflict captured the headlines in the 1980s, with reporting on the use of children by both sides in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988),<sup>2</sup> the large-scale recruitment of children by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009),<sup>3</sup> and the role of children in other prominent conflicts.<sup>4</sup> The report by Graça Machel on the impact of armed conflict on children, presented to the General Assembly in 1996, further galvanized international attention to the issue, and spurred the United Nations, NGOs, and CSOs to respond to the plight of children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG).<sup>5</sup> The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations agency mandated to protect children from violence, exploitation, and abuse, together with other international organizations (IOs) and NGOs, led the design and implementation of interventions and activities intended to prevent child recruitment and use by armed groups and armed forces and facilitate the release and reintegration of children who had been associated with parties to conflict.<sup>6</sup>

### A. CHILD PROTECTION IN EMERGENCIES

"Child protection," a cross-cutting sector of work running through humanitarian, development, and human rights agendas, is defined as "the prevention of and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against children."<sup>7</sup> When conducted in emergency contexts, child protection includes work to ensure the safety and well-being of children, and to shield them from the immediate and long-term effects of natural and man-made crises. This includes work on gender-based violence, unaccompanied and separated children, and psychosocial support, as well as a focus on the prevention of child recruitment and use in conflicts, and the release and reintegration of children associated with armed groups and armed forces. Child protection efforts are guided by several frameworks,<sup>8</sup> including the 2007 Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or

<sup>1</sup> As Mack and Kenyon Lischer have noted, one of the biggest challenges in evaluating the landscape is the lack of overarching information and a universal data set; much remains anecdotal. Andrew Mack, "Ending the Scourge of Child Soldiering: An Indirect Approach," in Scott Gates and Simon Reich, eds., *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), p. 242; and Sarah Kenyon Lischer, "War, Displacement and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo" in Gates and Reich, eds., *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, reports focused on Iraq's "Lion Cubs," a paramilitary force comprised of boys between 5 and 12 years old, and Ayatollah Khomeini's call for all Iranians from 12 to 72 to join the fight. Peter W. Singer, "Facing Saddam's Child Soldiers," The Brookings Institution, 14 January 2003. Available from [www.brookings.edu/research/facing-saddams-child-soldiers](http://www.brookings.edu/research/facing-saddams-child-soldiers).

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF worked in Sri Lanka with international partners and local organizations and NGOs, such as the Tamils Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), to facilitate the release of former LTTE child soldiers. UNICEF, "Close to 150 Child Soldiers Released by the LTTE," 13 April 2004. Available from [www.unicef.org/media/media\\_20399.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_20399.html).

<sup>4</sup> These instances include the child recruitment and displacement of tens of thousands of children – the "Lost Boys and Girls" – in the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005) and the endless atrocities against children committed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) across central Africa.

<sup>5</sup> Note by the Secretary-General, 26 August 1996, A/51/306, 26 August 1996. Available from [www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/51/306](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/51/306).

<sup>6</sup> A few examples of the IOs and NGOs involved include the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Save the Children, Oxfam, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Mercy Corps, Defence for Children International, Child Rights International Network, War Child, Child Soldiers International, and Invisible Children.

<sup>7</sup> Definition by the Child Protection Working Group (CPWG). This UNICEF-led working group was established in 2007 and developed the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. Since 2016 this work has been included in the new global-level interagency group the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, co-led by UNICEF and Save the Children. For more information see <http://cpwg.net>. Child Protection Working Group, Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2012, p. 13. Available from <http://cpwg.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/03/CP-Minimum-Standards-English-2013.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the ILO Convention No.182 on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its Protocol of 1967.

Armed Groups<sup>9</sup> and its founding principles: taking into account the best interest of the child, non-discrimination, confidentiality, voluntary participation, transparency, flexibility, gender equality, and the “do no harm” principle.<sup>10</sup> Programmes, interventions, and activities targeting children associated with armed groups are commonly divided into “prevention” and “release and reintegration”, and this chapter will approach the discussion in that manner as well.

## B. PREVENTION OF CHILD ASSOCIATION WITH NSAGS

As evidenced by O’Neil in chapter 2, a wide range of structural, social, and individual factors is understood to contribute to child association with NSAGs. Programmes therefore rely on different theories of change, methods, and targeting of beneficiaries. Depending on their expertise and mandates, international and local actors focus on different populations of children, at different levels of risk, and at different times, using a wide variety of programmatic tools and points of leverage, each tackling “prevention” from a different perspective. The following examples are intended to showcase how broad and diverse the interventions, the programming actors, and the assumptions behind prevention programming are.

Depending on their expertise and mandates, international and local actors focus on different populations of children, at different levels of risk, and at different times, using a wide variety of programmatic tools and points of leverage.

For some, strengthening the protective environment and the resilience of children, families, and communities is key to the prevention of child recruitment and use. UNICEF, together with its partners, implements awareness-raising activities focusing on child recruitment and use, for example, by training community networks<sup>11</sup> and faith-based leaders about the negative effects of child recruitment and use in order to create protective environments for children. Mercy Corps has organized sports programmes to teach “teamwork, conflict resolution skills, gender equality, and values to develop life plans” in order to prevent Colombian youth from joining the FARC.<sup>12</sup> War Child implements activities to teach children and youth how to communicate, express emotions, and confront difficult situations so that they can “better deal with the challenges of everyday life in conflict-affected areas.”<sup>13</sup>

Some organizations view child association with armed groups as the result of precarity and physical insecurity, and therefore focus on providing the most basic of services and the creation of safe spaces. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) seeks to protect unaccompanied minors by tracing next of kin and reuniting children in war-torn settings with their families.<sup>14</sup> Save the Children is one of

several organizations that sets up child-friendly spaces in conflict zones to limit interactions with armed groups and thus prevent recruitment, as well as to provide psychosocial support and basic care.<sup>15</sup>

For those who see child involvement in NSAGs as a reflection of lack of opportunities, the programmatic focus has been on education, life skills training, empowerment, and employment. Child Soldiers International, for instance, supports education as a tool to prevent recruitment of vulnerable girls.<sup>16</sup> The International Labour Organization (ILO) implements programmes focused on reducing illegal child labour, which is believed to make children vulnerable to NSAG recruitment; thus, these actions further a preventive agenda.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the United Nations Development

<sup>9</sup> The principles strive to “consolidate global humanitarian knowledge and experience in working to prevent recruitment, protect children, support their release from armed groups and reintegrate them into civilian life”; UNICEF, “Child Protection from Violence, Exploitation and Abuse: Paris Principles and Paris Commitments”, 6 December 2013. Available from [www.unicef.org/protection/57929\\_58012.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58012.html).

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, “Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action”, May 2010. Available from [www.unicef.org/lac/CCCs\\_EN\\_070110.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/lac/CCCs_EN_070110.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> For example, in Sudan, UNICEF and Save the Children established Community Based Child Protection Networks (CBCPN), consisting of 15 community members who receive training on child protection, child rights, family tracing and reunification, alternative care arrangements, family mediation, and counselling. These groups conduct activities such as advocating for children’s rights, “advising on good parenting skills, identifying vulnerable women and children, mediating in family disputes involving children, family tracing and reunification, referring cases for appropriate services.” Mike Wessells, “What Are We Learning about Protecting Children in the Community? An Inter-Agency Review of the Evidence on Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms in Humanitarian and Development Settings”, Save the Children, November 2009, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Fernanda Cruz, “The War on Child Soldier Recruitment Begins at School”, Mercy Corps, 22 June 2012, Available from [www.mercycorps.org/articles/colombia/war-child-soldier-recruitment-begins-school](http://www.mercycorps.org/articles/colombia/war-child-soldier-recruitment-begins-school).

<sup>13</sup> War Child, “Conn@ct.Now in Colombia.”, accessed on 12 January 2018. Available from [www.warchildholland.org/connctnow-colombia](http://www.warchildholland.org/connctnow-colombia).

<sup>14</sup> Kirstin Barstad, “Preventing the Recruitment of Child Soldiers: The ICRC Approach”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (1 December 2008), p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> Francine Uenuma, “Children in Central African Republic Suffering from Sexual Abuse, Disease and Recruitment into Armed Groups”, Save the Children, 12 August 2013. Available from [www.savethechildren.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=8rKLIXM/Glpl4E&b=9366511&ct=13242663](http://www.savethechildren.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=8rKLIXM/Glpl4E&b=9366511&ct=13242663).

<sup>16</sup> Jo Griffin, “Education Protects Girls in DRC from Recruitment”, *Their World*, 14 November 2016. Available from <http://theirworld.org/news/education-protects-girls-in-drc-from-recruitment-to-armed-gangs>.

<sup>17</sup> ILO, “Moving Towards a Child Labour Free Jordan: A Collection of Emerging Good Practices”, 2016, pp. 6–7, 18. See also ILO’s Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (C182, 1999).



#### JUBA, SOUTH SUDAN

Displaced children residing at a UN transit site attend makeshift classes.

—August 2016

UN Photo/Isaac Billy

Programme (UNDP) implements employment programmes in Somalia to empower youth and provide them with opportunities, so that they will have fewer incentives to join armed groups.<sup>18</sup>

Other approaches favour a focus on changing the behaviour of parties to armed conflict. Some organizations advocate for the rights of children<sup>19</sup> and the prohibition of the recruitment and use of children in hostilities. UNICEF and ICRC promote “the legal and normative framework that underpins prohibitions against the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups.”<sup>20</sup> The Swiss-based NGO Geneva Call developed the Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict<sup>21</sup> as a means to elicit a direct pledge from NSAGs to respect international norms surrounding child recruitment.<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch uses research, media, and advocacy campaigns to hold the people who send children to fight accountable.<sup>23</sup> Other efforts seek to reduce child recruitment by calling out perpetrators and working to hold them accountable for their crimes. In 2005, the United Nations established the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations<sup>24</sup> committed against children in armed conflict (including child recruitment) in order to systematize the collection of data to inform prevention strategies and name and shame perpetrators.<sup>25</sup>

### STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

Despite decades of prevention programming for children in conflict contexts, the knowledge base of what types of approaches are effective and in which contexts is relatively small and constrained by a dearth of baseline data, clearly defined programme objectives and outcomes, as well as limited access.<sup>26</sup> There are significant methodological challenges for evaluating prevention programmes and activities, especially if the desired outcome amounts to a non-event (e.g., never joining an armed group). In addition, measuring “child protection” or well-being more broadly “is culturally, socially, and politically constructed, and varies across ethnic groups, countries, and regions”<sup>27</sup> As discussed in detail later in the chapter, collecting meaningful data takes particular expertise and time, both of which child protection, humanitarian, and development actors tend to lack. Coupled with some scepticism towards third-party evaluation, underfunding and timeframes imposed by donors, it can be difficult to conduct robust, longitudinal impact evaluations.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>18</sup> UNDP, “Somalia – Youth Empowerment,” video, 2012. Available from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yglWZ5khhR0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yglWZ5khhR0).

<sup>19</sup> Jo Becker, *Campaigning for Children: Strategies for Advancing Children’s Rights* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> UNICEF, “Child Recruitment by Armed Forces or Armed Groups,” 22 March 2011. Available from [www.unicef.org/protection/57929\\_58007.html](http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58007.html). Through the ratification and implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, the endorsement of the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, and the Paris Commitments to Protect Children from Unlawful Recruitment or Use by Armed Forces or Armed Groups.

<sup>21</sup> Geneva Call, Deed of Commitment under Geneva Call for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict, 2010, [https://genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm\\_uploads/2013/12/DoC-Protecting-children-in-armed-conflict.pdf](https://genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2013/12/DoC-Protecting-children-in-armed-conflict.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Geneva Call, Deed of Commitment, accessed 2 January 2018. Available from <https://genevacall.org/how-we-work/deed-of-commitment>. Beyond the work of Geneva Call, Security Council Resolution 1539 (2004) called on parties to armed conflict to adopt action plans to halt recruitment and use of children in conflict. S/RES/1539 (2004).

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Child Soldiers,” accessed 2 January 2018. Available from [www.hrw.org/topic/childrens-rights/child-soldiers](http://www.hrw.org/topic/childrens-rights/child-soldiers).

<sup>24</sup> The six grave violations include killing or maiming of children, recruitment or use of children by armed forces or armed groups, attacks on schools or hospitals, rape or other sexual violence against children, abduction of children, and denial of humanitarian access to children.

<sup>25</sup> The MRM is implemented in conjunction with the development of Action Plans with Armed Forces and Armed Groups, which are signed commitments between the United Nations and parties to conflict to address the issue. For more information, see [www.mrmtools.org/mrm](http://www.mrmtools.org/mrm) and <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/our-work/action-plans>.

<sup>26</sup> Charles-Antoine Hofmann et al., “Measuring the Impact of Humanitarian Aid: A Review of Current Practice,” Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute, June 2004. Available from [www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/281.pdf](http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/281.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Wessells, “What Are We Learning?,” p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

While solid scientific data on the subject is limited, decades of institutional knowledge and experience have yielded some lessons, as well as caveats and concerns, for how to conduct prevention programming for children at risk of recruitment by armed groups. These include the following:

- Interventions rarely start early enough. Children are recruited from “settings with pre-existing fragile institutional realities” in which “many education and health systems are deficient in terms of coverage, structure, financing, contents, methods, and quality” before conflict begins.<sup>29</sup>
- While early child protection interventions used to focus on single issues, such as child labour, trafficking, or health, the systems approach often applied today targets multiple levels at once, recognizing that children are embedded in a social system, in families, and in communities, and solutions must target each part of their ecosystem.<sup>30</sup>
- It has long been recognized that a community-based approach is essential to capitalize on existing structures and strengthen the formation of social and cultural capital.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, by working with community organizations, local NGOs, local governments, and faith-based groups, programmes are more likely to be appropriately tailored to beneficiaries’ needs and to reach difficult-to-access populations, including girls.<sup>32</sup>
- A strong awareness of the existing legal framework is considered central to prevention strategies,<sup>33</sup> but international norms and procedures alone do not restrain armed groups – especially not in fragile states in violent conflict.<sup>34</sup> Awareness campaigns should be followed up with accountability measures against the perpetrators,<sup>35</sup> while recognizing that punitive approaches intended to strengthen prevention down the line can also have unintended consequences, for instance when negotiating peace agreements.<sup>36</sup>

When prevention falls short, post-involvement efforts can still benefit from a number of these lessons learned, such as a strong awareness of legal and normative frameworks and the need to work closely with local communities.

### C. RELEASE AND REINTEGRATION: THE UNITED NATIONS APPROACH TO POST-NSAG-INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN

Post-involvement programmes run the spectrum, from limited efforts to release and demobilize groups or individuals to more comprehensive approaches that support their reintegration into society as civilians. Interventions to release and reintegrate children are informed by post-involvement interventions for adult combatants associated with NSAGs, principally disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes.<sup>37</sup> The ambitious objective of the DDR process is “to contribute to security and stability in post-conflict environments so that recovery and development can begin, [aiming] to deal with the post-conflict security problem that arises when ex-combatants are left without livelihoods or support networks, other than their former comrades, during the vital transition period from conflict to peace and development.”<sup>38</sup> Traditionally, DDR programmes occurred after the peace process and involved the collection and removal of weapons, the discharge of active combatants, and either short-term reinsertion assistance or longer-term support for combatants’ social and economic reintegration into civilian life; however, their specific focus and format has evolved.

<sup>29</sup> Vargas-Barón emphasizes the importance of investing in policy initiatives in fragile states before conflict breaks out – even though this has traditionally been viewed as a developmental approach rather than a violence prevention initiative – because there is a need to reevaluate past approaches given the “escalation of guerilla movements, community wars, the world-wide reach of terrorism, and the increasing conscription of children as armed combatants” (p. 210). These policy initiatives include integrated parent education and support systems, integrated basic community services, comprehensive education reform, and security systems and networks. Though the United Nations, and especially UNICEF, have been open to these developmental investments, states have been less welcoming, according to Vargas-Barón. Emily Vargas-Barón, “National Policies to Prevent the Recruitment of Child Soldiers”, in Gates and Reich, eds., *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, p. 205; and Peter W. Singer, “Talk Is Cheap: Getting Serious about Preventing Child Soldiers”, *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2004), pp. 561–586.

<sup>30</sup> Fred Wulczyn et al., “Adapting a Systems Approach to Child Protection: Key Concepts and Considerations”, UNICEF, January 2010. Available from [www.unicef.org/protection/Conceptual\\_Clarity\\_Paper\\_Oct\\_2010\(3\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/protection/Conceptual_Clarity_Paper_Oct_2010(3).pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Maureen W. McClure and Gonzalo Retamal, “Wise Investments in Future Neighbors: Recruitment Deterrence, Human Agency, and Education”, in Gates and Reich (eds.), *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, p. 240.

<sup>32</sup> Beth Verhey, “Child Soldiers: Lessons Learned on Prevention, Demobilization, and Reintegration”, World Bank, 31 May 2002, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Vera Achvarina and Simon Reich, “No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers”, *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006), pp. 127–164. See also Gerard McHugh and Manuel Bessler, “Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups: A Manual for Practitioners”, United Nations, 2006; Gates and Reich, eds., *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*; and Katharine Fortin, *The Accountability of Armed Groups Under Human Rights Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Singer, “Talk Is Cheap”, p. 566.

<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, in northern Uganda, where warrants issued by the ICC against LRA members worked against a successful peace agreement. Amelia Katan and Daniel Komakech, “Peace and Prosecution: An Analysis of Perceptions Towards the International Criminal Court Intervention’s [sic] in Northern Uganda”, *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (April 2017), p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Sometimes referred to as disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement (DDRRR) programming.

<sup>38</sup> UNDDR, “What Is DDR?”, accessed on 12 May 2017. Available from [www.unddr.org/what-is-ddr/introduction\\_1.aspx](http://www.unddr.org/what-is-ddr/introduction_1.aspx).



The first wave of DDR programmes for adults focused on reinsertion more than reintegration, with cash payments to ex-combatants creating the perception of a “cash for weapons” policy that has been widely criticized and disavowed.<sup>39</sup> This was the case in DRC, for example, where adult ex-combatants who surrendered their weapons received economic reinsertion packages that could include money and other material goods (e.g., \$300 and a bicycle to help them get back to their community and purchase a few basics for a new life).<sup>40</sup> Since the possession of a weapon was one of the eligibility criteria for participation in DDR, many women were excluded from the programme because “although they may have fought they did not possess weapons.”<sup>41</sup>

Over time, the “R” in DDR has shifted from a limited “reinsertion” component to a more robust “reintegration” effort. By 2010, a second wave of DDR broadened the goal to a comprehensive approach that focused on “building the conditions for sustainable peace.”<sup>42</sup> Within these broadened goals, reintegration programmes designed to prevent recidivism include a diverse range of approaches, from education and occupational training to psychosocial counselling, and DDR programmes are linked with other peacebuilding processes, such as security sector reform and transitional justice measures.<sup>43</sup>

Recognizing the importance of going beyond the limited DDR target groups,<sup>44</sup> and of involving actors not usually party to peace processes (e.g., street gangs), the United Nations has expanded its DDR approach to encompass Community Violence Reduction (CVR)<sup>45</sup> and pre-DDR activities, to include community members, women, and at-risk youth.<sup>46</sup> In 2015, for instance, MINUSCA<sup>47</sup> introduced pre-DDR for combatants in the Central African Republic (CAR) that offered cash for work, skills training, entrepreneurial support, and education on “the promotion of human rights, responsible citizenship and social cohesion.”<sup>48</sup>

### THE RELEASE OF CHILDREN

It was not until the late 1980s that children and youth were explicitly included in formal peace agreements or DDR

The release of children from armed groups should take place “at all times, even in the midst of conflict and for the duration of the conflict”.

initiatives. DDR for children traditionally ran along most of the same lines as for adults, with a few notable exceptions: First, while children were initially required to “surrender their weapons” to be eligible for DDR, this practice was eventually discontinued.<sup>49</sup> Recognizing that child association with armed groups takes many forms and that this requirement led to the exclusion of unarmed children (especially girls),<sup>50</sup> starting in 2000 children were no longer required to provide a weapon or demonstrate weapons proficiency.<sup>51</sup>

Second, unlike traditional DDR programmes that are premised on a peace agreement, the release of children from armed groups should take place “at all times, even in the midst of conflict and for the duration of the conflict.”<sup>52</sup> Efforts to release and reintegrate children should be carried out regardless of political negotiations, or the existence of adult DDR programmes or security sector reforms. There is an array of interventions to help separate children from NSAGs that can take

<sup>39</sup> Danielle Beswick and Paul Jackson, *Conflict, Security and Development: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 1162.

<sup>40</sup> In the DRC in 2002, adult ex-combatants would receive reinsertion packages that could include money and other material goods (e.g., \$300 and a bicycle to help them get back to their community and purchase a few basics for a new life). World Bank, “Demobilization and Reintegration in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)”, 11 March 2013. Available from [www.worldbank.org/en/results/2013/03/11/demobilization-and-reintegration-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo](http://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2013/03/11/demobilization-and-reintegration-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo).

<sup>41</sup> Jane Freedman, *Gender, Violence and Politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 53.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Muggah and Chris O'Donnell, “Next Generation Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration”, *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2015), p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> UNDDR, “How Has DDR Evolved?”, accessed on 12 January 2018. Available from [www.unddr.org/what-is-ddr/how-has-ddr-evolved\\_3.aspx](http://www.unddr.org/what-is-ddr/how-has-ddr-evolved_3.aspx).

<sup>44</sup> UNDDR, *Community Violence Reduction: Creating Space for Peace*, forthcoming 2018, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> CVR was borne out of UN DDR efforts in Haiti. Since their first application, CVR programmes have become a part of six global peacekeeping operations (MINUSCA, MINUSMA, MINUSTAH, MONUSCO, UNAMID, and UNOCI) intended to strengthen local missions through programmatic funding and engaging with local governments, local and international NGOs, and United Nations agencies, including UNDP, FAO, UNOPS, UN Women, ILO, and IOM.

<sup>46</sup> A distinction is made between, on the one hand, pre-DDR projects that employ a CVR-like approach for those who will be eligible to join formalized DDR processes later and, on the other hand, CVR programming for those who do not qualify for DDR. UNDDR, *Community Violence Reduction*, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> United Nations, “MINUSCA Fact Sheet”, accessed on 30 November 2017. Available from <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusca>.

<sup>48</sup> UNDDR, *Community Violence Reduction*, p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> This change was formalized by Security Council Resolution S/2000/101 and with the publication of the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) in 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Tiny Vandewiele, *Optional Protocol: The Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2006), p. 51.

<sup>51</sup> United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, “Module 5.30. Children and DDR”, in *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Standards*, 1 August 2006, p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, Article 2.8 (February 2007), p. 5. Available from [www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf).

place outside of DDR programmes. Humanitarian actors and states, for example, occasionally employ tactical negotiations to try to secure the release of children, which can take place either during or after conflict. One well-publicized example of an intervention outside of DDR is the negotiations with Boko Haram that led to the 7 May 2017 release of 82 girls – part of a group of 276 kidnapped from the Government Secondary School in Chibok, Nigeria, in 2014. In the Chibok case, the negotiations came after a civil outcry – including demonstrations and an international social media campaign (i.e., #bringbackourgirls) – that demanded the Nigerian Government intervene and urged Boko Haram to release the girls.<sup>53</sup> Other types of mid-conflict interventions are information campaigns to provide associated children with the practical information necessary to escape or counter the misinformation they receive from their commanders (e.g., that the community will reject them or that they are not eligible for DDR). In DRC, for example, messages for LRA members to “come home” were distributed by radio, via leaflets, and by messages broadcast from helicopter speakers.<sup>54</sup>

Third, in the last decade, children have been separated and protected from their commanders in cantonment and interim care centres during the DDR process. These centres are meant to be safe spaces that will allow the necessary time for screening processes, verification of identity and age, addressing health needs, and immediate psychosocial support; they aim to be places “for youth to begin their transition from the bush to ‘normal’ life.”<sup>55</sup> Family reunification is the top priority,<sup>56</sup> and after family tracing children can be given “early reintegration assistance” to help them and their families adjust during the first months.<sup>57</sup>

Children who exit NSAGs through informal processes or spontaneous releases are offered “supported returns”; but it is unclear how many children opt for these services, and how child protection actors identify and support these children. In South Sudan, for example, “auto-demobilized” children can opt to be absorbed into existing reintegration support services, including family tracing and reunification, psychosocial support, education, and livelihoods programming.<sup>58</sup>

## THE REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN

Like approaches to releasing children from armed groups, the body of practice around reintegrating children after association has been influenced by adult DDR programmes, but also tailored to the particular needs of children. Child reintegration, as defined by the Paris Principles, is “the process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation.”<sup>59</sup> Traditionally, UNDP and the World Bank have led the international community’s reintegration efforts for adults, and UNICEF and its implementing partners<sup>60</sup> have led child-oriented programming. That programming has largely been organized around five core components outlined by the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Standards in 2006: psychosocial support and care; community acceptance; education, training and livelihood; inclusive programming for all waraffected children; and follow-up and monitoring.

**Psychosocial support and care** is an important part of the reintegration process, given the mental health issues (e.g., behavioural changes and psychological trauma) that children suffer as a consequence of their time with armed groups. This support should start during the release process, should be implemented at “all stages of reintegration programming” to support children and their families and communities in developing “their strengths and resilience”; and should actively engage children in their own recovery.<sup>61</sup> In northern Uganda, for example,

<sup>53</sup> The campaign to compel the return of the abducted children gained traction under the internationally adopted slogan “Bring Back Our Girls”; but after three years almost half of the girls are still in the grip of Boko Haram.

<sup>54</sup> Liz Arthur, “Escape from War – Impact of ‘Come Home’ Messaging”, *Invisible Children*, 23 September 2014. Available at <https://invisiblechildren.com/blog/2014/09/23/escape-war-come-home-messaging>.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Blattman and Jeannie Annan, “Child Combatants in Northern Uganda: Reintegration Myths and Realities”, in Robert Muggah, ed., *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Dealing with Fighters in the Aftermath of War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 111.

<sup>56</sup> Verhey, “Child Soldiers”, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> UNICEF, “Strategy for Child Release and Reintegration UNICEF South Sudan Country Office”, 2015. When family mediation is required, CAAFAG will stay in interim care, or family-based alternative care arrangements are sought. Only in exceptional circumstances are independent living arrangements supported. United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre, “Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: Key Non-Negotiables”, accessed on 26 May 2017. Available from [www.unddr.org/key-topics/children/children-associated-with-armed-forces-and-armed-groups-key-non-negotiables\\_4.aspx](http://www.unddr.org/key-topics/children/children-associated-with-armed-forces-and-armed-groups-key-non-negotiables_4.aspx).

<sup>58</sup> UNICEF, “Strategy for Child Release”.

<sup>59</sup> The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, Article 2.8 (February 2007), p. 7. Available from [www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> United Nations partners include World Food Programme for food provision, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations for agriculture related activities, and ILO for activities related to the economic reintegration of children; other partners include international and local NGOs such as Save the Children, Cooperazioni Internazionale, Caritas, International Rescue Committee, International Committee of the Red Cross, War Child, SOS Villages, Don Bosco, and INTERSOS.

<sup>61</sup> The Paris Principles, p. 39.

psychosocial programmes for children and youth included rituals and ceremonies that support reintegration (e.g., cleansing rituals), as well as sports and games.<sup>62</sup> Even programmes with a different orientation (e.g., livelihoods, education) can serve psychosocial goals when they help children to return to “a sense of normalcy and safety,”<sup>63</sup> “shift their identity from soldier to civilian,”<sup>64</sup> and/or promote confidence and prosocial behaviour, and prevent depression.<sup>65</sup>

**Family reunification and community acceptance** are two of the most important aspects of children’s reintegration; implementation ranges from preparatory work for family and communities to ICRC’s family-tracing programme, Restoring Family Links.<sup>66</sup> Programmers have recognized that social participation and community acceptance are beneficial for preventing recidivism among ex-combatants and for promoting reconciliation between groups that were once antagonized.<sup>67</sup> In Nigeria, for instance, radio messaging is used to foster community awareness of reintegration, child abuse, and stigma.<sup>68</sup> Community-based resources must be utilized to ensure sustainable support for demobilized children,<sup>69</sup> and it is important to point out that there is a rich landscape of bottom-up local programming within which communities deal with reintegration processes.<sup>70</sup> In Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, communities have established reintegration “shuras,” or tribal council meetings;<sup>71</sup> and in African countries such as Sierra Leone,<sup>72</sup> Mozambique,<sup>73</sup> and Uganda,<sup>74</sup> traditional cleansing rituals have been used as a tool to remove the stigma that attaches to ex-combatants and reconcile them with their communities.

**Education and vocational training** start from the assumption that the likelihood of successful reintegration to civilian life is increased by education and job opportunities. Child protection actors aim to ensure that all released children have access to schools and other learning facilities appropriate to their age and level of education. For example, in Yemen accelerated learning programmes are offered to children or adolescents who missed out on basic education; adolescents who prefer employment have access to training, business set-up support, and job placement.<sup>75</sup>

Programmes narrowly targeted to formerly associated children can cause further polarization and stigmatization.

An inclusive approach that supports all war-affected children is a core component of child reintegration programmes. After years of experience, it has become clear that programmes narrowly targeted to formerly associated children can cause further polarization and stigmatization, as well as envy and anger from victims and war-affected communities over demobilization benefits. Community-oriented reintegration efforts can help strike a balance between the community’s interests and the need to support formerly associated children, and can foster a feeling of inclusion.<sup>76</sup> In South Sudan, for example, UNICEF applies a “one-plus-one”<sup>77</sup> targeting principle in its reintegration programme; for each released child, another at risk of recruitment is inducted into the programme.<sup>78</sup> Reintegration programmes now often invest in services and infrastructure that benefit the whole community, such as building and staffing schools or livelihood projects in the community.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Jeannie Annan, Christopher Blattman, and Roger Horton, “The State of Youth and Youth Protection in Northern Uganda: Findings from the Survey for War Affected Youth – A Report for UNICEF Uganda”, September 2006.

<sup>63</sup> Theresa S. Betancourt and Kashif T. Khan, “The Mental Health of Children Affected by Armed Conflict: Protective Processes and Pathways to Resilience”, *International Review of Psychiatry*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (June 2008), quoted in Theresa S. Betancourt et al., “Research Review: Psychosocial Adjustment and Mental Health in Former Child Soldiers – a Systematic Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Future Research”, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (1 January 2013), p. 29.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), quoted in Theresa S. Betancourt et al., “Research Review: Psychosocial Adjustment”, p. 29.

<sup>65</sup> Theresa S. Betancourt et al., “Research Review: Psychosocial Adjustment”, p. 29.

<sup>66</sup> See ICRC, “Restoring Family Links”, accessed on 23 December 2017. Available from <https://familylinks.icrc.org/en/Pages/home.aspx>.

<sup>67</sup> Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, “Community Counts: The Social Reintegration of Ex-combatants in Colombia”, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 2015, pp. 1–2.

<sup>68</sup> See chapter 6 on Nigeria, p. 202.

<sup>69</sup> Verhey, “Child Soldiers”, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Apart from the Uganda case study, the following examples are sourced from Kaplan and Nussio, “Community Counts”, p. 4.

<sup>71</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, “U.S. Tries to Reintegrate Taliban Soldiers”, *New York Times*, 23 May 2010. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2010/05/24/world/asia/24reconcile.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/24/world/asia/24reconcile.html).

<sup>72</sup> Laura Stovel, “There’s No Bad Bush to Throw Away a Bad Child”: “Tradition”-Inspired Reintegration in Post-War Sierra Leone”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2008).

<sup>73</sup> For Mozambique, see Paolo Granjo, “The Homecoming: Postwar Cleansing Rituals in Mozambique”, *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2007).

<sup>74</sup> Annan et al., “The State of Youth”, p. 16.

<sup>75</sup> UNICEF, “Yemen Operational Framework for the Prevention of Child Recruitment and Reintegration of Children and Young People Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups – First Draft”, 30 July 2016.

<sup>76</sup> World Bank, “The Cartagena Contribution to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration”, June 2009, p. 43. Available from <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/276761468028451619/pdf/695120ESW0P0940artagenacontribution.pdf>.

<sup>77</sup> UNICEF South Sudan, “282 Boys and 1 Girl Freed in Final Release of Children from Cobra Faction in South Sudan”, 24 April 2015. Available from [www.unicef.org/southsudan/media\\_16448.html](http://www.unicef.org/southsudan/media_16448.html).

<sup>78</sup> Those at risk of recruitment often include children with family members in armed groups, unaccompanied children, orphans, and children working or living on the streets.

<sup>79</sup> UNICEF, “Preliminary Strategy: Prevention of Recruitment, Release and Reintegration of Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Groups in South Sudan”, 2015.





#### JORDAN

Children play in a covered  
playground at the Zaatri  
Refugee Camp.  
— March 2016

UN Photo/Mark Garten

Lastly, even though the need for **follow-up and monitoring** seems widely recognized, there is still much to learn about how these interventions work and under which circumstances. For many areas, such as community acceptance and family reunification, and education and livelihood training, the programme is just the beginning of an individual's long journey.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, as explained in the next section, most programme evaluations only focus on collecting short-term data and do not consider long-term disengagement from armed groups.

### STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

As with prevention programming, rigorous knowledge about the impact of reintegration efforts aimed at children remains limited due to a number of persistent challenges. First and foremost, insecurity has made follow-up with geographically dispersed beneficiaries difficult. Second, lack of funding, expertise in sophisticated evaluation techniques, and agreed-upon metrics constitute general challenges<sup>81</sup> and hinder rigorous evaluation. Additionally, short-term funding timelines and donor requirements incentivize programme evaluations that focus on easily quantified results.

As a result of these challenges, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of release and reintegration interventions is mostly programmatic in scope, measuring the outputs (e.g., the number of programme participants) rather than the impact (e.g., successful and sustainable reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life or the prevention of recidivism).<sup>82</sup> Evaluations rarely venture beyond ex-combatants to take stock of how reintegration programmes strengthen communities and families, even though they function as a "restraining force" for illegal behaviour.<sup>83</sup> In addition, little comparative work exists across programmes and contexts.<sup>84</sup>

It is difficult to extrapolate broadly about the efficacy of release and reintegration interventions from the few rigorous evaluation studies for single programmes that do exist, especially for children. Two rigorous studies on adult samples produced mixed results. One study on Sierra Leone found that DDR programmes had no discernible impact on the reintegration of former combatants and that those who did not participate in formalized programming seemed to fare just as well as those who did;<sup>85</sup> another study in Burundi found that DDR participation led to increased income and reduced poverty incidence but did not impact political reintegration (e.g., attitudes).<sup>86</sup> While

<sup>80</sup> Lindsay Stark, Neil Boothby, and Alastair Ager, "Children and Fighting Forces: 10 Years on from Cape Town", *Disasters*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2009), p. 539.

<sup>81</sup> "Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Program (TDRP). Roundtable on Lessons Learned and DDR Implementation Challenges" (Paris: The World Bank, 2017).

<sup>82</sup> Originally, absolute numbers of weapons collected were used to demonstrate programmatic impact of demobilization efforts, but it was quickly realized that relying on short-term data devoid of context was not useful for measuring efficacy. Recidivism, a term more commonly associated with (juvenile) justice, would be one of the primary metrics for any evaluation. As Kaplan and Nussio note, while "not all who fail to reintegrate are recidivists, all recidivists represent reintegration failures." Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, "Explaining Recidivism of Ex-combatants in Colombia", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (10 May 2016), p. 67.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>84</sup> "At the macro level, studies of DDR have typically not engaged in a comparison of outcomes in countries that did and those that did not receive interventions. At the micro level, strikingly few rigorous attempts have been made to identify factors that might explain why some individuals and not others are able to successfully reintegrate after conflict. In particular, no studies have systematically compared the reintegration success of those that have and have not participated in demobilization and reintegration programs." Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Demobilization and Reintegration", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Aug 2007), p. 532.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 531–567.

<sup>86</sup> Michael J. Gilligan, Eric N. Mvukiyehe, and Cyrus Samii, "Reintegrating Rebels into Civilian Life: Quasi-Experimental Evidence from Burundi", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (2013).



there still remains a lot to be learned about whether these programmes help prevent recidivism in the long run, facilitate transitions to meaningful civilian lives, and/or contribute to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, there are limited positive and negative lessons learned. A few of these lessons, as well as experiential and empirical findings, follow:

- Age-appropriate programming that is inclusive of young adults and takes into account the age of association is essential. This is particularly true as many individuals became associated with armed groups when they were under 18 but disengaged as adults. In Uganda, for example, adolescents and young adults faced the same reintegration challenges as minors, and young adults often fared worse in literacy and education. The child-orientation of programmes left these young adults frustrated, as they felt that their agency was negated and that they were treated as children.<sup>87</sup>
- Reintegration programmes are more effective if they are community-based, community-driven, and inclusive. Projects such as the Child Soldier Special Project Beneficiaries in Burundi have demonstrated that by involving communities and including all children affected by armed conflict, programmes can help protect formerly associated children's privacy, safeguard them against stigmatization, and reduce community resentment.<sup>88</sup> Likewise, community-based approaches may improve participation of hard-to-access populations, such as female CAAFAG and their children,<sup>89</sup> who often spontaneously reintegrate and rarely access DDR programmes.<sup>90</sup>
- Evidence points to the benefits of programmes that are anchored in local structures and traditions, as they can help facilitate children's reintegration into families and communities. In Mozambique, for instance, most former child soldiers interviewed 16 years after being reunited with their families credited traditional ceremonies performed upon their return to cleanse them and protect their communities from "ancestral rebuke" with having helped them return to civilian life and deal with their feelings of shame and guilt.<sup>91</sup>
- Efforts to sensitize families and communities appear to bolster reintegration programmes. In Mozambique, community members said that their acceptance of returning child soldiers was impacted by campaigns and activities to encourage their support.<sup>92</sup>
- Short-term programmes are often considered inadequate by those whom they are supposed to help, and may cause frustration. Programming experience in DRC shows that former CAAFAG and community members were not satisfied with reintegration programmes because they lacked long-term perspectives.<sup>93</sup>
- There is still a lot to learn about the efficacy of educational and vocational skills training in reducing recidivism and reinforcing long-term economic stability. Research has yielded mixed results. A programme for former child combatants in Sierra Leone concluded that skills training did not help enhance livelihoods.<sup>94</sup> More recent studies on adult and underage ex-combatants in Colombia have shown no significant positive effect of employment on recidivism.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, however, those who entered into a programme to obtain their high school diplomas were significantly less likely to relapse than those who did not. As an ex-combatant noted, "This [programme] won't last forever. But, if I finish my studies, I'll always have that. I'll be able to get by."<sup>96</sup> Despite the mixed evidence, practitioners have learned several important lessons. One of the oft-noted problems is that

<sup>87</sup> Annan et al., "The State of Youth", p. 73.

<sup>88</sup> Milfrid Tonheim, "Where Are the Research Gaps? Reviewing Literature on Former Girl Soldiers' Reintegration in the African Context" in Bård Mæland, ed., *Culture, Religion, and the Reintegration of Female Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 22–23.

<sup>89</sup> For example, in DRC, girls were estimated to make up 40 per cent of the total number of children released from NSAGs, but made up less than 10 per cent of children who went through DDR. Gus Waschefort, *International Law and Child Soldiers* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2015), p. 205. Six hundred girls (7 per cent of the 8,546 children) were registered by MONUSCO between 2009 and 2015, but according to one study, more than a third of 150 interviewed girls never received any type of medical, psychosocial, or socio-economic assistance. Child Soldiers International, "What the Girls Say: Improving Practices for the Demobilisation and Reintegration of Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Democratic Republic of Congo", June 2017, pp. 11–12. Available from <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=e57e9cb2-cd70-4dc2-8681-e29bc6f3622b>.

<sup>90</sup> See, for instance, Seema Shekhawat, ed., *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Issues that impede girls from entering DDR programmes include the "fear of social stigma, potential damage to the family honour, and a negative impact on future marriage possibilities" and could be addressed through a community-based approach. Beth Verhey quoted in Claudia Seymour, "Unprotected: Young People in Post-Conflict Burundi", *Small Arms Survey* 2015, p. 251.

<sup>91</sup> Neil Boothby, Jennifer Crawford, and Jason Halperin, "Mozambique Child Soldier Life Outcome Study: Lessons Learned in Rehabilitation and Reintegration Efforts", *Global Public Health*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2006), p. 96.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

<sup>93</sup> Eastern Congo Initiative and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, "We Came Back with Empty Hands: Understanding the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Children Formerly Associated with Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo", January 2013, p. 88.

<sup>94</sup> Save the Children, "No Place Like Home? Children's Experiences of Reintegration in the Kailahun District of Sierra Leone", 2004, p. 5, quoted in Lindsay Stark, Neil Boothby, and Alastair Ager, "Children and Fighting Forces: 10 Years on from Cape Town", *Disasters*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2009), p. 536.

<sup>95</sup> Disaggregating the sample, however, one can distinguish between guerrillas, who are more ideologically motivated and for whom employment does not have an effect on recidivism, and ex-paramilitaries, who are generally more economically motivated and for whom employment is beneficial, if not vital. Kaplan and Nussio, "Explaining Recidivism of Ex-combatants in Colombia", pp. 82–83.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

programmes are driven by what officials know to provide and what participants want,<sup>97</sup> rather than a rigorous market analysis by a professional.<sup>98</sup> This has led to widespread agreement that job skills programmes must be responsive to both the market and the aspirations of formerly associated children. Improving the efficacy of education and job skills interventions may have significant impacts on a child's prospects for successful reintegration. One study suggests that successful economic reintegration can influence community acceptance, as community members view productive ex-combatants more positively.<sup>99</sup>

- Research suggests that education and employment programmes not only serve practical goals (e.g., enhancing economic opportunities), but also provide psychosocial benefits. Education and employment programmes have been found to represent “a way to rebuild a sense of dignity, agency and social belonging” for formerly associated children.<sup>100</sup> Experience in DRC and Nepal found that education or job training boosted psychosocial well-being when participants “succeeded at new tasks associated with civilian life”<sup>101</sup> and created new social contacts,<sup>102</sup> respectively.
- In spite of their acknowledged importance, targeted mental health interventions for depression or post-traumatic stress are often lacking due to short-term funding and limited human resources.<sup>103</sup> Some studies have shown that certain types of treatment (e.g., Narrative Exposure Therapy [NET])<sup>104</sup> are effective in reducing symptoms of traumatic stress with ex-combatants.<sup>105</sup> Other studies caution against using methods that focus on describing feelings about traumatic events, because they can be harmful or impair recovery if applied inappropriately.<sup>106</sup>

**JUBA, SOUTH SUDAN**  
Displaced children play at a  
UN transit site.  
—August 2016

UN Photo/Isaac Billy



One particular challenge to implementing psychosocial interventions is that former CAAFAG “are often reintegrated right back into contexts of poverty and violence, and are subject to many of the same stressors that were present when they initially became associated with the NSAG.”<sup>107</sup>

- Ensuring that ex-combatants can participate in their communities and are a part of peace processes may have a positive impact on their reintegration. Programme evaluations in Colombia<sup>108</sup> and Northern Ireland<sup>109</sup> have demonstrated that the inclusion of adult ex-combatants has significantly lowered rates of recidivism. Studies on CAAFAG suggest they would likewise benefit from inclusion, as exclusionary processes that do not recognize them have been shown to “di[m] their interest in civilian life.”<sup>110</sup>

Questions about whether traditional release and reintegration approaches and DDR programming are effective ways to manage the exit of children – or adults, for that matter – from

<sup>97</sup> An assessment of reintegration activities for children in South Sudan revealed that many adults assume that children and youth are easily inclined to make decisions based on unrealistic preferences regarding education or work. UNICEF, “Assessment of UNICEF Supported Programmes for Reintegration of Children Formally Associated with Armed Groups and Forces in Sudan,” January 2008.

<sup>98</sup> Canadian International Development Agency, “Support to Former Child Soldiers: Programming and Proposal Evaluation Guide,” May 2005. Available from <http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/CD4-23-2005E.pdf>. Save the Children, “No Place Like Home?,” 2004. Annette Ittig, “Midterm Evaluation: UNICEF Demobilization, Social and Economic Reintegration of Child Soldiers/Minors Associated with the Fighting Forces in Afghanistan Program,” U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, International Child Labor Program, June 2006, p. v.

<sup>99</sup> Julie Schiltz, Sofie Vindevogel, Eric Broekaert, and Ilse Derluyn, “Dealing with Relational and Social Challenges after Child Soldiering: Perspectives of Formerly Recruited Youth and Their Communities in Northern Uganda,” *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2016), p. 316.

<sup>100</sup> Eastern Congo Initiative and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, “We Came Back with Empty Hands,” p. xii.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>102</sup> Sarah Maguire, “UNICEF Programme for the Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Nepal: Evaluation Report May 2008,” Department for International Development, Japan, and UNICEF, p. 42. Available from [www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/Nepal\\_2008-008\\_-\\_CAAFAG\\_Evaluation\\_report\\_2008.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/Nepal_2008-008_-_CAAFAG_Evaluation_report_2008.pdf).

<sup>103</sup> This was, for example, the case in DRC. Eastern Congo Initiative and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, “We Came Back with Empty Hands,” p. 110.

<sup>104</sup> Narrative Exposure Therapy is “a short-term treatment for traumatized survivors of violence whereby an individual is asked to construct a narrative of her/his life story, with a focus on traumatic experiences. The therapy helps to transform fragmented memories into a coherent narrative, and assists with the processing of painful emotions.” Rebecca Littman, “Insights from Social Science on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups,” State of Research Brief, United Nations University, 2017, p. 9. Available from [http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6290/unu\\_briefs\\_SocialScience.pdf](http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6290/unu_briefs_SocialScience.pdf).

<sup>105</sup> Tobias Hecker, Katharin Hermenau, Anselm Crombach, and Thomas Elbert, “Treating Traumatized Offenders and Veterans by Means of Narrative Exposure Therapy,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, Vol. 6, No. 80 (2015).

<sup>106</sup> Michael G. Wessells, “Do No Harm: Toward Contextually Appropriate Psychosocial Support in International Emergencies,” *American Psychologist*, Vol. 64, No. 8 (November 2009), p. 845.

<sup>107</sup> Rebecca Littman, “Insights from Social Science,” p. 9. See also Kenneth E. Miller and Andrew Rasmussen, “War Exposure, Daily Stressors, and Mental Health in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: Bridging the Divide between Trauma-Focused and Psychosocial Frameworks,” *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (2010); and Patricia Justino and Philip Verwimp, “Poverty Dynamics, Violent Conflict, and Convergence in Rwanda,” *Review of Income and Wealth*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2013).

<sup>108</sup> Kaplan and Nussio, “Community Counts,” p. 17.

<sup>109</sup> Kieran McEvoy and Peter Shirlow, “Re-Imagining DDR: Ex-Combatants, Leadership and Moral Agency in Conflict Transformation,” *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2009), p. 48.

<sup>110</sup> Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, pp. 170–171.

armed groups have centred on the rigidity of the DDR process<sup>111</sup> and “the level of uniformity in the international approach [which discouraged] any deviation or exploration of alternative approaches.”<sup>112</sup> Some have voiced concern that more needs to be done to reach out to CAAFAG and tailor DDR programmes to their needs.<sup>113</sup> To design effective programming, there is a need for better assessments of the complex interplay of conflict dynamics that lead children to associate with NSAGs, as well as their experiences with armed groups and goals for the future.<sup>114</sup>

## 3 Prevention, Release, and Reintegration in Today’s Complex Conflict Environments

Today, the question is whether the United Nations’ approaches to prevention and release and reintegration programmes for children are fit for purpose in contemporary conflict contexts, especially with regard to armed groups that are characterized as “violent extremist” or listed as terrorist. Beyond the nature or legal designation of the parties to conflict, there are many other changing conflict dynamics that complicate the programmatic response. For example, while release and reintegration programmes previously took place in post-conflict contexts, they are increasingly being mandated in ongoing conflicts, alongside active counter-terrorism campaigns and efforts to counter violent extremism.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, today’s conflicts are marked by increased violence against civilian populations, are less conducive to traditional political settlements, and are increasingly intractable.<sup>116</sup> It remains to be seen if standard approaches to protecting and responding to affected children are effective in these settings and/or whether there is utility in further tailoring them to these contexts, supplementing them with additional components, or running them alongside other interventions.

### A. PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

In recent years, the focus on programming activity to prevent and counter violent extremism (PVE/CVE) has increased, raising questions about how these efforts relate to traditional prevention and release and reintegration programming for at-risk and formerly associated children.

At their core, PVE and CVE efforts are based on the assumption that “terrorism” and “violent extremism” present fundamentally different challenges that necessitate different approaches and solutions. The following section examines some of the programmes labelled as PVE and CVE and how they approach preventing and responding to child recruitment and use by NSAGs. Given the sparse empirical literature and experience on the subject, this is a limited overview, especially regarding PVE and CVE programmes that are specifically designed for children.

Over the last decade the United Nations<sup>117</sup> has worked to advance four primary counter-terrorism objectives, set out in its 2006 Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy:<sup>118</sup> addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism; enhancing measures to prevent and combat terrorism; building states’ capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system in that regard; and ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis for the fight against terrorism.<sup>119</sup> With the shift towards PVE and CVE – often perceived to be the softer side of counter-terrorism – the focus has changed to prevention and the scope has narrowed to addressing root causes, ideologies, and facilitating conditions. In January 2016, the United Nations’

<sup>111</sup> Christine Ryan, *Children of War: Child Soldiers as Victims and Participants in the Sudan Civil War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 20–23.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>113</sup> Jean-Claude Legrand, “Lessons Learned”, p. 21.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10–12.

<sup>115</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, “DDR in the Context of Offensive Military Operations, Counterterrorism, CVE and Non-Permissive Environments: Key Questions, Challenges, and Considerations,” in James Cockayne and Siobhan O’Neil, eds., *UN DDR in an Era of Violent Extremism: Is It Fit for Purpose?* (New York: United Nations University, 2015), p. 41.

<sup>116</sup> Sebastian von Einsiedel, “Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict,” Occasional Paper, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, March 2017.

<sup>117</sup> Through various bodies, such as the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) and its Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT), both part of the new United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism. Statement Attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General on the United Nations Office for Counter-Terrorism, 15 June 2017. Available from <http://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2017-06-15/statement-attributable-spokesman-secretary-general-united-nations>.

<sup>118</sup> CTITF, UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, accessed 28 December 2017. Available from [www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy](http://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy).

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*



**BEKAA VALLEY, LEBANON**

Young Syrian students leave the bus after attending the "second shift" (additional afternoon classes exclusively for Syrians).

— April, 2016

*Diego Ibarra Sánchez*





Given the existing knowledge gaps and the potential for unintended negative consequences, many have pointed out that PVE and CVE programmes risk violating the “do-no-harm principle”.

role in preventing and countering violent extremism was elevated with the Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.<sup>120</sup> The Plan of Action calls for an “All-of-UN” approach oriented to prevention, focusing on addressing the drivers of violent extremism. While youths receive the most attention,<sup>121</sup> the plan specifically makes child-oriented recommendations related to strengthening governance and disengagement, rehabilitation, and counselling programmes for those engaged in violent extremism,<sup>122</sup> including gender-sensitive, educational, and “global citizenship” programming.<sup>123</sup>

Given the thrust of PVE – with its focus on prevention and addressing conditions that are conducive to violence – there has been a natural overlap with development and humanitarian goals and work, including core child protection tenets.<sup>124</sup> This complementarity has been bolstered by not only the Secretary General’s Plan of Action, but also the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which explicitly link development to security, and the reorientation of development funds to include PVE programmes.<sup>125</sup> This nexus creates challenges and opportunities for child-oriented prevention and release and reintegration programming, and for development and humanitarian interventions more broadly.

Some have raised concerns about the potential securitization and politicization of development aid,<sup>126</sup> and have argued that the overlap in objectives makes it harder to identify priorities, creates competition for development funds, and could potentially undermine development efforts.<sup>127</sup> Others have promoted the relationship between development and PVE activities in the belief that they can be mutually reinforcing, promote integrated approaches, and foster overall programming coherence and coordination.<sup>128</sup>

A variety of United Nations organizations, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UNDP, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UN Women, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), are currently undertaking PVE/CVE projects and activities, and have developed networks and platforms to further international cooperation and capacity development in support of these efforts.<sup>129</sup> These programmes and interventions can take many different forms: For example, UNDP has developed Tamkeen – Emergency Response to Palestinian Youth Despair through Sport, Dialogue, and Employment Generation Fast-Track Initiatives – to promote social cohesion so as to reduce “the potential of violence and radicalization among Palestinian youth,” particularly in the Gaza Strip.<sup>130</sup> By comparison, UNESCO’s work to prevent violent extremism addresses root causes by promoting education policies and programmes, media literacy, engagement with young people, and cultural heritage awareness raising.<sup>131</sup> As these two examples alone illustrate, PVE and CVE encompass a variety of programmes and interventions driven by different theories of change, and targeted to different populations, at different times.

<sup>120</sup> Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, Report of the Secretary-General, A/70/674, 24 December 2015. Available from [www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674).

<sup>121</sup> The Plan recommends that Member States (1) support and enhance youth participation in PVE activities; (2) integrate youth into decision-making processes at local and national levels; (3) foster intergenerational trust and dialogue; (4) involve hard-to-reach youth; (5) establish national mentoring programmes for youth; and (6) ensure a portion of PVE projects is set aside to address the specific needs of youth.

<sup>122</sup> Priority area no. 2, Strengthening Good Governance, Human Rights and the Rule of Law, Agenda for Action: Recommendations on Preventing Violent Extremism, p. 4. Available from [www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org/counterterrorism.ctitf/files/plan\\_action.pdf](http://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org/counterterrorism.ctitf/files/plan_action.pdf).

<sup>123</sup> Priority area no. 6, Education, Skill Development and Employment Facilitation, *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>124</sup> These include, for example, action items such as addressing a lack of socio-economic opportunities, addressing discrimination and marginalization, prioritizing the engagement of communities, empowerment of youth, education, skills development, and employment facilitation.

<sup>125</sup> In 2015, the European Commission linked its development approach with PVE in the Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism (STRIVE) programme. European Commission, “STRIVE for Development. Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism”, 2015. Available from [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/strive-brochure-20150617\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/strive-brochure-20150617_en.pdf). In 2016, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) revised its guidelines to allow funding by its member states for PVE activities to be counted towards their annual development targets. OECD, “Final Communiqué of the 2016 DAC High Level Meeting”, 25 February 2016. Available from [www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=DCD/DAC\(2016\)11&docLanguage=En](http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=DCD/DAC(2016)11&docLanguage=En).

<sup>126</sup> Anna Möller-Loswick, “Is UN Goal 16 on Peace Being Misused to Justify Securitization?”, IPI Global Observatory, 11 October 2017. Available from <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/10/is-un-goal-16-on-peace-being-misused-to-justify-securitization/>.

<sup>127</sup> Kate McGrane, “Fighting Violent Extremism – Humanitarians Beware”, IRIN, 3 August 2017. Available from [www.irinnews.org/opinion/2017/08/03/fighting-violent-extremism-humanitarians-beware](http://www.irinnews.org/opinion/2017/08/03/fighting-violent-extremism-humanitarians-beware).

<sup>128</sup> Eelco Kessels and Christina Nemr, “Countering Violent Extremism and Development Assistance: Identifying Synergies, Obstacles, and Opportunities”, Policy Brief, Global Center on Cooperative Security, February 2016. Available from [www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/feb-2016-CVE-and-Development-policy-brief.pdf](http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/feb-2016-CVE-and-Development-policy-brief.pdf).

<sup>129</sup> A 2017 review found there were 400 ongoing or recently completed international United Nations projects with regard to counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism – most in West Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe – whose activities range from conducting specialized training courses to the development of guides and handbooks. Capability of the United Nations System to Assist Member States in Implementing the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, A/71/858 (2017), p. 10.

<sup>130</sup> Additional information to the Report of the Secretary-General on the Capability of the United Nations System to Assist Member States in Implementing the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, A/RES/70/291 (2017), p. 8.

<sup>131</sup> For more examples of UNESCO’s work, see <http://en.unesco.org/preventing-violent-extremism>.

PVE and CVE are often used interchangeably, making it challenging to distinguish between prevention and reintegration goals. PVE programmes are often upstream prevention programmes directed towards a broad audience long before involvement, perhaps even before any hint of a problem. Some PVE programmes are more targeted with regard to particular beneficiaries and in their goals, for example efforts to train teachers and police officers to recognize the “signs of violent extremism”. Other PVE efforts are not even denoted as such and include activities aimed at promoting broader societal goals that could also reduce support for violent extremism, such as programmes that promote diversity, mutual understanding, and peace.<sup>132</sup> For instance, a Mercy Corps initiative in Jordan offers activities such as rock climbing and leadership training, and focuses on stress relief as well as self- and community awareness, with the goal of “reattaching young people’s hearts and heads.”<sup>133</sup> The 1001 Nights programme<sup>134</sup> uses an entertainment curriculum that seeks to provide life skills training, psychosocial services, and alternative education to promote positive normative values for vulnerable boys and girls in refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon.<sup>135</sup> In addition to physical programmes, a major thrust of PVE programming has been online, including through social media. Online PVE programmes include a range of interventions, from broadly oriented efforts such as digital literacy campaigns,<sup>136</sup> the provision of online resources to counter hate speech,<sup>137</sup> and alternative or counter-narratives campaigns, to narrowly oriented one-on-one engagement with individuals expressing violent, extremist sentiments on social media.<sup>138</sup>

Whereas PVE is focused on pre-involvement and prevention, CVE activities and programmes tend to seek to reverse approval for, or involvement with, extremist activities and groups. CVE is narrowly focused on groups or individuals deemed to be “radicalized”; supportive of NSAGs or at risk of recruitment by them, and/or engaged with NSAGs or political violence more broadly. CVE programmes can be voluntary, such as targeted counter-messaging campaigns on social media, or involuntary, and involve the police, court orders, and mandatory rehabilitation activities in prisons. One example is the Sabawoon Rehabilitation Centre in Pakistan, which provides a minimum of six months of individualized, in-facility programming, including familial engagement, mental health treatment, and sports activities, with the aim of “deradicalizing” adolescents formerly associated with the Taliban.<sup>139</sup>

The need to find effective prevention and response measures to violent extremism and terrorism has taken on a new urgency for local communities, states, and the United Nations in light of the potential return of large numbers of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from Syria and Iraq. In the European Union, reintegration programmes for children who return from NSAGs deemed violent extremist are recommended to use tailored and holistic multi-agency case management, taking into account the rights of the child and child protection, and focusing on returning children “into an appropriate social network as soon as possible after their arrival.”<sup>140</sup> This approach should involve a range of practitioners, be adapted to fit the individual and his or her motivations for joining a NSAG, and address that person’s roles while with the group and his/her reasons for leaving.<sup>141</sup> Local authorities have been spearheading many of these efforts, sometimes in coalitions such as the Strong Cities Network.<sup>142</sup> Although not specifically targeting children, a programme worth mentioning is the Aarhus Model (or Danish model), a well-known and much-adapted method that encompasses a wide range of activities, including targeted mentorship programmes for at-risk youth and “deradicalization” for those who have been involved with NSAGs.<sup>143</sup> The impact of these emerging programmes, especially those tailored for children, is still being evaluated, and thus there is a lot yet to learn about PVE and CVE programming.

<sup>132</sup> One example is PEACEapp, an initiative of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) “aiming at the use of ICT, gamified apps, and videogaming platforms as strategic ways of building peaceful understanding among individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds”. “PEACEapp”, accessed 17 November 2017. Available from [www.unaoc.org/what-we-do/projects/peaceapp](http://www.unaoc.org/what-we-do/projects/peaceapp).

<sup>133</sup> Alice Su, “An Experiment: Can Rock Climbing Lure Young Jordanians from the Pull of Violent Extremism?” *Washington Post*, 4 April 2017. Available from [www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-jordan-countering-the-lure-of-violent-extremism-with-rock-climbing-and-other-lessons/2017/04/03/1dc817be-1339-11e7-bb16-269934184168\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-jordan-countering-the-lure-of-violent-extremism-with-rock-climbing-and-other-lessons/2017/04/03/1dc817be-1339-11e7-bb16-269934184168_story.html).

<sup>134</sup> Big Bad Boo Studios, “101 Nights”, accessed on 27 November 2017. Available from [www.bigbadboo.ca/index.php/propertiesdetail/pid/9/1001nights](http://www.bigbadboo.ca/index.php/propertiesdetail/pid/9/1001nights).

<sup>135</sup> UNICEF, “Makani Activity Updates”, February 2017. Available from [www.unicef.org/jordan/overview\\_10143.html](http://www.unicef.org/jordan/overview_10143.html).

<sup>136</sup> Jagtar Singh, Paulette Kerr, and Esther Hamburger, eds., “Media and Information Literacy: Reinforcing Human Rights, Countering Radicalization and Extremism”, UNESCO, UNITWIN Cooperation Programme on MIL and Intercultural Dialogue, UNAOC and GAPMIL, 2016, p. 16. Available from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002463/246371e.pdf>.

<sup>137</sup> UNESCO, “Countering Online Hate Speech”, accessed on 27 November 2017. Available from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002332/233231e.pdf>. And UNESCO, “MIL CLICKS”, accessed 27 November 2017. Available from <http://en.unesco.org/milclicks>.

<sup>138</sup> An example is the One to One project of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. “One to One”, accessed on 27 November 2017. Available from [www.isdglobal.org/programmes/communications-technology/one-to-one](http://www.isdglobal.org/programmes/communications-technology/one-to-one).

<sup>139</sup> International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, “1st Strategic Workshop on Rehabilitation and Deradicalization of Militants and Extremists: Report on a Workshop Organised by the Fata Secretariat Capacity Building Project”, Singapore, 18–19 May 2010, p. 22.

<sup>140</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), “RAN Manual – Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Their Families”, July 2017, p. 70. Available from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran\\_br\\_a4\\_m10\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf).

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>142</sup> The Strong Cities Network was launched at the United Nations in 2015 and is led by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. See <http://strongcitiesnetwork.org/about> and [www.isdglobal.org/isdapproach](http://www.isdglobal.org/isdapproach).

<sup>143</sup> The Danish model was established as a collaboration among PET (Danish Security and Intelligence Service), the Office for Democracy, and agents and operators in the field such as the Aarhus police. Andrew Higgins, “For Jihadists, Denmark Tries Rehabilitation”, *New York Times*, 13 December 2014. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/world/for-jihadists-denmark-tries-rehabilitation.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/world/for-jihadists-denmark-tries-rehabilitation.html).

## B. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

The pursuit of empirical and practical knowledge about PVE and CVE is complicated by a variety of challenges. First, the conceptualizations of PVE and CVE are underdeveloped and at points problematic (e.g., their exceptionalism) and, on the whole, “the knowledge gap on what violent extremism is and how it can be countered is enormous. Empirical evidence is so scarce that it is fair to say that the evidence base is nascent at best.”<sup>144</sup> Second, from a programmatic perspective, these are relatively new fields and there has been little time to accumulate a sufficient evidence base around their impact, particularly with regard to children and youth. Third, measuring the impact of PVE and CVE programming is inherently difficult, because of limited access to programmes and beneficiaries, challenges in isolating the impact of particular aspects of multi-prong programming, and the complexity of measuring non-events (e.g., not becoming an extremist). Due to these challenges, and those that impact child protection programming more broadly, with few exceptions,<sup>145</sup> “most evaluations [of counter-radicalization measures] stop short of dealing with long-term objectives and outcomes, and focus instead on intermediate target groups and output (such as the number of funded programmes, targeted communities, and established dialogue partners)”<sup>146</sup>

While the above-mentioned “system approach” reintegration programmes for returning FTFs look promising, they might prove challenging to implement. The structures for information sharing between different sectors and involved practitioners (e.g., social and family workers, teachers, mental health practitioners, etc.) might be hard to navigate. Furthermore, incentivizing individuals to share the necessary information on their involvement with NSAGs and convincing them to fully participate in interventions might also prove challenging, given the risk that cooperation could be perceived as admittance of guilt.<sup>147</sup> Although several manuals and toolkits have been developed for the reintegration of returning FTFs, the actual “experience in working with children who have returned from Syria and Iraq is still very limited,”<sup>148</sup> making it difficult to assess the value of these tools. A study of former Sri Lanka LTTE members, including children, purporting to be the only empirically sound assessment of a deradicalization programme, touted a multi-pronged approach (educational, vocational, psychological, spiritual, recreational, cultural, family, and community programming) that beneficiaries claimed led to “lower levels of extremism,” empowerment, and a closer connection to their communities;<sup>149</sup> the study’s caveat, however, is that rehabilitation programming was one of few options for participants, as they were on the losing end of a battle with no societal platform to support their convictions.

Given the existing knowledge gaps and the potential for unintended negative consequences, many have pointed out that PVE and CVE programmes risk violating the “do-no-harm principle.”<sup>150</sup> Although not specifically pertaining to children, an analysis of British CVE policy<sup>151</sup> found that efforts to solidify national identity over distinct ethnic and social identities in the name of countering violent extremism actually had the opposite effect,<sup>152</sup> leaving participants feeling stigmatized, a phenomenon known as “othering” thought to contribute to, rather than suppress, conflict.<sup>153</sup> Concerns about the unintended negative consequences of CVE programming are particularly acute with regard to “deradicalization” efforts. Given the limited history of PVE and CVE programming and the lack of information on its impact, it may be helpful to look to other, more established and empirically rich disciplines that focus on violence prevention and/or disengagement from violent groups in other contexts.

<sup>144</sup> Mareike Schomerus and Sherine El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, with Jassi Sandhar, *Countering Violent Extremism: Topic Guide* (Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2017), p. 25.

<sup>145</sup> One exception is the previously mentioned 1001 Nights programme – the third-party evaluation of which appears quite rigorous – which has demonstrated some success in “resetting normative values and providing psycho-social support to Syrian and Iraqi children traumatized by violence.” For example, in Jordan, 49 per cent of those children who displayed intolerance for people from different backgrounds before exposure to the curriculum became more tolerant after. In Lebanon, 43 per cent of those who preferred violent methods of dispute resolution before the programme preferred non-violent alternatives after. Big Bad Boo Studios, “1001 Nights Jordan and Lebanon Refugee Implementation,” presented at the Education and Diversity Foundation, Netherlands, July 2017.

<sup>146</sup> Lasse Lindeskilde, “Introduction: Assessing the Effectiveness of Counter-Radicalisation Policies in Northwestern Europe,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2012), pp. 335–344.

<sup>147</sup> RAN, “RAN Manual,” p. 3.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>149</sup> David Webber, Marina Chernikova, Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Malkanthi Hettiarachchi, Rohan Gunaratna, Marc-Andre Lafreniere, and Jocelyn J. Belanger, “Deradicalizing Detained Terrorists,” *Political Psychology*, May 2017, p. 2.

<sup>150</sup> Schomerus et al., *Countering Violent Extremism*, p. 23.

<sup>151</sup> See “CONTEST: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism,” July 2011. Available from [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/97994/contest-summary.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97994/contest-summary.pdf).

<sup>152</sup> Paul Thomas, *Youth, Multiculturalism and Community Cohesion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 168; Paul Thomas, *Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism: Failing to Prevent* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012); and Schomerus et al., *Countering Violent Extremism*, p. 25.

<sup>153</sup> Schomerus et al., *Countering Violent Extremism*, p. 25.



# 4 Insights from Other Fields

Despite the differences between NSAGs and criminal organizations, some basic similarities suggest the utility of drawing from criminological work. Criminologists are already applying work to violent extremism;<sup>154</sup> specifically, the research and programming experience on crime and gang prevention and desistance may be informative for evaluating ways forward for child protection in contemporary contexts. In addition, other areas of practice not often applied to “violent extremist” or terrorist contexts, such as public health, might also be worth further exploration considering the relevant empirical evidence base, and the potential to broaden the overall knowledge base on programming impact.

## A. CRIMINOLOGY

Criminological models may have useful applications to armed conflict contexts because of the basic similarities between NSAGs, criminal organizations, and street gangs and common risk factors for association across groups. Criminologists have questioned the “largely unchallenged assumption” that violent extremism represents a “fundamentally different challeng[e]”; and a few have pointed to the merits and efficacy of applying broader crime prevention strategies to violent extremist contexts.<sup>155</sup> Criminological models may also be practical, as pre- and post-NSAG involvement periods for many individuals may involve criminal activity. They may be especially relevant in contemporary conflict contexts, where there is significant overlap and symbiosis between armed groups and organized crime syndicates. Lastly, empirical research on crime desistance and gang prevention spans several decades,<sup>156</sup> and provides a stronger evidence base from which to work.

Criminological and public health approaches may be well suited to respond to the realities of child recruitment and use by armed groups today.

At least three key insights from criminology are particularly relevant to violent extremism today. First, criminal desistance and gang disengagement, and the process of “disembedding” from a group and “de-identifying” as a member, have been proven to be gradual, sometimes erratic processes. In contrast, policymakers often envision DDR or CVE as interventions that are an instant termination of association with armed groups and abandonment of arms. The applicability of the criminological conceptualization that desistance and disengagement are two interrelated, gradual, and possibly erratic<sup>157</sup> processes is bolstered by growing evidence<sup>158</sup> and would not only have programmatic consequences but also require a shift towards longitudinal evaluation. A second pertinent insight is that research demonstrates the positive impact of deterrence programmes (e.g.,

Boston’s Operation Ceasefire<sup>159</sup> or Cincinnati Ceasefire<sup>160</sup>) that combine suppression efforts with desistance incentives and alternatives (e.g., job training, psychological treatment, etc.),<sup>161</sup> and this multi-pronged approach may prove beneficial for the prevention of child (re-)recruitment by NSAGs. Lastly, criminological studies have shown that family-based interventions for at-risk youth have been successful in risk-factor reduction even when there is

<sup>154</sup> See, for example, Scott H. Decker and David Pyrooz, “‘I’m Down for a Jihad’: How 100 Years of Gang Research Can Inform the Study of Terrorism, Radicalisation and Extremism”, *Perspectives of Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2015).

<sup>155</sup> Yvon Dandurand, “Social Inclusion Programmes for Youth and the Prevention of Violent Extremism”, in Marco Lombardi et al., eds., *Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism among Youth to Prevent Terrorism* (Amsterdam: IOS Press and NATO, 2015), p. 31.

<sup>156</sup> Jacqueline Scott, “Insights from Criminology on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups” State of Research Brief, United Nations University, 2017, p. 6. Available from [http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6291/unu\\_briefs\\_Criminology\\_WEB-PAGES.pdf](http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6291/unu_briefs_Criminology_WEB-PAGES.pdf). It should be noted here that certain areas of research do not enjoy the same wealth of scholarship. This is particularly true of gang desistance, which until recently was a relatively understudied aspect of street gang literature. See Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) for a systematic review of risk factors.

<sup>157</sup> With “erratic” we refer in the first place to re-recruitment (see chapter 2 for more on the how and why of re-recruitment) but also to joining other armed groups. For example, see Wessells’ discussion in *Child Soldiers* of child demobilization in Liberia and Uganda.

<sup>158</sup> Jacqueline Scott, “Insights from Criminology”, p. 5. For more on the definitional aspects of disengagement versus desistance, see David C. Pyrooz and Scott H. Decker, “Motives and Methods for Leaving the Gang: Understanding the Process of Gang Desistance”, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2011); and Gary Sweeten, David Pyrooz, and Alex Piquero, “Disengaging from Gangs and Desistance from Crime”, *Justice Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2013).

<sup>159</sup> See Anthony A. Braga, David M. Kennedy, Anne Morrison Piehl, and Elin J. Waring, “Reducing Gun Violence: The Boston Gun Project’s Operation Ceasefire”, U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, September 2001.

<sup>160</sup> John Seabrook, “Don’t Shoot: A Radical Approach to the Problem of Gang Violence”, *New Yorker*, 22 June 2009.

<sup>161</sup> Jennifer Wong, Jason Gravel, Martin Bouchard, Carlo Morselli, and Karine Descormiers, “Effectiveness of Street Gang Control Strategies: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Evaluation Studies”, Research and National Coordination Organized Crime Division, Law Enforcement and Policy Branch Public Safety Canada, 2012, pp. 28–29, quoted in Jacqueline Scott, “Insights from Criminology”, p. 7.

a gang member in the family.<sup>162</sup> Since children often become associated with NSAGs through family members or friends, there are lessons to be learned from the importance of family-based interventions and the similarities with youth gang membership.<sup>163</sup>

## B. PUBLIC HEALTH

Public health models can be valuable for prevention, release, and reintegration programming in contemporary conflict contexts, since they have experience with responding to highly interactive dynamics that impact children, and measuring the impact of complex and multi-layered programmes. Public health practitioners have long understood the need for a holistic and systematic approach, recognizing that concentrating on single issues will prompt fragmented responses.<sup>164</sup> Building on this idea, public health approaches have sought to reinforce the systems that are already in place to protect children from a variety of adverse outcomes, to encourage efficient resource management, and to emphasize prevention that is contextually appropriate. This approach lends itself naturally to child protection in emergencies; studies on child soldier reintegration have demonstrated that holistic approaches support long-term reintegration and self-sufficiency. By engaging family, cultural practices (e.g., traditional cleansing, health rituals), and community-oriented efforts to broker acceptance and forgiveness, reintegration prospects improve.<sup>165</sup>

Public health approaches have sought to reinforce the systems that are already in place to protect children from a variety of adverse outcomes.

Those who devise M&E models of child protection interventions can also learn from public health approaches. Building upon the ecological model of violence prevention and child development,<sup>166</sup> public health models monitor both risk and protective factors across individual, family, community, and societal levels, enabling key actors to make informed decisions that address protection challenges.<sup>167</sup> From another perspective, population-based measures can shed light on the well-being of a population by focusing on a set of indicators in a representative sample. In Senegal, for instance, a study measuring child protection outcomes and impacts has demonstrated that a population survey can be orchestrated quickly and within the framework of national resources.<sup>168</sup> Applying a public health approach to studying the efficacy of interventions could help enhance the quality of the knowledge base on child protection interventions.<sup>169</sup>

Other fields besides criminology and public health might provide insights and inspiration for child protection programming in contemporary contexts. Although evidence on their impact is scarce, alternate accountability and justice models deserve further exploration, especially given the complexity and scale of the conflicts and the capacity of the criminal justice systems in many affected countries. A potentially fruitful area for further exploration is the application of transitional justice models to contemporary conflicts to see if they could potentially reduce the risk of stigma and the rate of recidivism, and enhance social repair,<sup>170</sup> even among individuals who have been members of terrorist and violent extremist groups.

<sup>162</sup> Jacqueline Scott, "Insights from Criminology," p. 10.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 10. Programmes in Los Angeles and Honduras, for instance, have shown that family-based interventions for high-risk youth – including those with multiple gang-affiliated family members – can drastically decrease the risk for gang association.

<sup>164</sup> Fred Wulczyn et al., "Adapting a Systems Approach to Child Protection: Key Concepts and Considerations," UNICEF, January 2010. Available from [www.unicef.org/protection/Conceptual\\_Clarity\\_Paper\\_Oct\\_2010\(3\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/protection/Conceptual_Clarity_Paper_Oct_2010(3).pdf).

<sup>165</sup> Neil Boothby, Jennifer Crawford, and Jason Halperin, "Mozambique Child Soldier Life Outcome Study: Lessons Learned in Rehabilitation and Reintegration Efforts," *Global Public Health*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2006); and Michael Wessells and Kathleen Kostelny, "Youth Soldiering: An Integrated Framework for Understanding Psychosocial Impact," in Brian K. Barber, ed., *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>166</sup> Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>167</sup> Michael Wessells, "The Case for Population Based Tracking of Outcomes for Children Toward a Public Health Approach in Child Protection System Strengthening," Columbia University, December 2014. Available from [www.cpcnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/The-Case-for-Population-Based-Tracking-of-Outcomes-for-Children-final.pdf](http://www.cpcnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/The-Case-for-Population-Based-Tracking-of-Outcomes-for-Children-final.pdf).

<sup>168</sup> Yasmine Anwar et al., "Measuring Child Protection Outcomes in Senegal: A Population-Based Survey of Pikine and Kolda Departments," CPC Learning Network and UNICEF, April 2017. Available from [www.cpcnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Measuring-CP-Outcomes-in-Senegal-Columbia-baseline-study-2017.pdf](http://www.cpcnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Measuring-CP-Outcomes-in-Senegal-Columbia-baseline-study-2017.pdf).

<sup>169</sup> Wessells, "The Case for Population Based Tracking"; and Stark Lindsay et al., "A Grounded Approach to the Definition of Population-Based, Child Protection and Well-Being Outcome Areas," Interagency Learning Initiative on Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Child Protection Systems, November 2012. Available from [www.cpcnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/SL-Pregnancy-Outcomes-report-final.pdf](http://www.cpcnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/SL-Pregnancy-Outcomes-report-final.pdf).

<sup>170</sup> Mark A. Drumbl, *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 200.





**SOUTH SUDAN**

A young student learns the English alphabet at one of the makeshift classrooms UNICEF established as part of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)'s initiative to protect civilians.

— July, 2016

UN Photo/Isaac Billy





**SYRIA**  
Children attend a make-shift school in  
a rural underground facility.  
—November 2016  
© UNICEF/anonymous

## 5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief overview of some of the international community's programmatic approaches for addressing the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, including both prevention and release and reintegration interventions. The chapter examined the existing evidence base on, and challenges to, studying the impact of prevention and post-involvement programming. While there is still more to learn about how and when these interventions work, through decades of practice, and in spite of the number of actors involved and diversity of approaches, positive as well as negative lessons have emerged.

Contemporary conflict contexts, however, present a range of challenges to effective prevention and release and reintegration efforts. The proliferation of parties to conflict, the types of armed groups involved (e.g., listed terrorist groups), the hybridization with organized crime, the increasingly transnational nature of conflict, the international counter-terrorism regime, and technological innovations in warfare and communications are just a few factors that have led to more intractable conflicts and more difficult operating environments for humanitarians. In the face of these shifting conflict dynamics, questions arise: Is the international community's approach to prevention and release and reintegration programming for children fit for purpose in contemporary conflict contexts? Are there programmatic gaps that need filling? Do existing approaches need to be further tailored to address current circumstances? Would flexible, individual child-centred approaches be sufficiently nimble to address contemporary conflict dynamics? And beyond the substance of programmatic interventions, how can child protection staff navigate the increasingly securitized, ongoing conflict environments in which they must operate?

To help answer these questions, this chapter has briefly reviewed some of the other emerging approaches for addressing the recruitment and use of children by armed groups. PVE and CVE have garnered the most attention, given the current international programming focus. These emerging fields of practice raise a number of questions about whether, especially on the prevention side, they provide a new approach, or if the differences lie more in their targeting, timing, and branding. Given the general lack of clarity around these interventions, there is little publicly available evidence from which to evaluate their efficacy. There are also questions about the potential for PVE and CVE interventions to do harm. The potential utility of incorporating or working alongside PVE and CVE programming is discussed in chapter 8.



This chapter also raises the prospects of drawing from other empirically rich fields – namely criminology and public health – that are not specifically oriented to armed groups. In both cases, at their core, the problems that crime and public health interventions seek to address have some commonality with the multi-causal ecology of child association with armed groups. While there are important differences between armed groups and criminal organizations (e.g., street gangs) and some of the contexts in which they operate, there are sufficient similarities to suggest that it may be useful to draw from the decades of empirical research and programming experience on gang prevention and desistance when designing child protection interventions. Some of the criminological and public health approaches highlighted in this chapter may be well suited to the realities of child recruitment and use by armed groups today. For example, public health has long applied a systematic approach that takes into account the broader and interactive dynamics that impact children’s health; by adopting more of a holistic approach, child protection programming for at-risk children and former CAAFAG might become more resource efficient and contextually appropriate.

The chapters that follow provide three case studies of contemporary armed conflicts: Syria and Iraq (chapter 4), Mali (chapter 5), and Nigeria (chapter 6). The case studies examine the empirical evidence surrounding how and why children become associated with armed groups, are used by them, and, ultimately, exit these groups. Through the lens of these ongoing conflicts, this volume will return to the programmatic questions outlined herein. In chapter 8, O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven examine whether traditional approaches to prevention and release and reintegration programming for children – but also youth – need a rethink in light of contemporary conflict dynamics and the benefits and costs of adapting and augmenting those efforts with other approaches, particularly PVE and CVE.



**MOSUL, IRAQ**

A child carries a bag as he and other civilians walk through the debris of buildings and vehicles destroyed during intense fighting as they flee for safe areas.

—July 2017

© UNICEF/Alessio Romenzi



4

# "I Am Nothing Without A Weapon"

Understanding Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in Syria and Iraq

By Mara Revkin

WITH RESEARCH ASSISTANCE BY AHMAD MIDHI  
AND MAZN NAJMALDEEN SABER

# 1 Introduction

The Syrian civil war, which began as a peaceful uprising in 2011, has since devolved into the deadliest conflict of the 21st century. According to United Nations estimates, the death toll had reached 400,000 by April 2016,<sup>1</sup> and 7.6 million Syrians (40 per cent of the country's population) have been displaced, either internally or as refugees to other countries. The conflict has spilled over into neighbouring Iraq, where Islamic State (IS)<sup>2</sup> seized a third of the country's territory in June 2014.<sup>3</sup> Since then, more than 26,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed as a result of the conflict, terrorism, and other acts of violence.<sup>4</sup> These two related conflicts have had particularly devastating consequences for Syrian and Iraqi children, many of whom have been orphaned or otherwise separated from their parents. In addition to facing the physical dangers of injury or death, children experience emotional and developmental challenges associated with exposure to extreme violence, the loss of family members or friends, and multi-year interruptions of schooling. Children are targets for several types of exploitation that are particularly prevalent in conflict settings: child labour, sexual abuse, early and coerced marriage, human trafficking, and, of particular concern for this study, recruitment and use by Government armed forces, pro-Government militias, and non-state armed groups (NSAGs). The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) established by the United Nations Security Council had verified 2,930 cases of recruitment and use of children by the Syrian army and 83 distinct NSAGs in Syria as of December 2017, but the true number of underage recruits is believed to be much higher.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Radio, "Syria Envoy Claims 400,000 Have Died in Syria Conflict", 22 April 2016. Available from [www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2016/04/syria-envoy-claims-400000-have-died-in-syria-conflict](http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2016/04/syria-envoy-claims-400000-have-died-in-syria-conflict).

<sup>2</sup> The author uses "Islamic State" and "IS" rather than some of the common alternatives (ISIL, ISIS, or Daesh) to mirror the group's self-appellation.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Rasheed and Maher Chmaytelli, "Iraqi Army Declares First Major Victory over Islamic State in Ramadi", Reuters, 27 December 2015. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iraq-ramadi-idUSKBN0UA0DH20151228](http://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iraq-ramadi-idUSKBN0UA0DH20151228).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Iraq, "UN Casualty Figures for Iraq for the Month of June 2017", 2 July 2017. Available from [www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=6995:un-casualty-figures-for-iraq-for-the-month-of-june-2017&Itemid=633&lang=en](http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=6995:un-casualty-figures-for-iraq-for-the-month-of-june-2017&Itemid=633&lang=en).

<sup>5</sup> The Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM), "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification of Recruitment and Use of Children by Parties to the Conflict in Syria, March 2011–December 2017".



**MOSUL, IRAQ**

A woman carries her child through the debris of buildings and vehicles destroyed during intense fighting as they flee the Old City for safe areas.  
—July 2017

© UNICEF/Alessio Romenzi

Pathways into and out of NSAGs are rarely linear and unidirectional, and the roles that children perform within groups are fluid and evolve over time.

All of the major NSAGs participating in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have recruited children, yet these groups vary significantly in the extent to which they do so, their motives and techniques, and the roles for which child recruits are used. Despite considerable media attention to this issue, previous reporting and research has relied heavily on secondary sources or propaganda produced by the armed groups themselves, particularly in the case of IS, which has featured children prominently in its videos and publications. Existing explanations for the motivations of children who join such groups often focus on single variables, such as ideology or economic necessity, without examining interactions and correlations between different variables. Past work also tends to focus exclusively on the recruiting practices of a single group, without examining the trajectories of children who switch sides between two or more groups over time, even though such “side-switching” is

commonplace in Syria and other multiparty civil wars.<sup>6</sup> In many cases, children are recruited or used by multiple NSAGs simultaneously. For example, Amr, an Iraqi boy who had been working in a steel factory in Ninewa Province since the age of 12, was first recruited by IS at the age of 17 to cook food for fighters. Even though IS had previously killed his own father, a former Iraqi police officer, Amr needed the job in IS’s kitchen, which paid better than the steel factory, to help support his mother and six siblings. A few months later, he was again recruited by an uncle in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a primarily Shiite militia, to spy on IS.<sup>7</sup> After a fellow IS member caught him taking photographs—for which his uncle offered him 3 million Iraqi dinars (approximately \$2,520)—he was imprisoned by IS. He eventually escaped from the IS prison after bribing one of its guards, only to be caught by Kurdish security forces and sentenced to detention in a juvenile reformatory in Erbil, where he was surveyed for this study. Amr’s trajectory—from child labourer to recruitment to prison—exemplifies the complexity of children’s experiences before, during, and after their association with NSAGs.

In many ways, Amr’s story – from child laborer to armed group recruit, from victim of ISIS violence to ISIS employee – exemplifies the complexity of children’s trajectory with armed groups today. Pathways into and out of NSAGs are rarely linear and unidirectional, and the roles that children perform within groups are fluid and evolve over time. Children who join NSAGs with the intent of serving in supporting or logistical roles may, voluntarily or involuntarily, transition into combat roles, as has been the case in Iraq, where IS has “transferred” many of its civilian employees to the front lines out of necessity.<sup>8</sup> Although patterns of child recruitment and use by NSAGs are highly complex and context dependent, certain trends are discernible.

This chapter, based on months of multi-method fieldwork in four countries adjacent to Syria – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey – attempts to illustrate those patterns and trends with new and rare data

from key informants, including child recruits themselves. Although the primary focus of this chapter is the Syrian conflict and its effects on children, this conflict cannot be studied in isolation from the related conflict in Iraq, given the cross-border nature of the violence and the involvement of multiple armed groups and state actors in both countries. In recognition of the transnational nature of these two overlapping conflicts, this chapter examines not only groups that operate exclusively inside of Syria but also some that are based primarily in Iraq or Lebanon but are engaged in operations on or across the Syrian border. The chapter concludes with findings that are relevant for international and local actors working to prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, as well as those seeking to facilitate the disengagement and demobilization of children who have already been recruited.

<sup>6</sup> Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Survey Respondent #8 (18, from Ninewa, detained on IS-related charges in Kurdistan), 16 May 2017.

<sup>8</sup> “Specimen 32Z”, archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi, 17 September 2016. Available from [www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2](http://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2).

## 2 Methodology

This chapter is based on several sources of data: (1) interviews with 144 key informants, including children formerly and currently associated with NSAGs who were under 18 at the time of their recruitment, conducted in the conflict-adjacent countries of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey between July 2015 and December 2017; (2) a pilot survey of 45 Iraqi children between the ages of 16 and 18 who have been detained on charges of joining IS in Iraq; (3) Twitter data generated by individuals living in NSAG-controlled areas; (4) official statements and archival documents produced by NSAGs; (5) meta-analysis of data collected by the Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children; (6) local newspapers and other secondary sources; and (7) primary testimonies from war-affected children themselves, including drawings and paintings inspired by their experiences with NSAGs.<sup>9</sup>

The interviews and pilot survey were conducted according to strict ethical and data-security requirements in order to minimize the potential dangers to respondents.<sup>10</sup> Interviews and surveys with vulnerable subjects, whether children or adults, were always anonymous, voluntary, and subject to informed consent. When cited in this chapter, the subjects are referred to by pseudonyms. The interviewees, who were selected on the basis of their personal experience with NSAGs or their contact with recruited children, include 24 teachers or principals who worked in schools controlled by NSAGs; 12 children and 33 adults currently or formerly engaged with NSAGs; 4 children who have been detained on IS-related charges in Jordan; 8 social workers and doctors who have provided treatment to children engaged with NSAGs, including a senior surgeon in Mosul's main hospital who oversaw the treatment of injured IS fighters; 9 parents of children engaged with armed groups; and 2 senior Iraqi military commanders who have observed the use of children by NSAGs in combat settings. In order to include the perspectives of

younger children, the research team photographed drawings and paintings found at elementary schools and in internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps.

The survey of 45 children accused of joining IS was conducted in a juvenile reformatory in Erbil with the permission of the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Given time and resource constraints, it was not possible to survey the entire population of the more than 200 detainees between the ages of 16 and 18.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the sample was randomly selected from a list of detainees who had already been convicted of terrorism-related charges. It is important to note the limitations of the conclusions that can be drawn from this pilot survey. All of the children surveyed are accused of joining IS, and their experiences do not necessarily generalize to children engaged with other NSAGs. Furthermore, the sample only includes boys, since no girls were housed at the reformatory at the time of the survey.<sup>12</sup>

### MOSUL, IRAQ

Displaced children and adults are seen in a vehicle fleeing from IS-controlled areas in rural Raqqa. — November 2016

© UNICEF/Delil Soulaiman



<sup>9</sup> All of the 57 children currently or formerly engaged with NSAGs who were interviewed or surveyed for this chapter are boys. It was not possible to locate girls currently or formerly engaged with NSAGs, in large part due to the social stigmas that deter girls from discussing their experiences of exploitation and that lead them to self-reintegrate. The recruitment and use of girls by NSAGs is nonetheless an important issue that is addressed in interviews with other key informants and through analysis of secondary sources.

<sup>10</sup> The interviews were covered by Yale University's Institutional Review Board Protocol #1506016040. Key informants who have interacted with NSAGs are cited according to the following format: pseudonym (age, profession or role with NSAG, district of origin) in [location of interview, date]. Child protection specialists and NGO officers are cited according to the following format: child protection specialist/NGO officer in [location of interview], [date]. The pilot survey was covered by Yale IRB Protocol #2000020198. Detainees (survey respondents in Iraq and interviewees in Jordan) are cited with fewer demographic characteristics to ensure anonymity according to the following format: Survey Respondent #\_\_ or interviewee pseudonym (age, from [province of origin]), date.

<sup>11</sup> For ethical reasons, children under the age of 16 were excluded from this study out of concern that they lack the capacity for genuinely informed consent and are particularly vulnerable to re-traumatization.

<sup>12</sup> All of the 57 children currently or formerly engaged with NSAGs who were interviewed or surveyed for this chapter are boys. Despite significant efforts, it was not possible to locate girls currently or formerly engaged with NSAGs. This is likely due in large part to the social stigmas that deter girls from discussing their experiences with exploitation. The recruitment and use of girls by NSAGs is nonetheless an important issue that is addressed in interviews with other key informants and through analysis of secondary sources. Other efforts to quantify the participation of girls suggest low rates of recruitment and use, which may either reflect a disparity in NSAG participation by gender and/or the systematic underreporting of the recruitment and use of girls – likely for the same reasons that it was difficult to identify and solicit interviews with NSAG-associated girls for this chapter. For example, girls represent only 118 of the 2,930 cases of child recruitment verified by the Syria MRM from March 2011–December 2017 (4 per cent). The Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification of Recruitment and Use of Children by Parties to the Conflict in Syria, March 2011–December 2017."

# 3 Overview of NSAGs

Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, thousands of different NSAGs have formed, merged, splintered, changed names, and/or disbanded.<sup>13</sup> The vast majority of these groups are poorly documented. The term “group” is itself misleading because most groups are organized into smaller units and brigades that may vary significantly in their demographics and ideological orientations. Although the report excludes state parties to the conflict, many NSAGs receive funding and training from foreign governments, blurring the distinction between state and non-state actors. Given the large number of groups involved in the overlapping conflicts in Syria and Iraq, as well as those groups’ unequal importance and strength, it was necessary to limit the scope of this chapter to a non-random sample of 10 NSAGs selected according to the following criteria:

- **Size:** The largest groups, in terms of membership and geographical scope of operations, were selected for inclusion.
- **Ideology/Ethnicity:** Islamist, Kurdish, and Yazidi groups were selected to ensure an ideologically and ethnically diverse sample.
- **Transnational Recruitment:** The chapter includes NSAGs that recruit foreign fighters in large numbers as well as those that rely primarily on Syrians or Iraqis.
- **State-Building:** Armed groups with state-like ambitions to govern people and territory tend to regard children not only as potential fighters but as the future of a multigenerational political project. State-building NSAGs were included in the report because of the unique role of children in their long-term plans.
- **State Sponsorship or Oversight:** Several of the NSAGs involved in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq receive significant financial support and training from states, or are partially organized and integrated into state armed forces (while retaining sufficient autonomy to be considered NSAGs). Since state actors are, in general, more susceptible to international pressure than NSAGs, groups that benefit from state sponsorship or oversight are highlighted.
- **Outliers:** Finally, certain groups were selected because their policies and practices concerning the recruitment of children make them outliers, either for better or worse.<sup>14</sup> Groups engaged in particularly egregious practices, including slavery, were included, as were groups (or brigades within groups) that stood out for their adoption of child-protective policies, such as minimum-age requirements. Understanding these variations is essential to identifying the conditions that lead some but not all armed groups to impose limits on the recruitment and use of children.

The following section presents a brief overview of the 10 groups covered in this chapter. The remainder of the chapter describes patterns observed across multiple groups, rather than the practices of each individual group. A pattern-based analysis has at least two important advantages over a group-based analysis. First, given the multiparty nature of the conflict, most children have had contact with more than one group. Second, the intended beneficiaries of this chapter – practitioners and policymakers in the child protection field – work with diverse populations of children from different regions who have had experiences with multiple NSAGs.

<sup>13</sup> The Carter Center has documented the formation of over 7,000 armed groups in the Syrian conflict. Kane Farabaugh, “Using Social Media, Carter Center Maps Syria Conflict”, Voice of America, 14 March 2017. Available from [www.voanews.com/a/using-social-media-carter-center-maps-syria-conflict/3764851.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/using-social-media-carter-center-maps-syria-conflict/3764851.html).

<sup>14</sup> The 2016 report by the United Nations Secretary-General on children and armed conflict listed the following non-state actors for recruiting children and grave violations against them in Syria: Ahrar al-Shama (AS), groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (referred to in this chapter as Islamic State (IS)), Army of Islam (referred to in this chapter as Jaysh al-Islam (JI)), Nusra Front (which later changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), and the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The report also listed Government forces, including the National Defense Forces and pro-Government militias. In Iraq, the report listed IS again and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, 24 August 2017, A/72/361–S/2017/821, pp. 38–39. Available from [www.un.org/oa/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/821&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC](http://www.un.org/oa/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/821&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC).

## A. AHRAR AL-SHAM (AS)

Ahrar al-Sham (AS) (“Free Men of the Levant”) is a coalition of Salafi groups that aims to replace the government of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad with “a civilized Islamic Society in Syria.”<sup>15</sup> The group’s ideology is more moderate than that of Al-Qaida and IS, although it has fought alongside the group formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), an Al-Qaida affiliate that has since merged with other groups to form Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), against common enemies, particularly the Syrian army. Unlike Al-Qaida and IS, which have transnational aspirations, AS’s objectives are generally limited to the territory of Syria. With an estimated membership of 15,000 to 20,000, the group is led by Syrians and has few foreign fighters.<sup>16</sup> AS has been recruiting boys as young as 15 since at least January 2013,<sup>17</sup> with 34 cases of child recruitment verified by the MRM.<sup>18</sup> According to a former AS fighter, the group generally requires that recruits be at least 16 years old to serve in combat roles, but 15-year-olds are used for supporting roles such as cooks and cleaners.<sup>19</sup>

## B. GROUPS SELF-AFFILIATED WITH THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY (FSA)

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed in 2011 by Syrian army defectors whose goal is to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad and who aspire to “a free and democratic Syria where all Syrian citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, creed, religion or class shall enjoy equal rights.”<sup>20</sup> Although initially regarded as the strongest rebel group in Syria, the FSA has struggled with infighting, corruption, and lack of discipline.<sup>21</sup> By 2013, jihadist groups had overtaken the FSA as the most militarily effective forces fighting the Syrian army. Nonetheless, the FSA is still considered “the cornerstone of Syria’s moderate opposition”<sup>22</sup> and has received training and funding from the United States.<sup>23</sup> In 2015, it was believed to have 35,000 fighters.<sup>24</sup> Although initially the FSA’s leadership intended for the organization to be centrally commanded, its operations have always been decentralized.<sup>25</sup> The group has been described as an “umbrella movement, composed of dozens of semi-autonomous armed opposition groups” that share common ideals, rather than as a unitary organization with a top-down command structure.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the policies and practices of the FSA’s constitutive units are highly variable. Although some FSA units have adopted an official minimum age requirement of 18, others have recruited boys as young as 9 for combat roles.<sup>27</sup>

## C. HAY’AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM (HTS)

Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), or “The Body to Liberate the Levant,” is a Sunni jihadist armed group formed in January 2017 through a merger between Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, or JN) and four smaller groups.<sup>28</sup> Despite its claim to be an “independent entity,”<sup>29</sup> HTS is widely regarded as an unofficial proxy for Al-Qaida in Syria, as was Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.<sup>30</sup> HTS is believed to be seeking the creation of an “Islamic emirate” in Syria that would be a stepping stone to its eventual goal of establishing a transnational caliphate.<sup>31</sup> It is believed to have approximately 31,000 fighters<sup>32</sup> concentrated in the Syrian governorates of Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama.<sup>33</sup> HTS’s recruiting practices have not been well documented since the merger that created it, but the largest contributor

<sup>15</sup> Ali El Yassir, “The Ahrar Al Sham Movement: Syria’s Local Salafists,” Wilson Center, 23 August 2016. Available from [www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-ahrar-al-sham-movement-syrias-local-salafists-0](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-ahrar-al-sham-movement-syrias-local-salafists-0).

<sup>16</sup> Ben Hubbard, “In Syria, Potential Ally’s Islamist Ties Challenge U.S.,” *New York Times*, 25 August 2015. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/middleeast/ahrar-al-sham-rebel-force-in-syrias-gray-zone-poses-challenge-to-us.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/middleeast/ahrar-al-sham-rebel-force-in-syrias-gray-zone-poses-challenge-to-us.html).

<sup>17</sup> Martin Chulov, “Free Syrian Army Threatens Blood Feud after Senior Officer Killed by Jihadists,” *Guardian*, 12 July 2013. Available from [www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/12/free-syrian-army-officer-killed](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/12/free-syrian-army-officer-killed).

<sup>18</sup> Syria MRM, “Summary of MRM4Syria Verification.”

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Karam (19, former combatant with AS from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Free Syrian Army, “Free Syrian Army Proclamation of Principles.” Available from [www.etilaf.us/fsa\\_proc\\_principles](http://www.etilaf.us/fsa_proc_principles).

<sup>21</sup> Robert Tait, “Syrian Rebel Army ‘Sacked’ over Corruption Claims,” *Telegraph*, 27 June 2014. Available from [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10930345/Syrian-rebel-army-sacked-over-corruption-claims.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10930345/Syrian-rebel-army-sacked-over-corruption-claims.html).

<sup>22</sup> Charles Lister, “The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand,” Brookings Institution, November 2016. Available from [www.brookings.edu/research/the-free-syrian-army-a-decentralized-insurgent-brand](http://www.brookings.edu/research/the-free-syrian-army-a-decentralized-insurgent-brand).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Syrian Rebels Get Their First U.S.-Trained Fighters,” *Washington Post*, 15 July 2015. Available from [www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/first-us-trained-syrian-fighters-reenter-their-country/2015/07/15/6e6c0651-353d-4e17-961b-98995321576c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/first-us-trained-syrian-fighters-reenter-their-country/2015/07/15/6e6c0651-353d-4e17-961b-98995321576c_story.html).

<sup>24</sup> Mona Alami, “Can FSA Get Back on Its Feet after Russian Intervention?,” *Al-Monitor*, 31 December 2015. Available from [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/free-syrian-army-morale-russia-strikes.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/free-syrian-army-morale-russia-strikes.html).

<sup>25</sup> Charles Lister, “The Free Syrian Army.”

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>27</sup> Syria MRM, “Summary of MRM4Syria Verification.”

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda and Allies Announce ‘New Entity’ in Syria,” *Long War Journal*, January 28, 2017. Available from [www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/al-qaeda-and-allies-announce-new-entity-in-syria.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/al-qaeda-and-allies-announce-new-entity-in-syria.php).

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, “Hay’at Tahrir al Sham Leader Calls for ‘Unity’ in Syrian Insurgency,” *Long War Journal*, 10 February 2017. Available from [www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-leader-calls-for-unity-in-syrian-insurgency.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-leader-calls-for-unity-in-syrian-insurgency.php).

<sup>30</sup> Sam Heller, “Syria’s Former al-Qaeda Affiliate Is Leading Rebels on a Suicide Mission,” *Century Foundation*, 1 March 2017. Available from <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/syrias-former-al-qaeda-affiliate-leading-rebels-suicide-mission>.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Lister, “Al Qaeda Is Starting to Swallow the Syrian Opposition,” *Foreign Policy*, 15 March 2017. Available from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/15/al-qaeda-is-swallowing-the-syrian-opposition>.

<sup>32</sup> Nazeer Rida, “Syria: Surfacing of ‘Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’ Threatens Truce,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 30 January 2017. Available from <https://english.aawsat.com/nazeer-rida/news-middle-east/syria-surfacing-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-threatens-truce>.

<sup>33</sup> Haytham Mouzahem, “Will Major Opposition Groups Face Off in Syria?,” *Al-Monitor*, 17 February 2017. Available from <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/syria-jihadist-factions-tahrir-al-sham-jabhat-fateh.html>.



to the merger – JN – has extensively recruited children as young as 8 for both combat and supporting roles.<sup>34</sup> Out of the 63 cases of child recruitment by JN that have been verified by the MRM, 94 per cent were used in combat roles and 24 per cent were under the age of 15.<sup>35</sup>

#### D. HIZBULLAH

Hizbullah is a Shiite Islamist militant group and political party based in Lebanon and a strong ally of the Syrian government. Hizbullah has been heavily involved in the Syrian conflict since 2012, when its fighters crossed the border from Lebanon and took over eight villages in the al-Qusayr district of Syria.<sup>36</sup> Hizbullah forces have since been fighting alongside allied Iraqi Shiite militias and Iran's Revolutionary Guard in several areas of Syria. In 2016, Hizbullah had approximately 20,000 active-duty troops and 25,000 reservists.<sup>37</sup> Estimates of the number of Hizbullah fighters believed to be fighting in Syria range from 3,000<sup>38</sup> to 8,000,<sup>39</sup> and more than 1,000 have been killed in combat there.<sup>40</sup> In addition to its activities in Syria, Hizbullah's leader has admitted that the group has a "limited presence" in Iraq.<sup>41</sup> Since its founding in the 1980s, Hizbullah has been using its ostensibly non-military "Mahdi Scouts" programme, in which participants perform drills in military fatigues and carry toy rifles, to prepare children for eventual combat roles.<sup>42</sup> Reportedly, at a ceremony in 2016, 70,000 new scouts graduated from the programme.<sup>43</sup> Since becoming involved in the Syrian conflict, Hizbullah has begun to recruit Syrian children both inside Lebanon, targeting the large population of Syrian refugees there, and in Syria itself, where the group is operating a "branch" of the Mahdi Scouts in areas of Aleppo.<sup>44</sup> A pro-Syrian government media outlet has published photographs of Hizbullah "martyrs" who appear to be significantly younger than 18.<sup>45</sup>

#### E. ISLAMIC STATE (IS)

The Sunni jihadist group now known as Islamic State (IS), or "al-Dawla al-Islamiyya" in Arabic, grew out of its predecessor, Al-Qaida in Iraq, in the early 2000s. As its name suggests, the group has always aspired to transition from an insurgency into a "state" that governs people and territory based on the model of the caliphate first laid out by the Prophet Muhammad. In July 2011, the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, sent operatives from Iraq into Syria to start building a base of operations there. In 2013, the city of Raqqa fell to the Syrian opposition and several armed groups, including IS, began fighting for control of the city. Eventually IS prevailed over Raqqa and rapidly expanded into other areas of Syria and Iraq. Although IS was originally an offshoot of Al-Qaida, the two groups cut ties in 2014 over ideological disagreements. In 2016, IS was believed to have between 18,000 and 22,000 fighters, down from the previous year's estimate of 33,000 amid increasing casualties and desertions.<sup>46</sup> By August 2017, IS had lost most of its territory in Iraq, including Mosul, but was still clinging to areas in the Syrian governorates of Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, and Hasakah.

IS has heavily recruited children whom it calls "Cubs of the Caliphate," from among Syrian and Iraqi civilians as well as from abroad. The MRM has documented IS's recruitment of children as young as seven for combat roles,<sup>47</sup> and IS's own personnel records from Homs and Aleppo indicate that of fighters from those specific units, 41 per cent and 21 per cent, respectively, were under the age of 18.<sup>48</sup> A former IS fighter said that the proportion of underage fighters in his unit had increased from 25 per cent when he joined in 2014 to over 50 per cent by the time he deserted in 2016.<sup>49</sup> In general, IS uses a biological rather than a numerical definition of adulthood that is based on

<sup>34</sup> Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Al Arabiya, "Hizbullah Fighters, Syrian Rebels Killed in Border Fighting"; 17 February 2013. Available from <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/17/266843.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Amos Harel and Gili Cohen, "Hezbollah: From Terrorist Group to Army," *Haaretz*, 12 July 2016. Available from [www.haaretz.com/st/c/prod/eng/2016/07/lebanon2](http://www.haaretz.com/st/c/prod/eng/2016/07/lebanon2).

<sup>38</sup> Bassem Mroue, "A Hezbollah Recruiting Drive Comes amid Losses, Deeper Involvement in Syria"; Associated Press, 18 December 2015. Available from [www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015-12-18/a-hezbollah-recruiting-push-covers-its-deeper-role-in-syria](http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015-12-18/a-hezbollah-recruiting-push-covers-its-deeper-role-in-syria).

<sup>39</sup> Dan De Luce, "Syrian War Takes Rising Toll on Hezbollah," *Foreign Policy*, 9 July 2015. Available from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/09/syrian-war-takes-rising-toll-on-hezbollah>.

<sup>40</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "Hezbollah's Balancing Act between Syria and Lebanon"; Atlantic Council, 12 April 2017. Available from [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/hezbollah-s-balancing-act-between-syria-and-lebanon](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/hezbollah-s-balancing-act-between-syria-and-lebanon).

<sup>41</sup> AFP, "Hezbollah Chief Admits His Militia Is Fighting in Iraq"; 16 February 2015. Available from <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/02/16/Hezbollah-fighting-is-in-Iraq-Nasrallah.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Robert F. Worth, "Hezbollah Seeks to Marshal the Piety of the Young"; *New York Times*, 20 November 2008. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2008/11/21/world/middleeast/21lebanon.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/21/world/middleeast/21lebanon.html).

<sup>43</sup> Nour Samaha, "Hezbollah's Crucible of War"; *Foreign Policy*, 17 July 2016. Available from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/17/hezbollahs-crucible-of-war>.

<sup>44</sup> Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Syrian Hezbollah Militias of Nubl and Zahara"; *Syria Comment*, 15 August 2016. Available from [www.joshualandis.com/blog/syrian-hezbollah-militias-nubl-zahara](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syrian-hezbollah-militias-nubl-zahara).

<sup>45</sup> Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Quwat al-Ridha: Syrian Hezbollah"; *Syria Comment*, 31 July 2015. Available from [www.joshualandis.com/blog/quwat-al-ridha-syrian-hezbollah](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/quwat-al-ridha-syrian-hezbollah).

<sup>46</sup> Patricia Zengerle and Jonathan Landay, "CIA Director Says Islamic State Still Serious Threat"; Reuters, 16 June 2016. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-fighters-idUSKCN0Z21ST](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-fighters-idUSKCN0Z21ST).

<sup>47</sup> Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

<sup>48</sup> IS Personnel List from Homs, archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi, 18 June 2015. Available from [www.aymennjawad.org/jawad/pics/large/612.jpg](http://www.aymennjawad.org/jawad/pics/large/612.jpg); and IS Personnel List from Aleppo, "Specimen 14U"; archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi, March 2015. Available from [www.aymennjawad.org/2016/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-1](http://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-1).

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Mahmoud (23, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 17 March 2016.

perceptions of an individual's strength and physical maturity.<sup>50</sup> Interviewees from IS-controlled areas report that children who wish to enlist are inspected for signs of puberty, and "if they have armpit hair and are able to carry a weapon, they are considered old enough to fight."<sup>51</sup> This logic also seems to apply to the designation of enemy combatants. When IS attacked Yazidi villages on Iraq's Sinjar Mountain in August 2014, men were immediately separated from women and children to be executed en masse.<sup>52</sup> Boys were asked to raise their arms; those with hair were considered adults and executed accordingly.<sup>53</sup> After forcing thousands of Yazidi women into sexual slavery, IS indoctrinated and conscripted many of their male children, and has used some of them as suicide bombers.<sup>54</sup>

## F. JAYSH AL-ISLAM (JI)

Jaysh al-Islam (JI), meaning "Army of Islam," was formed in 2013 through a merger of approximately 50 Damascus-area groups with Islamist and Salafi orientations.<sup>55</sup> JI has since expanded into Aleppo, Daraa, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Quneitra governorates, as well as the Lebanese border area of Aarsal.<sup>56</sup> JI's objective is to overthrow the Assad regime and establish a new "technocratic" government based on sharia.<sup>57</sup> Unlike some other Salafi groups involved in the Syrian conflict, JI does not have transnational ambitions beyond the territory of Syria. According to its leader, "We have no intention to make war against anyone except for the Syrian regime."<sup>58</sup> JI does not recruit foreign fighters, and all of its members are believed to be Syrian.<sup>59</sup> Despite its focus on Syrian domestic politics, JI has received substantial foreign funding from Saudi Arabia, which supported the initial formation of the group as a counterweight to Al-Qaida.<sup>60</sup> The latest estimates of JI's size range from 12,000 to 15,000 fighters.<sup>61</sup>

Like many of the groups covered in this chapter, JI officially prohibits the recruitment of underage fighters but unofficially engages in child recruitment. JI has condemned both the Syrian army and IS for their recruitment of children. In one instance, JI published photographs of the ID cards of four Syrian army soldiers killed in battle who were between the ages of 16 and 18 and condemned the government's "forced recruitment of children."<sup>62</sup> In another, JI members arrested two young men (ages 15 and 18) at a checkpoint in Daraa who were on their way to join IS and rebuked its rival for "manipulate[ing] the minds of children."<sup>63</sup> Despite JI's official policies and statements, many cases of child recruitment have been documented including that of one Syrian boy interviewed for this study who joined at the age of 14<sup>64</sup> and 38 cases of child recruitment verified by the MRM.<sup>65</sup>

## G. NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES (NDF)

The National Defense Forces (NDF) is a paramilitary group established by the Syrian government in 2012 as a part-time volunteer reserve to supplement the regular armed forces. By 2013, Syrian security officials claimed that the size of the NDF approached 100,000 fighters.<sup>66</sup> The formation of the NDF was an attempt to regularize these notoriously violent and undisciplined militias. Although the Syrian government has taken steps to integrate NDF volunteers into the state military apparatus, including training and paying their salaries, in practice, the group

<sup>50</sup> In some areas of policymaking, particularly welfare, IS has used a numerical definition for adulthood. For example, in Deir Ezzor, IS has reportedly provided subsidies to parents with children under the age of 14, suggesting that children older than 14 are considered adults and expected to be self-sufficient. See @DeirEzzor24, "عشرة الأربعة دون هون من لكل ليرة 10000 بقيمة مائة معونات لتسليم العائلة أفراد تطلب من الأهالي في منطقة ببالصور تسجيل أسماء بنديا عش", Twitter, 5 September 2015. Available from <https://web.archive.org/web/20170607170154/https://twitter.com/DeirEzzor24/status/640100779865600001>.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Majid (27, lawyer from Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 20 September 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Heza (36, Yazidi woman enslaved by IS) at Mamilian IDP Camp in Dohuk, Iraq, 4 January 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape," *New York Times*, 13 August 2015. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html).

<sup>54</sup> Yesica Fisch and Maya Alleruzzo, "Iraqi Boys' Harrowing Tale of Captivity, Training by IS," Associated Press, 10 May 2017. Available from [www.apnews.com/4d0000cea20442bbabccdc2c242f8225e/Iraqi-boys-harrowing-tale-of-captivity-training-by-IS](http://www.apnews.com/4d0000cea20442bbabccdc2c242f8225e/Iraqi-boys-harrowing-tale-of-captivity-training-by-IS).

<sup>55</sup> BBC News, "Guide to the Syrian Rebels," 13 December 2013. Available from [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003).

<sup>56</sup> Abdullah Suleiman Ali, "Jaysh Al-Islam Confronts Islamic State in Aarsal," *Al-Monitor*, 5 February 2015. Available from [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2015/02/jaysh-al-islam-qalamoun-syria-aarsal-lebanon.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2015/02/jaysh-al-islam-qalamoun-syria-aarsal-lebanon.html).

<sup>57</sup> Hadeel Oueiss, "The Rebel Commander of Damascus," *Daily Beast*, 30 January 2017. Available from [www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/15/the-rebel-commander-of-damascus](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/15/the-rebel-commander-of-damascus).

<sup>58</sup> Eli Lake, "Syria's 'Army of Islam' Says It Wants No War With Israel," *Bloomberg View*, 29 September 2016. Available from [www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-09-29/syria-s-army-of-islam-says-it-wants-no-war-with-israel](http://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-09-29/syria-s-army-of-islam-says-it-wants-no-war-with-israel).

<sup>59</sup> Oueiss, "The Rebel Commander of Damascus."

<sup>60</sup> Ian Black, "Syria Crisis: Saudi Arabia to Spend Millions to Train New Rebel Force," *Guardian*, 7 November 2013. Available from [www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/syria-crisis-saudi-arabia-spend-millions-new-rebel-force](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/syria-crisis-saudi-arabia-spend-millions-new-rebel-force).

<sup>61</sup> Eli Lake, "Syria's Army of Islam."

<sup>62</sup> Al Souria, "النظام يزج بالأطفال على جبهات دمشق و"جيش الإسلام" ينشر صوراً لبعضهم," 20 November 2015. Available from [goo.gl/aUwC1j](http://goo.gl/aUwC1j).

<sup>63</sup> Hassan Burhan, "جيش الإسلام يقتل شابين أثناء توجيههما لمناطق تنظيم 'الدولة' في درعا," SMART News Agency, 13 October 2016. Available from <http://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/PrintPage/id/203706/type/wires>.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification."

<sup>66</sup> Sam Dagher, "Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2013. Available from [www.wsj.com/articles/syrias-alawite-force-turned-tide-for-assad-1377568628](http://www.wsj.com/articles/syrias-alawite-force-turned-tide-for-assad-1377568628).

still functions as a semi-autonomous militia.<sup>67</sup> Members do not always wear uniforms and are permitted and even encouraged to loot houses when fighting in rebel-controlled areas.<sup>68</sup> The legal minimum age for compulsory military service in the Syrian army is 18, but the NDF has recruited children as young as 13 in areas around Damascus.<sup>69</sup> The NDF has an all-female unit named "Lionesses for National Defense."<sup>70</sup> It has been suggested that the Syrian government is "increasingly outsourcing the dirty work"<sup>71</sup> of the conflict to irregular militias, including the NDF, to avoid accountability.<sup>72</sup>

## H. PEOPLE'S AND WOMEN'S PROTECTION UNITS (YPG/YPJ)

The People's Protection Units, or "Yekineyên Parastina Gel" (YPG) in Kurdish, is the military arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian affiliate of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The YPG and PYD are seeking to establish an autonomous, self-governing state in the northern Syrian region of Rojava.<sup>73</sup> They share the PKK's Marxist-inspired ideology of "Democratic Confederation", which aims to establish a utopian egalitarian society.<sup>74</sup> In 2016, the YPG had an estimated 60,000 fighters, with plans to increase its membership to over 100,000 by the end of 2017.<sup>75</sup> The group recruits significant numbers of women, who serve in combat roles in its Women's Protection Units (YPJ), in keeping with the PYD's purported support for gender equality,<sup>76</sup> as well as significant numbers of foreign fighters, including Americans.<sup>77</sup> The group has recruited significant numbers of boys and girls under 18; some are volunteers, while others as young as 13 have been forcibly abducted.<sup>78</sup> Out of 57 cases of child recruitment by Kurdish groups that have been verified by the MRM, 72 per cent were boys, 28 per cent were girls, 82 per cent were used in combat roles, 28 per cent were under the age of 15, and the youngest was 10 years old.<sup>79</sup>

## I. POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES (PMF)

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), or "al-Hashd ash-Shabi" in Arabic, is an umbrella organization of some 40 primarily Shiite Iraqi militias formed in June 2014 with an estimated membership of 100,000 to 150,000.<sup>80</sup> The size of the PMF, which receives funding and training from Iran, grew considerably in response to a fatwa issued by the leading Iraqi Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani, which called on all able-bodied civilians to take up arms against Islamic State, which regards Shiite Muslims as apostates.<sup>81</sup> On 5 June 2015, al-Sistani issued a new fatwa that urged students specifically to use their summer vacations to "contribute to (the country's) preservation by training to take up arms and prepare to fend off risk if this is required."<sup>82</sup> Since then, the PMF has come under increasing scrutiny for its recruitment of children.<sup>83</sup> In November 2016, the Iraqi parliament adopted a law that formally integrates the PMF into the Iraqi military.<sup>84</sup> Although the PMF is now required to report to the Iraqi prime minister, it remains an "independent military formation,"<sup>85</sup> according to the text of the law, and is exempt from the education and minimum age requirements (18 years) that apply to the regular armed forces. The PMF was heavily involved in the

<sup>67</sup> Aron Lund, "Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?," Carnegie Middle East Center, 2 March 2015. Available from <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215>.

<sup>68</sup> Erika Solomon, "Battered by War, Syrian Army Creates Its Own Replacement," Reuters, 21 April 2013. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-insight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-insight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421).

<sup>69</sup> Ali al-Amin, "أطلق على الجبهات برفقة قوات الأسد. النظام يجندهم بصنوفه والموت مصير ينتظرهم," Al-Souria, 28 March 2017. Available from <https://goo.gl/nStqIX>. Also the NDF and other pro-government militias were listed in the Secretary General's latest report on Children and Armed Conflict for recruiting children in 2016. A/72/361-S/2017/82, p. 38.

<sup>70</sup> Liz Sly and Ahmad Ramadan, "The All-Female Militias of Syria," *Washington Post*, 25 January 2013. Available from [www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/01/25/the-all-female-militias-of-syria](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/01/25/the-all-female-militias-of-syria).

<sup>71</sup> Simon Adams, "The World's Next Genocide," *New York Times*, 15 November 2012. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/opinion/the-worlds-next-genocide.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/opinion/the-worlds-next-genocide.html).

<sup>72</sup> Sabine Carey, Michael Colaresi, and Neil Mitchell, "Governments, Informal Links to Militias, and Accountability," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (1 August 2015).

<sup>73</sup> Rodi Said, "Syria's Kurds Rebuked for Seeking Autonomous Region," Reuters, 17 March 2016. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-federalism-idUSKCN0W11EP](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-federalism-idUSKCN0W11EP).

<sup>74</sup> Matt Bradley and Joe Parkinson, "America's Marxist Allies Against ISIS," *Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2015. Available from [www.wsj.com/articles/americas-marxist-allies-against-isis-1437747949](http://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-marxist-allies-against-isis-1437747949).

<sup>75</sup> Mewan Dolamari, "Syrian Kurdish YPG Will Increase Number of Fighters to 100,000 in 2017," *Kurdistan 24*, 21 March 2017. Available from [www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/ad2a1bc1-fb8-4253-9f65-213c8add1fa3/Syrian-Kurdish-YPG-will-increase-number-of-fighters-to-100-000-in-2017](http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/ad2a1bc1-fb8-4253-9f65-213c8add1fa3/Syrian-Kurdish-YPG-will-increase-number-of-fighters-to-100-000-in-2017).

<sup>76</sup> In November 2014, the PYD issued a decree affirming "equality between men and women in all spheres of public and private life." Sylvia Westall, "Self-Ruling Region in Syria Issues Women's Rights Decree: Monitor," Reuters, 9 November 2014. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-women-idUSKCN0IT0D20141109](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-women-idUSKCN0IT0D20141109).

<sup>77</sup> Jennifer Percy, "Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS," *New York Times*, 30 September 2015. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/magazine/meet-the-american-vigilantes-who-are-fighting-isis.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/magazine/meet-the-american-vigilantes-who-are-fighting-isis.html).

<sup>78</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria," 19 June 2014. Available from [www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule-abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria](http://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule-abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria).

<sup>79</sup> Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

<sup>80</sup> United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Iraq, 9 November 2015, S/2015/852. Available from <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1535632.pdf>.

<sup>81</sup> Ali al-Sistani, "المرجع السنيستاني يدعو المواطنين الذين يتمكنون من حمل السلاح ومقاتلة الإرهابيين دفاعاً عن بلادهم وشعبهم ومقدساتهم التطوع في القوّات الأُمّية," 13 June 2014. Available from [www.sistani.org/arabic/n-news/24908](http://www.sistani.org/arabic/n-news/24908).

<sup>82</sup> Associated Press, "Is the U.S. Paying to Train Child Soldiers in Iraq?," 28 July 2015. Available from [www.cbsnews.com/news/iraq-shiite-militia-summer-camps-teens-learn-combat-techniques-isis](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraq-shiite-militia-summer-camps-teens-learn-combat-techniques-isis).

<sup>83</sup> S/2015/852.

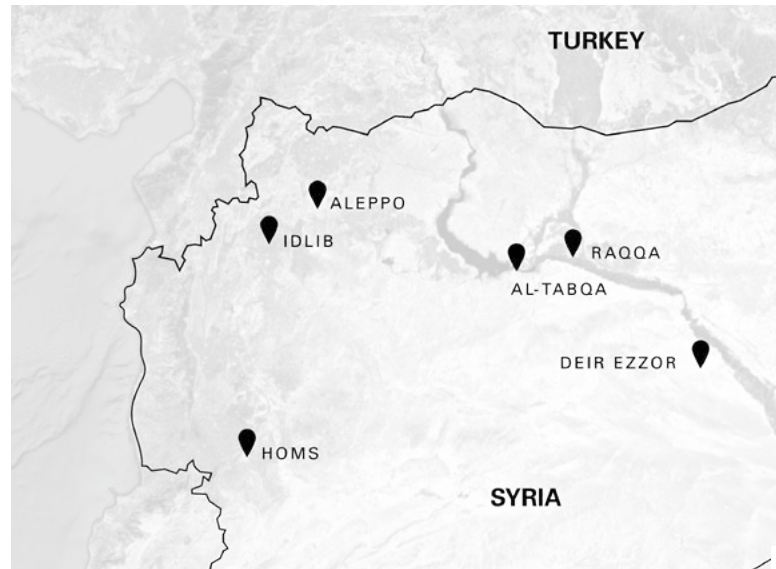
<sup>84</sup> Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Iraq's Parliament Adopts Law Legalizing Shiite Militias," Associated Press, 26 November 2016. Available from <https://apnews.com/38d21400b14444b08d8169ca03e-cdb1b/mortars-kill-16-iraqi-civilians-mosul>.

<sup>85</sup> Iraq Press Agency, "تصن قانون الحشد الشعبي وفقاً لموقع مجلس النواب العراقي," 26 November 2016. Available from [www.iraqpressagency.com/?p=223503](http://www.iraqpressagency.com/?p=223503).

military campaign to expel IS from western Iraqi towns bordering Syria.<sup>86</sup> Although the PMF has denied crossing into Syria,<sup>87</sup> a PMF spokesman's statement – "We are fully ready to go to any place that contains a threat to Iraqi national security" – has been interpreted as implying that the group is prepared to do so.<sup>88</sup>

## J. SINJAR RESISTANCE UNITS

The Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), or "Yekîneyên Berxwedana Sengalê" in Kurdish, an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), was created in 2007 as a primarily Yazidi militia. The group receives training from the YPG/YPJ in Syria's Hasakah province, and was initially funded by the Iraqi government. Estimates of YBS's membership range from 1,200 to 2,000.<sup>89</sup> Like the YPG, which allows women to serve in combat roles, YBS has an all-female fighting unit. Although the Iraqi government has stipulated that salaries only be paid to fighters over the age of 18, YBS appears to have pooled and redistributed funds for underage fighters, paying a monthly rate of \$200 for those under 14, and \$400 for those ages 14 to 17,<sup>90</sup> though the YBS General Command denies allegations that any fighters are under 18.<sup>91</sup>



# 4 Why and How Do NSAGs Recruit or Coerce Children into Their Ranks?

## A. WHY RECRUIT CHILDREN?

NSAGs recruit children for many reasons. In the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the following motivations and logics are particularly salient.

**SHORTAGE OF ADULTS:** To compensate for high casualty and defection rates, many NSAGs turn to children as substitutes for adults.<sup>92</sup> In February 2013, the director of a "military academy" associated with the FSA that was training children between the ages of 14 and 18 in northern Aleppo explained, "There are no more adult men in the villages."<sup>93</sup>

**COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE:** In addition to recruiting children as substitutes for adults, some NSAGs recruit children because their physical or psychological characteristics are believed to give them a comparative advantage over adults in particular roles. For example, IS specifically recruits children to work as spies and informants because they are less likely than adults to attract suspicion.<sup>94</sup> The same logic may apply to its recruitment of foreign children. Since domestic laws usually prohibit surveillance of minors, they are less likely to be detected by intelligence

<sup>86</sup> Reuters Staff, "Iraqi Shi'ite Militia Says Will Fight IS in Syria Border Town", 4 November 2017. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-syria/iraqi-shiite-militia-says-will-fight-is-in-syria-border-town-idUSKBN1D408H](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-syria/iraqi-shiite-militia-says-will-fight-is-in-syria-border-town-idUSKBN1D408H).

<sup>87</sup> Nadia Riva, "PMF Denies Entering Syrian Territory", Kurdistan 24, 1 June 2017. Available from <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/2a4b9e68-6a63-427b-bd5a-385ee0e66a77>.

<sup>88</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran-Trained Militias Join U.S.-Backed Campaign on Mosul, Flying Shi'ite Flags", Reuters, 30 October 2016. Available at [www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-iran/iran-trained-militias-join-u-s-backed-campaign-on-mosul-flying-shiite-flags-idUSKBN12U0UJ](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-iran/iran-trained-militias-join-u-s-backed-campaign-on-mosul-flying-shiite-flags-idUSKBN12U0UJ).

<sup>89</sup> Joanna Paraszcuk, "Yazidi Militias Fight IS in Iraq, amid Kurdish Rivalries", Radio Free Europe, 11 June 2015. Available from [www.rferl.org/a/sjamic-state-yazidi-militias-kurdish-region/27066780.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/sjamic-state-yazidi-militias-kurdish-region/27066780.html).

<sup>90</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Armed Groups Using Child Soldiers", 22 December 2016. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/22/iraq-armed-groups-using-child-soldiers](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/22/iraq-armed-groups-using-child-soldiers).

<sup>91</sup> Firat News Agency, "YBS: HRW Report Not True, We Invite Them to the Battle Front", Kurdish Info, 24 December 2016. Available from <https://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/ybs-hrw-report-not-true-we-invite-them-to-the-battle-front-17722>.

<sup>92</sup> Mara Revkin and Ahmad Mhidi, "Quitting ISIS", *Foreign Affairs*, 1 May 2016. Available from [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-05-01/quitting-isis](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-05-01/quitting-isis).

<sup>93</sup> AFP, "Rebels Train Syrian Teens to Become 'Killing Machines'", 6 February 2013. Available from <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/06/264772.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Fatima (42, housewife from Deir Ezzor and mother of a child recruited by IS), in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.





MAP OF KEY LOCATIONS  
IN SYRIA & IRAQ

agencies.<sup>95</sup> Children also have a comparative advantage over adults in their ability to cross borders and checkpoints without triggering the suspicion of authorities. As a result, many NSAGs have used children to traffic supplies and weapons across Syria's borders as well as in and out of areas controlled by the government.

**MALLEABLE MINDS:** NSAG recruiters target children because they are perceived as more ideologically malleable than adults. In the words of interviewees from IS-controlled areas, the group views children as “blank slates,” “raw material,” and “empty vessels” who are easily indoctrinated.<sup>96</sup> According to a female school principal from Deir Ezzor, “IS targets children because their brains are more malleable than those of adults.”<sup>97</sup> A former IS fighter from Deir Ezzor said, “IS knows that children are more enthusiastic and more willing to believe fully in jihad.”<sup>98</sup>

**UNDIVIDED ALLEGIANCE:** Children may be preferred over adults because they are less likely to have divided loyalties. In a multiparty civil war such as that in Syria, control over contested territory tends to shift frequently and rapidly among different NSAGs. When a NSAG captures new territory, the recruitable adult men in the area are likely to have fought previously for one or more of its rivals. For example, a high percentage of IS's Syrian fighters previously fought for the FSA and either defected to IS or surrendered during fighting and were given a choice “to join or die.”<sup>99</sup> These fighters are less likely to be fully committed to IS and its goals, and may be reluctant to fight against members of their former groups. An IS personnel form for a fighter trained in Hasakah notes with concern that he “has friends in Ahrar al-Sham and JN: considers them Muslims.”<sup>100</sup> One adult Syrian fighter said that he defected to Turkey after IS tried to deploy him to fight in Fallujah because “it was not my fight.”<sup>101</sup> Given the potential for divided loyalties, IS views children as ideal candidates for recruitment because many are too young to have fought previously for another armed group.

Children may be preferred over adults because they are less likely to have divided loyalties.

**CHEAP LABOUR:** Some children who join armed groups have already dropped out of school and are working in full-time jobs at the time of recruitment. But children who have never received a salary before see engagement with armed groups as a path to economic independence. From the perspective of NSAGs, children are cheap labour because they are willing to work for lower wages than adults, and they are usually too young to have dependents – wives and children – for whom some NSAGs provide additional benefits. For example, even though IS generally pays the same salary to adult fighters and those under 18 (base salaries had fallen from hundreds to only \$50 per month by April 2016), adult fighters receive an additional stipend of \$50 for each wife, \$50 for each female slave, and \$35 for each child, and sometimes housing for their families.<sup>102</sup> HTS also provides additional support for fighters with dependents.<sup>103</sup> Anas, who joined JI at the age of 14, reported that some of his fellow adult fighters who were struggling to support families defected to IS or HTS primarily to receive additional benefits for their wives and children.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Anthony Faiola and Souad Mekhennet, “They’re Young and Lonely, The Islamic State Thinks They’ll Make Perfect Terrorists,” *Washington Post*, 11 February 2017. Available from [www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2017/02/11/theyre-young-and-lonely-the-islamic-state-thinks-theyll-make-perfect-terrorists](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2017/02/11/theyre-young-and-lonely-the-islamic-state-thinks-theyll-make-perfect-terrorists).

<sup>96</sup> Interviews with Ahmed (43, teacher from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 18 February 2017; and Fatima (42, housewife from Deir Ezzor and mother of a child recruited by IS), in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Zainab (40, school principal from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 18 February 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Mahmoud (23, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 17 March 2016.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Hassan (38, FSA combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>100</sup> Islamic State Personnel Form from Hasakah Province, “Specimen 271,” archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi. Available from [www.aymennajwad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2](http://www.aymennajwad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2).

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Mahmoud (23, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 17 March 2016.

<sup>102</sup> Joby Warrick, “Cash-Strapped ISIS Offers \$50 a Month to Fighters – but More If They Own Sex Slaves,” *Washington Post*, 22 April 2016. Available from [www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/04/22/cash-strapped-isis-offers-50-a-month-to-fighters-but-more-if-they-own-sex-slaves](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/04/22/cash-strapped-isis-offers-50-a-month-to-fighters-but-more-if-they-own-sex-slaves).

<sup>103</sup> Radio Rozana, “تعدد الزوجات في ريف إدلب.. من يتبع علي ذلك؟” 13 March 2016. Available from [goo.gl/hSXUJt](http://goo.gl/hSXUJt).

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

## B. TECHNIQUES OF RECRUITMENT

NSAGs in the Syrian and Iraqi contexts use a variety of techniques to recruit children. In particular, techniques vary greatly depending on whether targets live in an area controlled or contested by a NSAG or outside of the NSAG's territory or area of operation.

**TRANSNATIONAL RECRUITMENT:** Table 1 summarizes transnational recruiting practices of the NSAGs covered in this chapter. Of these groups, IS has recruited the greatest number of foreign fighters, with estimates ranging from 27,000 to 31,000 fighters from at least 86 different countries.<sup>105</sup> The term “foreign fighters” refers to combatants recruited from outside of the country or countries in which the group is primarily based – in IS's case, Syria and Iraq. HTS has recruited significant numbers of foreign fighters from outside of Syria. In 2015, the leader of the group estimated that a majority – 70 per cent – of its fighters were Syrian, and 30 per cent were foreigners.<sup>106</sup> AS<sup>107</sup> (also based in Syria) and Hizbullah<sup>108</sup> (based in Lebanon but operating in Syria) recruit some foreigners, as does YBS (based in Iraq but receiving training in Syria), which recruits from the Yazidi diaspora community in Europe.<sup>109</sup> JI and the NDF (based in Syria) and the PMF (based in Iraq) do not recruit foreigners in significant numbers (Table 1).

NSAGs that recruit children from areas outside of their immediate territorial control, including transnationally, cannot rely on coercion and therefore are limited to the tools of persuasion and inducement. The trajectories of foreign fighters, including children who have travelled to Syria, are diverse and resist generalization, but nonetheless some patterns can be identified. Some NSAGs make individualized appeals to children through one-on-one dialogues, usually conducted over social media platforms. Sometimes these dialogues are initiated by official recruiters who do not have a pre-existing relationship with the people they target,<sup>110</sup> but in other cases, potential recruits are encouraged to join by friends or family members who have already joined the NSAG.<sup>111</sup>

Recruiters who target foreign children over social media have made efforts to isolate them from family and friends and to replace these relationships with a virtual community. Omar, a 16-year-old Jordanian boy, said that he was approached on Facebook by an IS supporter who claimed to be living in the “caliphate.” With few friends in the real world, Omar saw the recruiter as a sympathetic listener and gateway to a virtual community. Eventually, Omar was arrested by Jordanian authorities on charges of spreading IS propaganda, although he claims, “I was only a supporter in my heart and online; I never planned to take any action.”<sup>112</sup> In addition to direct recruitment, some foreign children have been taken into Syria by parents who have been recruited.<sup>113</sup>

**TABLE 1**  
Variation in NSAG  
Recruitment of Foreign  
Fighters (Adults and  
Children)

	HEAVY RECRUITMENT	SOME RECRUITMENT	LITTLE TO NONE
Ahrar al-Sham (AS)		•	
Free Syrian Army (FSA)		•	
Hizbullah		•	
Islamic State (IS)	•		
Jaysh al-Islam (JI)			•
National Defense Forces (NDF)			•
Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)			•
Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS)		•	
Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)	•		

<sup>105</sup> Soufan Group, “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq”, December 2015. Available from [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ITSG\\_Foreign-FightersUpdate\\_FINAL3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ITSG_Foreign-FightersUpdate_FINAL3.pdf).

<sup>106</sup> Al Jazeera, “اليو محمد الجولاني أمير جبهة النصرة”, video, 27 May 2015. Available from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwOT43vFZA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwOT43vFZA).

<sup>107</sup> Mousab Alhamadee, “Recalling a Syrian Leader Who Helped Jihadis Grow Prominent in Rebellion”, McClatchy DC Bureau, 30 September 2014. Available from [www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24773947.html](http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24773947.html).

<sup>108</sup> AFP, “Hezbollah Says ‘Thousands’ of Fighters to Respond if Israel Attacks”, Al-Monitor, 23 June 2017. Available from [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/06/israel-palestinians-conflict-quds-hezbollah.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/06/israel-palestinians-conflict-quds-hezbollah.html).

<sup>109</sup> Paraszczuk, “Yazidi Militias Fight IS in Iraq”.

<sup>110</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS and the Lonely Young American”, *New York Times*, 27 June 2015. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html).

<sup>111</sup> Mercy Corps, “From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria’s Violent Extremist Groups”, 28 September 2015. Available from [www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/From%20Jordan%20to%20Jihad\\_0.pdf](http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/From%20Jordan%20to%20Jihad_0.pdf).

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Omar (16, detained on IS-related charges in Jordan), March 2017.

<sup>113</sup> Graeme Wood, “The American Climbing the Ranks of ISIS”, *Atlantic*, March 2017. Available from [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/the-american-leader-in-the-islamic-state/510872](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/the-american-leader-in-the-islamic-state/510872).



**FIGURE 1**  
An IS Math Textbook from  
Mosul

**LOCAL RECRUITMENT:** Patterns of local recruitment differ significantly from those of transnational recruitment and are heavily influenced by on-the-ground conditions of coercion, real-life social networks, material incentives, and NSAG-controlled institutions (particularly schools). State-building NSAGs – those that successfully hold and govern territory – control not only the means of violence but also the local economy, and thus can employ physical and economic coercion to recruit members. NSAGs that recruit from territory under their control tend to recruit children through their existing familial and social networks.

NSAGs also use material incentives – salaries, food, cell phones, and other benefits – to attract recruits. In Raqqa, IS has provided financial assistance selectively – only to families that do not have a fighting-age male at home.<sup>114</sup> This policy rewards

families who send their men (and boys) into battle. The need for food security is an important motivation in areas of Syria where sieges and the destruction of agricultural infrastructure have led to widespread starvation.<sup>115</sup> One Syrian interviewee who became responsible for supporting his family at the age of 14, after the death of his father, cited the promise of regular, high-quality meals as one of his reasons for joining the FSA.<sup>116</sup> In opposition-held areas where in 2013 grain and electricity shortages resulted in days-long bread lines, FSA fighters were allowed to cut to the front of the line.<sup>117</sup> A Syrian boy recruited by JN at the age of 14 said that the group had offered food and medicine to his family as an incentive.<sup>118</sup>

NSAGs that control territory may use schools to spread their ideology to the next generation and facilitate recruitment. An official IS document describes education as “the foundational brick on which Islamic society is built.”<sup>119</sup> For NSAGs with state-building projects, education is essential to ensuring the transmission of the group’s ideology to its next generation. The YBS and other Yazidi militias provide new recruits with several months of education in the movement’s history, language, and philosophy,<sup>120</sup> while children recruited by the YPG/YPJ undergo military and ideological training for between 20 and 45 days.<sup>121</sup> Several NSAGs have operated schools with curricula that implicitly or explicitly encourage children to take up arms or support the group’s cause in non-military ways. As early as 2014, JN was providing free educational programmes that included weapons training.<sup>122</sup> IS has taken over existing school systems and introduced new curricula that are clearly aimed at preparing students for military service. According to a school principal from Deir Ezzor who continued working in her local primary school for several months after IS took over, “classrooms are pipelines to the battlefield.” When IS arrived in 2014, members forced teachers to undergo “sharia training” courses and introduced new textbooks with violence-based lessons, including arithmetic problems that required students to count guns and bullets (Figure 1)<sup>123</sup>. Over time, however, school enrolment rates in IS-controlled areas declined precipitously as parents withdrew children from school to protect them from indoctrination, and IS – under growing pressure from territorial losses and casualties – de-prioritized education and other non-military institutions.<sup>124</sup> One school in Mosul saw enrolment decline from 700 to 100 during the three years that IS ruled the city. Most of the remaining students were children of fighters.<sup>125</sup> Of the

<sup>114</sup> Khaberni, “الشروط توزيع الزكاة في داخل,” 25 June 2016. Available from [www.khaberni.com/news/168593](http://www.khaberni.com/news/168593).

<sup>115</sup> Maha El Dahan, “Syrian Food Crisis Deepens as War Chokes Farming,” Reuters, 26 April 2016. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-wheat-idUSKCN0XN0GO](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-wheat-idUSKCN0XN0GO).

<sup>116</sup> Interview with Marwan (19, former FSA and JN combatant from Aleppo) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

<sup>117</sup> Kelly McEvers, “Jihadi Fighters Win Hearts and Minds by Easing Syria’s Bread Crisis,” National Public Radio, 16 June 2013. Available from [www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/01/18/169516308/as-syrian-rebels-reopen-bakeries-bread-crisis-starts-to-ease](http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/01/18/169516308/as-syrian-rebels-reopen-bakeries-bread-crisis-starts-to-ease).

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

<sup>119</sup> Shiv Malik, “The Isis Papers: Leaked Documents Show How Isis Is Building Its State,” *Guardian*, 7 December 2015. Available from [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/07/leaked-isis-document-reveals-plan-building-state-syria](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/07/leaked-isis-document-reveals-plan-building-state-syria).

<sup>120</sup> Email correspondence with Frédérique Geerdink, 16 April 2017.

<sup>121</sup> Syria MRM, “Summary of MRM4Syria Verification.”

<sup>122</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Maybe We Live.”

<sup>123</sup> Mark Molloy, “Islamic State Textbooks Featuring Guns and Tanks ‘Used to Teach Children Maths’ in School,” *Telegraph*, 16 February 2017. Available from [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/16/isis-textbooks-featuring-guns-tanks-used-teach-children-maths](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/16/isis-textbooks-featuring-guns-tanks-used-teach-children-maths).

<sup>124</sup> Kinana Qaddour, “Inside ISIS’ Dysfunctional Schools,” *Foreign Affairs*, 13 October 2017. Available from [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-13/inside-isis-dysfunctional-schools](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-13/inside-isis-dysfunctional-schools).

<sup>125</sup> Interview with Mustafa (45, principal of an elementary school in Mosul) in Mosul, Iraq, 15 April 2017.



**FIGURE 2**

An Islamic State “Media Point” in Raqqa

45 children detained on IS-related charges who were surveyed for this study, only two admitted to attending an IS-controlled school; the others had dropped out.<sup>126</sup> In IS-controlled areas, multi-year gaps in education are a bigger problem for many children than indoctrination.

In addition to operating schools, some NSAGs disseminate audiovisual propaganda both over the Internet, to attract foreign recruits, and on the ground in areas they control. For example, IS created “media points” (“naqtat i’alamiyya”) that distributed printed pamphlets and flash drives containing PDFs of the latest publications, and projected videos on large screens (Figure 2).<sup>127</sup>

According to interviewees who observed these “media points” on the ground in Syria, the majority of their users were children who were attracted to the flashy audiovisual displays. One interviewee noted that IS appeared to staff these centres with recruiters who are specifically trained to appeal to children, including one man in Raqqa who previously hosted a children’s television programme.<sup>128</sup> A teacher from Deir Ezzor observed, “The children watch these videos for entertainment because they don’t understand what violence is. [They] are being trained to think that violence is normal.”<sup>129</sup>

## 5 What Individual, Social, and Structural Factors Influence Child Trajectories into NSAGs?

The processes through which children become engaged with NSAGs are multi-causal and influenced by variables on several different conceptual levels: (1) individual, pertaining to the individual and his or her personal experiences and beliefs; (2) social, pertaining to intermediary forms of social organization such as a tribe, village, or district; and (3) structural, pertaining to macro historical, economic, and environmental forces.

<sup>126</sup> Survey Respondent #26 (17, from Kirkuk, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 18 April 2017; Survey Respondent #27 (18, from Ninewa, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 18 April 2017.

<sup>127</sup> Official photograph issued by Islamic State in Raqqa, March 2016. Available from <https://web.archive.org/web/20170927082514/https://examplewordpresscom38019.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/1921.jpg?w=640>.

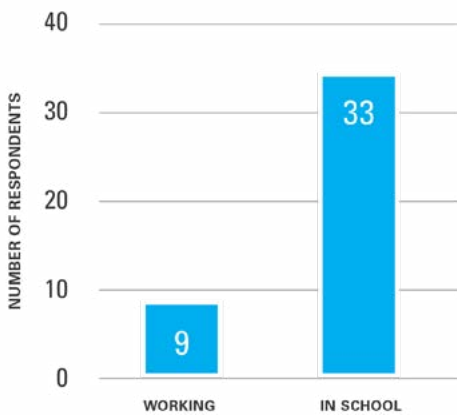
<sup>128</sup> Interview with Wael (29, construction worker from Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Karima (34, teacher from Deir Ezzor), in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 20 September 2016.



## A. INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL FACTORS

Children who become engaged with NSAGs in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts often exhibit one or more of the following distinctive traits: (1) the pursuit of a meaningful future, or what is sometimes referred to by psychologists as a “quest for significance”;<sup>130</sup> (2) a desire for agency and control over one’s environment; (3) grievance- or revenge-based motivations; or (4) the need for survival. These traits are not mutually exclusive and often coexist in the same individual.



**FIGURE 3**  
Juvenile Detainees in  
Kurdistan: Status Prior to  
Arrest

**QUEST FOR SIGNIFICANCE:** A significant percentage of children interviewed and surveyed for this chapter who became associated with NSAGs in Syria or Iraq had previously dropped out of school and were engaged in low-wage, unfulfilling, and often dangerous forms of child labour at the time of their recruitment. Of 45 Iraqi children imprisoned on charges of joining IS who were surveyed for this study, nine had previously been working full-time in low-wage jobs including carpentry, farming, steelmaking, and construction (Figure 3). One 16-year-old detainee who had dropped out of school at the age of nine to sell chickens with his family asked his father’s permission to move to Kirkuk for a better job. When his father refused, he joined IS to escape what he saw as a dead-end career with “no future.”<sup>131</sup> The father of a Syrian boy who was recruited by HTS and later by IS in Raqqa said that recruiters often targeted children working as day labourers or in markets, knowing that they would be susceptible to the promise of a higher salary and a

more “honourable” job.<sup>132</sup> A child protection specialist in Gaziantep observed that children often believe that “it is more dignified to be a fighter than to work in a degrading civilian job. Weapons are a status symbol.”<sup>133</sup> There is also evidence that some children are attracted to NSAGs by the opportunity to acquire new skills and education. For example, a 14-year-old Yazidi girl working on a female Yazidi militia base as a cook and cleaner reported that she was “so excited” to begin an “ideological course of three to four months to get educated for the first time in her life.”<sup>134</sup>

**AGENCY AND CONTROL:** Children living in conflict areas often feel powerless, and NSAGs offer them a sense of control in a chaotic and unpredictable environment. A 16-year-old Syrian boy who worked for two years as a checkpoint guard for IS before eventually fleeing to Turkey said that he liked the job because “it made me feel like I was in control for the first time in my life.”<sup>135</sup> Some children reported that the ability to wield violence made them feel safer. Karam, who joined AS in Idlib when he was 16 years old, said that he did so in order to protect himself from other armed groups and criminals.<sup>136</sup> Girls have reported joining Kurdish and Yazidi militias to empower themselves and escape traditional values. A 16-year-old girl said she joined the YPG/YPJ’s female unit in the Syrian region of Afrin specifically to avoid early marriage: “My father told me it would be better for me to get a boyfriend and marry than join the army. In just one day here, I learned more than I had in all my life – about [Ocalan’s] ideology, how to liberate women and free Yazidis.”<sup>137</sup>

**REVENGE:** Many children who become engaged with NSAGs are motivated by the desire to avenge the death of a family member or by a personal experience with injustice or violence. In the Kurdish governorate of Dohuk, a 15-year-old boy left an IDP camp there and later called his family to announce that he had joined YBS to fight “for revenge” against IS.<sup>138</sup> Samer said that he joined the FSA at the age of 15 to avenge the death of his brother, who was killed by Syrian government forces in 2013.<sup>139</sup> Karam, who joined AS at the age of 16, wanted to avenge the death of a close friend who had been killed in a shelling attack by the Syrian government in Idlib.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski, Xiaoyan Chen, Mark Dechesne, Shira Fishman, and Edward Orehek, “Fully Committed: Suicide Bombers’ Motivation and the Quest for Personal Significance,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2009).

<sup>131</sup> Survey Respondent #34 (16, from Kirkuk, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 17 April 2017.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Fares (48, power plant worker from Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with a child protection specialist in Gaziantep, Turkey, 22 February 2017.

<sup>134</sup> Anecdote related by Frédérique Geerdink (journalist reporting from Syria) in email correspondence, 16 April 2017.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with Ali (16, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Istanbul, 15 September 2016.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Karam (19, former AS combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

<sup>137</sup> Dominique Soguel, “Military Training Offers Yazidi Women Chance to Fight Back, Taste of Freedom,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 October 2015. Available from [www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/10/02/Military-training-offers-Yazidi-women-chance-to-fight-back-taste-of-freedom](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/10/02/Military-training-offers-Yazidi-women-chance-to-fight-back-taste-of-freedom).

<sup>138</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Armed Groups Using Child Soldiers,” 22 December 2016. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/22/iraq-armed-groups-using-child-soldiers-0](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/22/iraq-armed-groups-using-child-soldiers-0).

<sup>139</sup> Interview with Samer (19, former combatant with FSA, JN, and IS from Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 22 February 2017.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with Karam (19, former combatant with AS from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.



**QAYYARA, IRAQ**

Children bring food to firefighters as they try to extinguish oil wells set alight by ISIS members as they retreated.  
—March 2017

© UNICEF/Alessio Romenzi

**SURVIVAL:** Finally, some children join NSAGs in order to stay alive, often under conditions of extreme duress and coercion. Children already fighting for one armed group who are captured by an enemy armed group may face detention or execution if they do not defect to the other side. One 17-year-old Iraqi boy with a heart condition joined IS in exchange for the promise of a free surgery that he could not otherwise afford.<sup>141</sup> Relatedly, parents may push their children to join NSAGs to improve their own health or safety. According to a senior surgeon in Mosul's main hospital, IS offered a breast cancer patient a monthly stipend of \$40 to cover the cost of her treatment if one of her sons would join the group.<sup>142</sup> Children have also joined armed groups to protect themselves and their families from harassment by other armed groups believed to be more dangerous. For example, Karam joined AS at the age of 16 at the suggestion of his father, who believed that his son would be safer with AS than with the local branch of the FSA, which was notoriously "full of thieves and bad guys."<sup>143</sup> In these cases, joining an armed group was a self-preservation strategy. A paradox of civil wars is that it is often safer to align oneself with a violent group than to remain unaffiliated.

## B. SOCIAL-LEVEL FACTORS

**FAMILIAL AND SOCIAL NETWORKS:** Individual decisions to join armed groups are rarely made in a vacuum, but are heavily influenced by pre-existing social and familial networks. Anas joined JI at the age of 14 because his older brother and cousin were already fighting for the group. When asked what he would do if his relatives defected to a different NSAG, he said, "Of course I would follow them because I trust them."<sup>144</sup> Sometimes, adults who already

NSAGs deliberately drive a wedge between children and their families to facilitate recruitment.

belong to a NSAG will encourage their children to join in order to enhance their perceived loyalty and status within the organization. Dalia, the mother of a Syrian boy who joined IS at the age of 12 and was later killed in combat in Iraq, said that her husband, already a member of the group, had asked his son to join "so that his commanders would think he was more committed and promote him to a higher rank." He encouraged one of his daughters, under the age of 18, to marry an IS fighter for the same career-advancing reasons.<sup>145</sup>

Groups of friends often join together, or a child who joins alone may encourage friends to follow suit. Tribes often join – or switch allegiances – collectively, as do brigades. Samer, a member of the Raqqa-based al-Wilda tribe, initially joined the FSA in 2013 (at the age of 15) with a brigade of his fellow tribesmen. When his brigade switched allegiance to JN, he followed the group, not because he was attracted to its jihadist ideology but because "I wanted

to stay with my tribe." Later, his brigade again switched sides to IS when the group began to take over Raqqa. According to Samer, IS initially focused its recruitment efforts on tribal leaders, knowing that once they pledged allegiance, "their tribesmen would follow them."<sup>146</sup>

**GENERATIONAL CONFLICTS:** Children who join NSAGs are sometimes reacting to generational conflicts with their parents. Abdallah, an adult FSA officer, described how the conflict has destabilized families: "Parents have lost the ability to control their children as a result of poverty, lack of education, a constant state of emergency, or a combination of these factors."<sup>147</sup> One 17-year-old Iraqi boy said that he joined IS specifically in order to get married after his father had refused to give permission.<sup>148</sup> A resident of Mosul said that a young boy in his neighbourhood was frustrated by his father's refusal to allow him to learn how to drive. The boy eventually joined IS, which not only taught him how to drive but also gave him a car.<sup>149</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Survey Respondent #41 (17, from Erbil, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 13 August 2017.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Dr. Ayad al-Ramadhani in Mosul, Iraq, 19 April 2017.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Karam (19, former AS combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with Anas (17, former JI fighter from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, 19 February 2017.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Dalia (41, teacher from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with Samer (19, former combatant with FSA, JN, and IS from Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Abdallah (41, FSA combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>148</sup> Survey Respondent #2 (18, from Salah ad-Din, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 15 May 2017.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with Omar (33, clothing store cashier from Mosul) in East Mosul, 15 April 2017.







**TALL KAYSUMAH, IRAQ**

Children and adults displaced by fighting between ISIS and Iraqi security forces are transported in an Iraqi military vehicle to an identification centre on the western outskirts of Mosul.

—March 2017

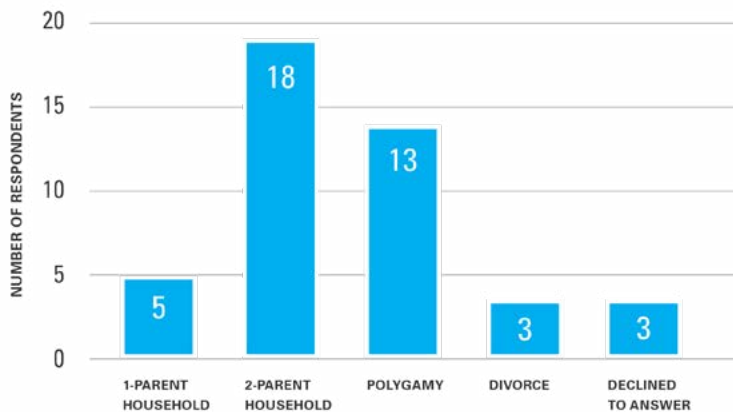
© UNICEF/Alessio Romenzi



There is some evidence that NSAGs deliberately exacerbate such conflicts to drive a wedge between children and their families. An IS recruiter told one former fighter who had joined the group at age 15 in defiance of his parents, “You have a religious duty to disobey your parents if they try to discourage you from participating in jihad.”<sup>150</sup> The father of a boy who joined IS at the age of 13 said that his son reported him to the religious police for smoking. When the police came to the man’s house to arrest him, they praised his son for faithfully following the doctrine of “Al-wala’ wa-l-bara’”; (literally, “loyalty and disavowal”), which IS interprets to require absolute fidelity to sharia, “even if it means hurting your family.”<sup>151</sup> Similar cases have been reported on social media, including one in which a child reported his father to IS for refusing to let him join.<sup>152</sup> IS even promotes such conflicts in its education materials: A teacher who worked in an IS-controlled school reported that the group distributed a storybook used to teach basic reading skills that highlighted conflict between children and their parents: “The protagonist was a boy from a rich family who recognizes that his parents are morally corrupt. The boy decides to leave his family to join jihad and becomes the hero of the story.”<sup>153</sup>

**ORPHANHOOD:** The high rate of orphanhood in both Syria and Iraq appears to be a contributing factor to NSAG recruitment. In 2015, UNICEF estimated that more than four million Iraqi children had lost at least one parent.<sup>154</sup> The Iraqi government runs only 23 orphanages across the whole country that, in 2014, were caring for 500 children – a tiny fraction of those in need.<sup>155</sup> The director of an Iraqi NGO warned, “The increasing numbers of orphans in the country with the lack of proper care will put them at the mercy of armed militias.”<sup>156</sup> The absence of a father or both parents forces children to assume the role of provider and protector of sisters and younger siblings. A young woman from Damascus reported that one of her male friends there had joined the NDF at the age of 14 because his father had died in a car accident and he needed to support his mother and sisters.<sup>157</sup> A refugee from Mosul reported that IS members had been visiting orphanages in the city for the purpose of recruiting children there.<sup>158</sup> One orphanage in Mosul’s Zohour neighbourhood was actually converted into a training camp for juvenile combatants.<sup>159</sup>

**FIGURE 4**  
Juvenile Detainees:  
Family Situation.



**DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE, AND POLYGAMY:** The destabilization of the nuclear family unit, through divorce, remarriage, or polygamy, can create conditions of neglect and insecurity that push children towards armed groups. For example, a YBS fighter reportedly asked an all-female Yazidi militia to take care of his 14-year-old daughter after her mother had been enslaved by IS and he married a second wife who was not interested in taking care of a girl who is not her biological daughter.<sup>160</sup> In many cases, armed groups function as adoptive parents for children whose actual parents are either unable or unwilling to care for them.

Polygamy tends to create competition for the father’s attention and resources among children born to different wives, leading – in some cases – to children’s feeling neglected and deprived, which may make them more vulnerable to NSAG recruitment. Polygamous parents, who tend to have larger families than non-polygamous parents, may also be more likely to encourage children to join NSAGs in order to be relieved

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Ali (16, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Istanbul, Turkey, 15 September 2016.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Jamal (48, water company employee from Aleppo) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 28 February 2017.

<sup>152</sup> @DeirEzzor24, “طفل من ريف دير الزور العربي يرفع شكوى ضد أبيه لدى تنظيم #داعش , وذلك بسبب منع الأب للطفل بالالتحاق بالتنظيم”, Twitter, 24 March 2017. Available at <https://twitter.com/DeirEzzor24/status/845388806178131972>.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Zainab (40, school principal from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 18 February 2017.

<sup>154</sup> UNICEF, “14 Million Children Impacted by Conflict in Syria and Iraq”, press release, 12 March 2015. Available from [www.unicef.org/media/media\\_81172.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_81172.html).

<sup>155</sup> “أعدادهم ازدياد لخطر الانتباه الحكومة على: سابقون ونواب للآيتام داراً 23 امتلاكها تعلن العمل”, accessed 10 June 2017. Available from [www.almadpress.com/ar/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=36314](http://www.almadpress.com/ar/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=36314).

<sup>156</sup> Salam Khoder, “Iraq’s Child Soldiers: ‘What Happened to Our Boys?’”, Al Jazeera, 8 June 2016. Available from [www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/iraq-child-soldiers-happened-boys-160523122213988.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/iraq-child-soldiers-happened-boys-160523122213988.html).

<sup>157</sup> Interview with Laila (17, student from Damascus) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Adeel (55, public transportation worker from Mosul) in Khazir IDP Camp near Erbil, Iraq, 27 February 2017.

<sup>159</sup> Khalid al Mousily, “How ISIS Groomed Iraqi Orphans into Becoming Child Soldiers”, Reuters, 17 February 2017. Available from [www.newsweek.com/isis-groomed-orphans-child-soldiers-557803](http://www.newsweek.com/isis-groomed-orphans-child-soldiers-557803).

<sup>160</sup> Email correspondence with Frédérique Geerdink.

of the responsibility of caring for them, or to increase the number of household breadwinners. Anas, who joined JI at the age of 14, described one such case of an adult member of his unit who was married to two different women and struggling to feed his many children. The man decided to defect to JN, which offered a monthly salary nearly twice that of JI in addition to food and fuel benefits, and he also recruited one of his underage sons into the group to help provide for the family.<sup>161</sup> Of the 45 Iraqi children surveyed for this study, 14 were from polygamous households, and the average number of siblings was 7 (higher than the national average fertility rate of 4.5 births per woman).<sup>162</sup> Jihadist NSAGs, notably HTS and IS, have specifically promoted the practice of polygamy both for ideological reasons (the Qur'an authorizes up to four wives)<sup>163</sup> and demographic reasons (to increase birth rates and encourage remarriage of war widows). In Idlib, HTS offers cash subsidies of 100,000 Syrian pounds (\$467) to men who marry widows and assume responsibility for their children.<sup>164</sup> This anecdotal evidence suggests that polygamy may, in some cases, contribute to economic stress that, in turn, encourages child recruitment.

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:** Domestic violence, which is associated with many of the unstable family situations described above, may encourage recruitment by making children feel unsafe in their own homes and therefore more inclined to join NSAGs for protection. An interviewee from Homs attributed high levels of domestic violence there to a rapid increase in widowhood during the war. Widows face pressure to remarry for physical and economic protection, but their new husbands often refuse to provide for stepchildren, forcing them to turn to child labour or NSAGs for subsistence. "Even if the new husbands do take stepchildren into their homes, they are often resentful or even violent toward them," he said.<sup>165</sup> Domestic violence is also correlated with unemployment. According to an NGO officer in Gaziantep, "unemployed fathers may feel emasculated and take out their frustration, either verbally or violently, on their wives and children."<sup>166</sup> In some cases, joining armed groups may be a strategy for self-protection. An NGO officer in Erbil described cases in which Kurdish girls had joined militias, including the YPG/YPJ, in order to escape domestic violence.<sup>167</sup>

## c. STRUCTURAL-LEVEL FACTORS

**CULTURE AND HISTORY:** It is important to recognize that child recruitment has deep historical roots in Syria and neighbouring Iraq, as do the related phenomena of child labour and child marriage. Definitions of "adulthood" are culturally relative, and local understandings of the age at which it is appropriate for young people to enter the workforce, begin military service, or marry have long deviated from the international standard of 18. In Lebanon, children are growing up in what one child protection specialist described as a "warrior culture", where "fighting for one's cause or group is considered noble."<sup>168</sup> Although mandatory military service in Syria begins at age 18, the country has a long tradition of paramilitary youth organizations.<sup>169</sup> In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's government began organizing child soldier units in the 1970s.<sup>170</sup> Major General Najim al-Jubouri of the Iraqi Army, who led the offensive against IS in Mosul, described parallels between this group's recruiting practices and the earlier Iraqi insurgency from which it emerged in the 2000s:

*At that time, Al-Qaida was using a process of gradual, incremental recruitment to involve children in its operations. At first, they offered children money in exchange for simple tasks such as sending signals, through flags or cell phones, of the presence of American and Iraqi convoys. Then, they started asking them to place IEDs in the path of these convoys. Eventually, they were recruiting children to be fighters and to serve as suicide bombers.<sup>171</sup>*

According to al-Jubouri, IS is using all of the same methods practiced by Al-Qaida, with the additional benefit of territorial control. "Since Al-Qaida did not control Tel Afar, they relied primarily on money to recruit children. Since the Islamic State controls territory, coercion rather than money is the main driver of recruitment."<sup>172</sup>

<sup>161</sup> Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>162</sup> World Bank, "Fertility Rate, Total (Births per Woman)", accessed 27 September 2017. Available from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SPDYN.TERT.IN>.

<sup>163</sup> See article by the female Islamic State propagandist Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, "Two, Three or Four," *Dabiq*, Vol. 12 (November 2015), p. 19, citing [An-Nisaa : 3].

<sup>164</sup> Radio Rozana, "تعدد الزوجات في ريف حلب.. من يتبع على ذلك" 13 March 2016. Available from [goo.gl/hSXUJt](http://goo.gl/hSXUJt).

<sup>165</sup> Interview with Adel (33, electrical engineer from Homs), in Homs by phone from Sanliurfa, Turkey, 22 February 2017.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with an NGO officer in Gaziantep, Turkey, 22 February 2017.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with an NGO officer in Erbil, Iraq, 24 February 2017.

<sup>168</sup> Interview with an NGO officer in Saida, Lebanon, 22 March 2017.

<sup>169</sup> In the 1980s, the government organized the "the Baathist Vanguard", a group in which school-aged girls and boys received paramilitary training and lessons in civil duty. Wasim Shamdin, "'Be Prepared': First Scouting Troop in Opposition Territory Educating Latakia's Youth," *Syrian Voice*, 10 October 2016. Available from <http://syrianvoice.org/be-prepared-first-scouting-troop-in-opposition-territory-educating-latakias-youth/?lang=en>. See also Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1991), p. 25.

<sup>170</sup> "Ashbal Saddam" trained boys between the ages of 10 and 15 in small arms and infantry tactics for up to 14 hours per day. Peter Singer, "Facing Saddam's Child Soldiers," *Brookings Institution*, 14 January 2003. Available from [www.brookings.edu/research/facing-saddams-child-soldiers](http://www.brookings.edu/research/facing-saddams-child-soldiers).

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Major General Najm al-Jubouri in Mosul, Iraq, 19 April 2017.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.



In addition to a history of child recruitment, high rates of child labour and child marriage facilitate the exploitation of children by NSAGs. Before the outbreak of the conflict, an estimated 8 per cent of Syrian children between the ages of 5 and 14 were involved in child labour.<sup>173</sup> In 2000, an estimated 25 per cent of Syrian girls between the ages of 15 and 19 were already married.<sup>174</sup> While the minimum legal age for marriage in Syria is 17 for boys and 16 for girls, exceptions are made for children as young as 15 if a judge determines that both parties are “physically mature” and their fathers or grandfathers consent.<sup>175</sup> Although these practices are longstanding, anecdotal evidence suggests that they have grown more common in the current conflict because conditions of perpetual instability and violence tend to force children into adult roles prematurely. In addition, interviewees cited the sharp decline in interest and opportunity for university-level education (associated with delayed marriage) as a factor in increasing child marriage among boys and girls, sometimes to members of NSAGs.<sup>176</sup>

“Fighting was normal, my brother had already taught me how to use a gun at a young age, and everyone I knew was joining one faction or another.”

— ANAS, 17 FORMER JI COMBATANT IN RAQQA, SYRIA.

**IDEOLOGY AND RELIGION:** Children who become engaged with NSAGs often cite ideology and religion as important motivations. Although the conventional understanding of “radicalization” generally assumes a linear and unidirectional process in which exposure to extreme ideology causes an individual to join a violent group, research on the conflicts in Syria and Iraq suggests that the role of ideology in child recruitment is significantly more complex.<sup>177</sup> Children often join NSAGs for non-ideological reasons – for example, to earn a living or protect their families – but over time, they may reframe their motivations in terms of ideology as a result of constant exposure to NSAG propaganda and the peer effects of living among “true believers.”<sup>178</sup> In many cases, ideology is a post hoc rationalization for joining rather than the proximate cause.

Anas, who joined JI at the age of 14, said that he initially decided to enlist because “fighting was normal, my brother had already taught me how to use a gun at a young age, and everyone I knew was joining one faction or

another”. However, after joining the group, “I learned that fighting was ‘jihad’, and I started using that word a lot.”<sup>179</sup> The intake forms of over 4,000 foreign fighters who travelled to Syria to join IS indicate that a significant majority – 70 per cent – claimed only “basic” knowledge of sharia, while a mere 5 per cent claimed to have “advanced” knowledge, suggesting that many were not particularly religious or well-versed in the group’s ideology prior to joining.<sup>180</sup>

**SECTARIANISM:** Although the Syrian uprising began with non-sectarian pro-democracy protests in 2011,<sup>181</sup> over time, religious differences between the primarily Sunni opposition and Alawite-dominated Syrian government have become increasingly salient. The sectarian character of the conflict has been inflamed by the intervention of regional powers on both sides (Shiite allies of the Assad government – Iran and Hezbollah<sup>182</sup> – as well as Sunni supporters of the rebels, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar).<sup>183</sup> In Iraq, IS’s massacres of Shia,<sup>184</sup> whom the group regards as apostates, prompted Shiite militias to perpetrate retaliatory massacres of Sunni civilians in areas recaptured from the group.<sup>185</sup> Given these dynamics, it is unsurprising that some children recruited by armed groups cite sectarian motivations. A 17-year-old Lebanese Hezbollah fighter who has been deployed several times to Syria said that he views the conflict as “a repetition of what happened over 1,000 years ago during the battle of Karbala, which ended with the killing of [Imam] Hussein [often cited as the origin of the Sunni-Shiite schism] ... We

<sup>173</sup> Based on data collected by UNICEF between 1999 and 2005. UNICEF, “The State of the World’s Children” (2007), p. 135.

<sup>174</sup> UNICEF, “Early Marriage”, *Innocenti Digest*, No. 7 (March 2001), p. 4. Available from [www.unicef.org/childrenandislam/downloads/early\\_marriage\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/childrenandislam/downloads/early_marriage_eng.pdf).

<sup>175</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Syria: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016”, 2017, p. 50. Available from [www.state.gov/documents/organization/265732.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265732.pdf).

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Adel (33, electrical engineer from Homs), in Homs by phone from Sanliurfa, 22 February 2017.

<sup>177</sup> Mara Revkin, “Does ISIS Need Territory to Survive?”, *New York Times*, 21 October 2016. Available from [www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/10/21/does-isis-need-territory-to-survive](http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/10/21/does-isis-need-territory-to-survive).

<sup>178</sup> Ben Oppenheim, Abbey Steele, Juan F. Vargas, and Michael Weintraub, “True Believers, Deserters, and Traitors: Who Leaves Insurgent Groups and Why”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (2015).

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>180</sup> Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, “The Caliphate’s Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Foreign Fighter Paper Trail”, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 18 April 2016, p. 18. Available from <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/Caliphates-Global-Workforce1.pdf>.

<sup>181</sup> Katharine Zoepf, “New Grievances Broaden Syria’s Protest Movement”, *New York Times*, 13 April 2011. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/world/middleeast/14syria.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/world/middleeast/14syria.html).

<sup>182</sup> Sarah El Deeb, “Syria, Iraq Troops Link at Border for First Time in Years”, Associated Press, 18 June 2017. Available from [www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-06-18/syria-iraq-troops-link-at-border-for-first-time-in-years](http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-06-18/syria-iraq-troops-link-at-border-for-first-time-in-years). A PMF leader has stated that the militia has received Assad’s permission to operate inside Syrian territory. Ammar Alsawad, “After Mosul Battle, Is Syria Next for PMU?”, *Al-Monitor*, 24 November 2016. Available from [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/pmu-iraq-syria-assad-mosul.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/pmu-iraq-syria-assad-mosul.html).

<sup>183</sup> Nancy Youssef, “Syrian Rebels Describe U.S.-Backed Training in Qatar”, PBS, 26 May 2014. Available from <https://www.pbs.org/vgbh/frontline/article/syrian-rebels-describe-u-s-backed-training-in-qatar/>.

<sup>184</sup> Tim Arango, “Escaping Death in Northern Iraq”, *New York Times*, 3 September 2014. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/world/middleeast/surviving-isis-massacre-iraq-video.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/world/middleeast/surviving-isis-massacre-iraq-video.html).

<sup>185</sup> Ned Parker and Jonathan Landay, “Special Report: Massacre Reports Show U.S. Inability to Curb Iraq Militias”, Reuters, 23 August 2016. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-massacres-falluja-special-report/special-report-massacre-reports-show-u-s-inability-to-curb-iraq-militias-idUSKCN10Y1VD](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-massacres-falluja-special-report/special-report-massacre-reports-show-u-s-inability-to-curb-iraq-militias-idUSKCN10Y1VD).



will not allow that to happen another time."<sup>186</sup> Even children who are not recruited by NSAGs may view the conflict through a sectarian lens, often adopting the prejudices of parents and older relatives.<sup>187</sup>

**ECONOMIC CONDITIONS:** Syria's national unemployment rate – estimated to be around 60 per cent in 2016 – is the highest in the Arab world, and the local unemployment rates in contested areas are even higher than the national average.<sup>188</sup> Although Iraq's unemployment rate of 14.8 per cent is comparatively low,<sup>189</sup> the local unemployment rate in areas controlled or contested by IS is much higher.<sup>190</sup> In many areas of Syria and Iraq, NSAGs are or were the only source of employment. In addition to providing salaries, many NSAGs also provide more and better-quality food

“I didn't care about the ideology of either group. It was always just business.”

— MARWAN, 19 FORMER FSA AND JN COMBATANT IN ALEPPO, SYRIA.

than is otherwise available to civilians. Marwan joined the FSA in 2012 at the age of 14 and later switched sides to JN because it was the highest-paying armed group in his area (Idlib). “I didn't care about the ideology of either group. It was always just business,” he said, adding that many parents in besieged Aleppo encouraged their children to attend JN's indoctrination courses in order to receive free food that the group provided to students. Many of the students went on to enlist as fighters with JN, either because they started to believe in the group's ideology or because “they just wanted food and money,” Marwan said.<sup>191</sup> Since many NSAGs including Hizbullah, HTS, and the FSA provide some form of compensation to a fighter's dependents, including funeral expenses if he is killed in combat, joining a NSAG is in some cases the functional equivalent of taking out a life insurance policy.

**EDUCATION:** The quality and quantity of education that children receive affects their propensity to join NSAGs. Schools in areas affected by the Syrian conflict are usually closed, controlled by an armed group, or no longer accredited. The same problems afflicted Iraqi schools in territory previously controlled by IS. Children not enrolled in school are more likely to take on full-time jobs or spend their free time in the streets or other places frequented by recruiters. Dalia, whose son was recruited by IS at the age of 12, said, “The most dangerous place is the street and the safest place is the home. As soon as children go outside, they are exposed to recruiting activities from all directions.”<sup>192</sup> In Deir Ezzor, after local schools closed, children who felt bored and lonely at home began congregating in mosques, where IS-affiliated preachers encouraged them to join the group.<sup>193</sup> One Syrian boy who joined AS at the age of 16 identified a lack of educational opportunities, in addition to financial incentives and the need to defend himself and his family, as motivation for taking up arms.<sup>194</sup>

Children who manage to stay in school face new dangers in the classroom and on their commute. IS and JN have taken over or interfered with existing school systems and introduced new militaristic curricula designed to facilitate recruitment.<sup>195</sup> Other NSAGs, including the FSA, have occupied schools and used them as barracks or command centres.<sup>196</sup> Even when schools remain nominally independent and are not directly controlled by NSAGs, teachers and curricula may still be influenced by them. Akram, a FSA commander whose son joined his brigade at the age of 13, said that many of the teachers in the local school system were fighting part-time for rebel brigades and would bring their guns to class.<sup>197</sup>

<sup>186</sup> Mona Alami, “Meet One of Hizbullah's Teen Fighters”, *Al-Monitor*, 28 January 2016. Available from [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/lebanon-hezbollah-teenagers-jihad-syria.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/lebanon-hezbollah-teenagers-jihad-syria.html).

<sup>187</sup> For example, an 11-year-old Syrian girl interviewed at a Jordanian refugee camp in 2012 said, “I hate the Alawites and the Shiites. We are going to kill them with our knives, just like they killed us.” David Kirkpatrick, “Syrian Children Offer Glimpse of a Future of Reprisals”, *New York Times*, 3 September 2012. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2012/09/04/world/middleeast/n-syrian-conflict-children-speak-of-revenge-against-alawites.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/04/world/middleeast/n-syrian-conflict-children-speak-of-revenge-against-alawites.html).

<sup>188</sup> Jeanne Gobat and Kristina Kostial, “Syria's Conflict Economy”, IMF Working Paper, International Monetary Fund, June 2016. Available from [www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wfp/2016/wp16123.pdf](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wfp/2016/wp16123.pdf).

<sup>189</sup> World Bank, “Unemployment, total (% of total labor force)”, March 2017. Available from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS>.

<sup>190</sup> The unemployment rate in East Mosul was estimated to be 56 per cent in September 2017, shortly after the city was retaken from IS. The unemployment rate in West Mosul, which experienced greater collateral damage, is likely to be even higher. International Rescue Committee, “East Mosul, Iraq Labor Market Assessment”, September 2017. Available from [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IRC\\_East%20Mosul%20Iraq%20Labor%20Market%20Assessment\\_211117.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IRC_East%20Mosul%20Iraq%20Labor%20Market%20Assessment_211117.pdf).

<sup>191</sup> Interview with Marwan (19, former FSA and JN combatant from Aleppo) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

<sup>192</sup> Interview with Dalia (41, teacher from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

<sup>193</sup> Interview with Firas (46, lawyer from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 20 February 2017.

<sup>194</sup> Mais Katt, “In Syrian War, All Sides Using Child Soldiers”, UPI, 27 June 2016. Available from [www.upi.com/In-Syrian-war-all-sides-using-child-soldiers/4501466538098](http://www.upi.com/In-Syrian-war-all-sides-using-child-soldiers/4501466538098).

<sup>195</sup> Hadia Mansour, “Syria: Confusion Reigns in Kfar Nabel's School System”, *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 19 June 2015. Available from <https://wpr.net/global-voices/syria-confusion-reigns-kafr-nabels-school>.

<sup>196</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Safe No More: Students and Schools Under Attack in Syria”, June 2013, p. 26. Available from [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria0613webwcover.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria0613webwcover.pdf).

<sup>197</sup> Interview with Akram (44, FSA officer from Aleppo and father of a 13-year-old FSA recruit) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.



**HOMS, SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC**

A street lined with rubble and destroyed buildings in the Old City area of Homs, the Syrian Arab Republic.

—May 2014

© UNICEF/Nasar Ali





**ACCESS TO INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA:** While less important for children recruited in areas where NSAGs are active, children who have travelled to Syria or Iraq from other countries were almost always influenced by information or communities that they found online. Of the four children interviewed for this study who have been detained by Jordanian authorities on terrorism-related charges, only one is accused of first making contact with a NSAG (IS) through real-life acquaintances. A second detainee initially communicated with an IS recruiter over the Internet, which allegedly led to contact with an IS operative on the ground in Jordan, while the remaining two detainees are accused only of engaging with IS over social media and claim never to have met any of its members or engaged in any terrorist activities offline.<sup>198</sup>

## 6 What Are the Experiences of and Roles for Children in NSAGs?

Children's experiences in NSAGs vary greatly depending on the group's organizational culture, its strategic and ideological objectives, and individual reasons for joining. However, several patterns are evident across many of the NSAGs covered in this chapter.

### A. RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY

All of the NSAGs engaged in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq purport to offer their members a new collective identity, but the nature of that identity varies. For some groups, religion is central to the identity being offered (Yazidi and Islamist NSAGs), while others, such as the FSA, define their identity primarily in terms of political objectives (in this case, the establishment of a democracy in Syria). In order to forge these collective identities, NSAGs often try to separate new recruits from their previous networks, affiliations, and allegiances. In the extreme case of IS, which claims to be creating a pan-Islamic community that transcends national borders and ethnolinguistic divisions, the group has implemented numerous policies that require its supporters and members to cut ties, actually or symbolically, to the outside world, including travel bans<sup>199</sup> and restrictions on Internet and satellite usage.<sup>200</sup> In one example focused on children in particular, IS issued a directive requiring all schools in the Iraqi governorate of Salah ad-Din to "remove the expression 'Republic of Iraq' wherever it is found and replace it with 'Islamic State' on buildings and in textbooks."<sup>201</sup>

Many of the NSAGs involved in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have made deliberate efforts to break and replace children's ties to their families. One Syrian boy recruited by JN at the age of 14 said that an instructor in his training course told him, "We are your family now."<sup>202</sup> When the parents of a Syrian boy who joined the YPG without their permission went to his training camp in an attempt to retrieve their son, they were told by a YPG commander, "You need to forget about this boy. He has become a son of the cause and is no longer your son."<sup>203</sup>

### B. TRAINING AND INDOCTRINATION

NSAGs engaged in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have taken different approaches to the training and indoctrination of child recruits. Some provide extensive training on rules, beliefs, and organizational objectives to enforce discipline and conformity.<sup>204</sup> Other groups provide minimal or no training. Some groups segregate children from adults for specialized training, but others do not distinguish between age groups. The type and amount of training that children receive affects their relationships with other NSAG members, roles and trajectories, and physical safety.

<sup>198</sup> Interviews with four juvenile detainees (three Jordanians and one Syrian between the ages of 16 and 17) at a facility in Jordan, 2 March 2017.

<sup>199</sup> Erem News, "داعش يمنع السفر الى خارج محافظة نينوى" 13 February 2015. Available from [www.eremnews.com/news/arab-world/205570](http://www.eremnews.com/news/arab-world/205570).

<sup>200</sup> Al Arabiya, "داعش يمنع الوأي فاي" بالرقعة ويحصر الإنترنت بالمقاهي, 19 July 2015. Available from <http://ara.tv/7nipe>.

<sup>201</sup> Islamic State, Diwan of Education, archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi, 14 January 2015. Available from [www.aymennjawad.org/jawad/pics/large/512.jpg](http://www.aymennjawad.org/jawad/pics/large/512.jpg).

<sup>202</sup> Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

<sup>203</sup> Dirar Khatab, "البناء القضيبة", قصص أطفال مجتدين في صفوف وحدات حماية الشعب, *Northern Syria Observer*, 17 June 2017.

<sup>204</sup> For example, Adnan, who joined JN in Idlib at the age of 14, was caught violating the group's ban on smoking. His punishment was to carry rocks that were needed to fortify military positions. Interview with Adnan (18, former combatant with JN, from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.



**CHILD-SPECIFIC TRAINING:** Some NSAGs, notably IS, Hizbullah, and the PMF, have created training programmes specifically for children. In July 2015, the PMF was operating a “summer camp” in Baghdad for hundreds of primarily underage recruits, some as young as 15.<sup>205</sup> Some NSAGs systematically expose children to violence – both before and after recruitment – with the apparent intent of desensitizing them to fear. IS has encouraged children to observe public decapitations of criminals and traitors. Fares, whose son was recruited by IS in Raqqa, described one instance in which an executioner gave children a severed head to use as a soccer ball. “IS makes death into a game so that blood starts to seem normal and even fun to children,” he said.<sup>206</sup> Children recruited by IS are also exposed to violence as a part of their training. In Deir Ezzor, juvenile recruits were required to sleep in windowless rooms where they would be woken up for dawn prayers by the sound of gunfire “so that they learn to be unafraid of bullets,” according to one former adult IS combatant.<sup>207</sup> In al-Tabqa, IS reportedly trained children to decapitate chickens in preparation for eventual beheadings of people.<sup>208</sup> The director of an FSA-affiliated “military academy” for children in Aleppo described the effects of the training: “When they arrive here, they are children. By the time they leave, they are killing machines. I train them not to be scared of war and not to hesitate when the time comes to kill.”<sup>209</sup>

**AGE-INTEGRATED TRAINING:** Other NSAGs provide the same training to all of their fighters, regardless of age, indicating that they view children and adults as functionally interchangeable. In some cases, NSAGs may integrate children into groups of adults in an effort to accelerate their physical and emotional development. A Syrian boy who joined HTS in Idlib at the age of 14 said that the group deliberately mixed children and adults in training programmes so that younger recruits would overcompensate and “try harder to prove that they could keep up with the grown men.”<sup>210</sup>

**MINIMAL TRAINING:** Many armed groups provide minimal or no training to underage recruits, often because of time and resource constraints. Samer, who joined the FSA from Raqqa when he was 15, said that he was issued a Kalashnikov rifle but received no training.<sup>211</sup> Other groups that normally provide training to children will drastically reduce the amount of training in times of necessity or crisis. When IS was at the peak of its expansion in 2014, all new recruits, including children, were required to complete 30 to 50 days of military training. However, as IS suffered military and territorial losses, the group significantly abbreviated these training courses – sometimes to only a few days – to shorten the pipeline to the battlefield.<sup>212</sup>

Poorly trained fighters are more susceptible to injury and death. One former adult IS combatant reported that his 17-year-old brother, who also joined the group, was sent to the front lines in Deir Ezzor without any training and, as a result, “he died the first day because he didn’t know how to fight.”<sup>213</sup> According to a senior Iraqi army officer who was involved in the campaign to liberate Mosul, although many of the underage IS fighters showed enthusiasm in combat, others appeared to be poorly trained, afraid, reluctant to fight offensively, and unable to defend themselves effectively when attacked. He believes that, as a result, underage fighters “are killed at higher rates” than their adult peers.<sup>214</sup>

## c. ROLES

The roles performed by children engaged with NSAGs are fluid and evolve over time. Children are often recruited into supporting roles and transition into combat roles as they grow older. For example, when Tarek first joined JN at the age of 14, he took a three-month indoctrination course, after which he worked as a cook for eight months. He was then assigned to a checkpoint for six months, and finally “promoted” to the rank of fighter and sent into combat.<sup>215</sup> As Tarek’s trajectory illustrates, children may perform many different types of services and functions for

<sup>205</sup> Associated Press, “Is the U.S. Paying to Train Child Soldiers in Iraq?”

<sup>206</sup> Interview with Fares (48, power plant worker from Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

<sup>207</sup> Interview with Nizar (38, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 18 September 2016.

<sup>208</sup> Interview with Abbas (42, engineer from al-Tabqa) in Gaziantep, Turkey, 11 July 2015.

<sup>209</sup> AFP, “Rebels Train Syrian Teens”

<sup>210</sup> Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

<sup>211</sup> Interview with Samer (19, former combatant with FSA, JN, and IS from Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 22 February 2017.

<sup>212</sup> Revkin and Mhidi, “Quitting ISIS”

<sup>213</sup> Interview with Elias (20, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Istanbul, Turkey, 15 September 2016.

<sup>214</sup> Interview with a senior Iraqi Army officer in Mosul, Iraq, 19 April 2017.

<sup>215</sup> Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

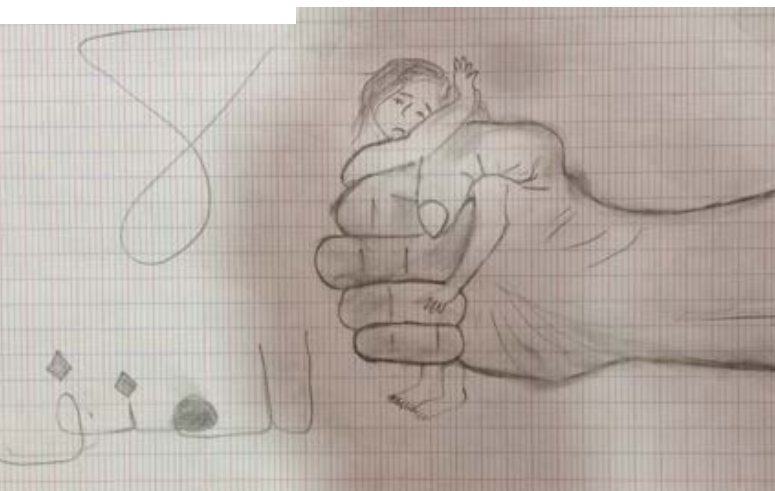
the group with which they are affiliated. Most roles can be described as one of the following: (1) support functions, (2) policing, (3) combat, (4) espionage, (5) smuggling, (6) politics and propaganda, and (7) forced marriage and/or sexual exploitation.

**SUPPORT FUNCTIONS:** Children are often recruited to perform supporting roles including cooking, cleaning weapons, digging trenches, or carrying injured fighters and corpses. Children who perform primarily supporting roles are often working in close proximity to fighting and can easily transition into combat roles. Furthermore, some supporting roles may be just as dangerous as combat. A FSA officer from Deir Ezzor reported that two boys recruited by IS were assigned to work in a munitions factory, where they later died after accidentally causing an explosion.<sup>216</sup>

**POLICING:** NSAGs that engage in policing of civilian populations often recruit children to work as guards, spies, or checkpoint personnel. Such jobs require less training and physical fitness than fighting, but often expose children to violence and may be stepping stones to combat roles. For example, children employed by IS as guards in detention facilities have interrogated and tortured prisoners.<sup>217</sup>

**COMBAT:** Children who perform combat roles are directly involved in conventional fighting or other violent operations such as suicide bombings and executions. Some groups seem to prefer children for particular combat roles because of their unique physical and psychological traits. A lawyer from Raqqa, observing that IS frequently uses children for suicide operations, suggested two possible explanations: (1) Children's susceptibility to indoctrination makes them enthusiastic about the prospect of martyrdom, and (2) they often lack the skill or strength to be useful in other operational roles.<sup>218</sup> Out of 89 documented underage IS fighters killed in combat in 2015, at least 19 died in suicide operations.<sup>219</sup> An 18-year-old Iraqi boy who joined Islamic State also reported that trainers seemed to view children as ideal candidates for suicide missions because of their enthusiasm.<sup>220</sup> IS deploys a disproportionate number of children to the front lines for use as "cannon fodder," according to a former fighter.<sup>221</sup> Another former IS fighter explained, "Since children are usually the most enthusiastic and least skilled, IS uses them to test the enemy at the beginning of battles. Since children are not very valuable as fighters, IS would rather sacrifice them than adults."<sup>222</sup>

**FIGURE 5**  
Drawings about Forced  
Marriage by a 15-Year-Old  
Syrian Girl



**ESPIONAGE:** Children are often recruited to spy on other civilians, including family members, friends, and neighbours. The mother of a 13-year-old boy who was recruited by IS said that the group "likes to use kids as spies because no one pays attention to them." She was caught selling contraband cigarettes by a child who reported her to the religious police.<sup>223</sup> Interviewees reported that IS had offered small cash rewards to children for intelligence tips.<sup>224</sup> As with other non-combat roles, espionage is often a gateway to more violent and dangerous work. One child who joined IS at the age of 13 worked as a spy before "graduating" to weapons training.<sup>225</sup>

**SMUGGLING:** Many NSAGs use children to smuggle contraband goods. The FSA has used children as young as 10 to carry supplies, munitions, and weapons from Turkey into Syria. Several NSAGs – the FSA, HTS, and AS – were all using children to smuggle supplies through a particular government checkpoint in Homs because they

<sup>216</sup> Interview with Abdullah (41, FSA combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>217</sup> Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

<sup>218</sup> Interview with Majd (27, lawyer from Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 20 September 2016.

<sup>219</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "استمرار استغلال أسساء الأطفال السوريين وتجنيدهم وزجهم في العمليات العسكرية" 25 September 2015. Available from [goo.gl/NK39hT](http://goo.gl/NK39hT).

<sup>220</sup> Survey Respondent #44 (18, from Salah ad-Din, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 10 August 2017.

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Halil (28, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Istanbul, Turkey, 15 September 2016.

<sup>222</sup> Interview with Elias (20, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Istanbul, Turkey, 15 September 2016.

<sup>223</sup> Interview with Fatima (42, housewife from Deir Ezzor and mother of a child recruited by IS), in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>224</sup> Interview with Faisal (40, teacher from Deir Ezzor), in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 18 February 2017.

<sup>225</sup> Marcia Biggs, "One Syrian Child Soldier's Desperate Struggle to Escape ISIS"; PBS News Hour, 5 August 2016. Available from [www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/one-syrian-child-soldiers-desperate-struggle-escape-isis](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/one-syrian-child-soldiers-desperate-struggle-escape-isis).



**FIGURE 5**  
Drawings about Forced  
Marriage by a 15-Year-Old  
Syrian Girl

were less likely to be stopped than adults.<sup>226</sup> Smuggling may be as dangerous as combat.<sup>227</sup> Karam, who joined AS at the age of 16, reported that three children who were being used to smuggle goods across the Syrian border were killed by the Turkish army in 2016 near the village of Khirbet al-Joz.<sup>228</sup>

**POLITICS AND PROPAGANDA:** NSAGs may involve children in protests or use their images in propaganda to make political or ideological statements. Child combatants have been used as bargaining chips in prisoner exchanges.<sup>229</sup> In the Syrian town of Khan Shaykhun, HTS fighters leading a march to protest U.S. and Russian airstrikes “were unable to convince the ‘wise men’ of the town to follow them, so they exploited children.”<sup>230</sup> In Lebanon, Hizbullah and other NSAGs have systemically used children to increase turnout for military parades and protests, where they often wear uniforms and carry weapons. Although such demonstrations usually begin peacefully, they sometimes turn violent.<sup>231</sup> Some NSAGs have used images or videos of children to score political points against rivals. In 2015, JN released footage of the tearful confessions of two captured

13-year-old IS fighters in an effort to embarrass and shame IS for using “material incentives” to recruit children, although JN has used similar tactics. As this video indicates, NSAGs instrumentalize children for both physical and informational warfare.<sup>232</sup>

**FORCED MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE:** Many armed groups, particularly those with multigenerational state-building projects for whom population growth is necessary for long-term survival, promote marriage and reproduction. Major General Naim al-Jubouri of the Iraqi Army said of IS, “They are not only interested in the present; they have a vision for the future, and children are the key to that vision.”<sup>233</sup> Accordingly, Syrian and Iraqi women and girls face pressure to marry IS fighters and bear children.<sup>234</sup> One official IS publication states that “it is considered legitimate for a girl to be married at the age of nine,”<sup>235</sup> and another describes the role of women this way: “As for you, O mother of lion cubs ... She is the teacher of generations and the producer of men.”<sup>236</sup> In Deir Ezzor, the group reportedly enlisted a local Syrian woman to conduct a “survey” of households to identify good candidates for marriage to fighters.<sup>237</sup> According to a civilian from IS-controlled Manbij, “Many parents felt that it was important for at least one of their daughters to marry an IS member as a kind of protection bargain.”<sup>238</sup> In Idlib, where HTS and the FSA are active, child marriage has been linked with a suicide epidemic among underage girls.<sup>239</sup> A 15-year-old Syrian refugee in Lebanon had attempted to poison herself after her family began pressuring her to marry a NSAG member in Syria, an experience she illustrated in drawings (Figure 5). In addition to underage and coerced marriage, boys and girls face the dangers of sexual assault and rape by NSAG members, although such violations are severely underreported because victims fear they will be stigmatized.<sup>240</sup>

<sup>226</sup> Interview with Adel (33, electrical engineer from Homs), in Homs by phone from Sanliurfa, Turkey, 22 February 2017.

<sup>227</sup> In one case, a 12-year-old boy was shot from behind while fleeing Turkish forces near the border, sustaining a permanent leg injury. Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Opposition Using Children in Conflict,” 29 November 2012. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2012/11/29/syria-opposition-using-children-conflict](http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/11/29/syria-opposition-using-children-conflict).

<sup>228</sup> Interview with Karam (19, former AS combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

<sup>229</sup> Ellen Francis, “Syrian Government, Rebels Swap More Than 100 Prisoners in Hama,” Reuters, 7 February 2017. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-prisoners-idUSKBN15M29G](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-prisoners-idUSKBN15M29G).

<sup>230</sup> Video shows Tahrir al-Sham fighters in a pickup truck leading a procession of children waving banners with slogans including, “U.S.A. and Russia [are in an] alliance to kill us.” @sahwaji1, “فانسفوا هؤلاء الاطفال في مظاهراتهم مثلوا #هينة تحرير الشام في #خان شيخون لم يستطعوا اقتاع الرجال العلاء” بتابعهم،” <https://web.archive.org/web/20170702173321/https://twitter.com/sahwaji1/status/827903429330792448>.

<sup>231</sup> Interviews with a UNICEF child protection officer in Beirut, Lebanon, 22 March 2017, and two NGO staff members in Beirut and Saida, Lebanon, 23–24 March 2017. See also Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, 24 August 2017, A/72/361–S/2017/821, para. 98. Available from <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1726811.pdf>.

<sup>232</sup> Shaam Network, “جبهة النصرة.. ثبت تسجيلاً لطفلين جندهما تنظيم الدولة لاستهدافها,” 13 May 2015. Available from [goo.gl/DF9LNY](http://goo.gl/DF9LNY).

<sup>233</sup> Interview with Major General Najim al-Jubouri in Mosul, Iraq, 19 April 2017.

<sup>234</sup> Mara Revkin and Elisabeth Wood, “The Islamic State’s Pattern of Sexual Violence,” paper presented at the American Political Science Association, August 2017.

<sup>235</sup> Islamic State, “Women in the Islamic State,” January 2015, p. 30. Available from <https://therinjfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf>.

<sup>236</sup> Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, “A Jihad Without Fighting,” *Dabiq*, Vol. 11 (August 2015), p. 44.

<sup>237</sup> Interview with Dalia (41, school teacher from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

<sup>238</sup> Interview with Mahmoud (24, civilian from IS-controlled Manbij) in Gaziantep, Turkey, 8 July 2015.

<sup>239</sup> Hadya Yahya and Hasan Arfah, “The Link between Suicide among Girls in Rural Idlib and Underage Marriages,” Syria Deeply, 28 July 2017. Available from [www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/07/28/the-link-between-suicide-among-girls-in-rural-idlib-and-underage-marriages](http://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/07/28/the-link-between-suicide-among-girls-in-rural-idlib-and-underage-marriages).

<sup>240</sup> Interviews with two child protection specialists in Gaziantep, 22 March 2017.

# 7 How and Why Do Children Exit NSAGs?

Pathways out of NSAGs are as complex and multi-causal as pathways to recruitment. Children who exit armed groups do so for reasons that depend both on their individual experiences and on structural and environmental conditions to which they are exposed. The following individual-, social-, and structural-level factors influence patterns of exit from NSAGs.

## A. INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL FACTORS

At the individual level, children may voluntarily disengage from NSAGs for a number of reasons. Some become disillusioned with an armed group's ideology or feel that their experience is not what was promised. An Iraqi child who joined IS at the age of 16, at the suggestion of friends, attended a training camp for only one day before changing his mind and fleeing to a refugee camp near Mosul. Despite the brevity of his engagement with the group, he was detained by Kurdish security forces and is now facing terrorism charges.<sup>241</sup>

Sometimes, children disengage from one NSAG in order to join another. Of the eight Syrian children interviewed for this study who had previously joined a NSAG, four had been engaged with two or more groups. "Side-switching" may be driven by ideological, social, or material reasons.

Another common individual-level pathway out of NSAGs is to seek medical treatment for injuries suffered as a result of engagement. Tarek, who joined JN at the age of 14, temporarily disengaged from the group in 2016 to undergo surgery in Turkey for a significant leg injury that he had sustained in combat.<sup>242</sup> Disengagement for medical reasons, however, is often temporary.

## B. SOCIAL-LEVEL FACTORS

At the social level, familial, community, and group dynamics may create conditions favourable to disengagement. Some children have left NSAGs as a result of intervention by family members. Parents may try to remove their children from the conflict theatre by taking them to neighbouring countries or sending them away with older siblings or relatives. In such cases, children may be disengaged physically but still identify with the NSAG, and they will often look for opportunities to return to the conflict. One Syrian boy who joined IS at the age of 13 was taken across the border into Turkey by his mother, who wanted to extract him from the group, but after two months, he announced his intention to return to Syria, where he eventually reenlisted and signed up to be a suicide bomber.<sup>243</sup>

While many children join NSAGs to support their families economically, the desire to support or protect family members may also be a motivation for disengagement. Marwan, who joined the FSA at the age of 14 and later switched sides to JN, left Syria in 2016 after his younger brother was injured in an airstrike and needed to be taken to Turkey for medical treatment.<sup>244</sup>

## C. STRUCTURAL-LEVEL FACTORS

Structural, economic, military, and political conditions may lead children to disengage from NSAGs.

Many children have disengaged involuntarily from NSAGs when they are detained by Syrian or Iraqi security forces or by enemy NSAGs, often in the context of the retreat or defeat of their group. Sometimes, children have already made the decision to desert and lay down their weapons when they are arrested. Of the 45 Iraqi children detained on charges of joining IS who were surveyed for this chapter, 30 were arrested in IDP camps, where many claimed to have fled after voluntarily deserting the group (Figure 6).

<sup>241</sup> Survey Respondent #29 (16, from Salah ad-Din, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 18 April 2017.

<sup>242</sup> Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

<sup>243</sup> Biggs, "One Syrian Child Soldier's Desperate Struggle."

<sup>244</sup> Interview with Marwan (19, former FSA and JN combatant from Aleppo) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.



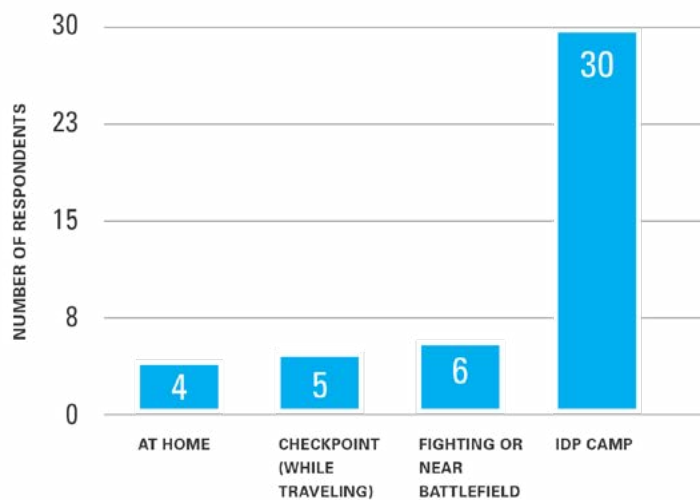


FIGURE 6

Drawings about Forced Marriage by a 15-Year-Old Syrian Girl

Children sometimes disengage from NSAGs if outside opportunities in the civilian world become more attractive than continued membership in the group.

Children sometimes disengage from NSAGs if outside opportunities in the civilian world become more attractive than continued membership in the group. In one of the best-case scenarios, children may decide to disengage from the conflict entirely to pursue educational or employment opportunities outside of Syria. Karam left AS after fighting for the group for three years (since joining at the age of 16) in order to continue his education in Turkey after an uncle there offered to take him in. Having friends or relatives in areas removed from the conflict decreases the costs and uncertainties of exit.<sup>245</sup>

Children may also disengage from NSAGs as a result of local or international pressure on their group to demobilize underage fighters. Several NSAGs, under scrutiny from international NGOs or local stakeholders, have

adopted child-protective policies, including minimum-age requirements. In July 2014, the YPG signed a Deed of Commitment with Geneva Call, pledging to refrain from using children under the age of 18 in combat roles.<sup>246</sup> The agreement resulted in the demobilization of 149 underage combatants, although the YPG has continued to recruit children.<sup>247</sup> In 2017, a delegation of tribal leaders met with YPG commanders in Aleppo and asked them to stop recruiting underage fighters. The YPG commanders agreed in order to avoid “tension with locals.”<sup>248</sup>

The FSA is another example of a group that has adopted child-protective policies in response to local and international pressure. After Human Rights Watch published a report in 2014 that documented instances of child recruitment by the FSA,<sup>249</sup> its leadership issued a statement affirming the FSA’s commitment to “combating this despicable practice,” citing the 2002 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>250</sup> Later, in June 2017, four FSA-affiliated brigades based in northern Syria signed a Deed of Commitment with Geneva Call pledging to refrain from recruiting children under age 18, to facilitate medical care and education for children, and to ban all acts of sexual violence.<sup>251</sup> In November 2017, four more FSA-affiliated brigades signed similar Deeds of Commitment, three of which pledged to prohibit the recruitment of children under age 18.<sup>252</sup>

Additionally, Geneva Call has been working with JI and other Islamist NSAGs to develop a draft statement that contains “15 key IHL [international humanitarian law] rules and their congruence with Islamic law to be respected in armed conflict.”<sup>253</sup> Although the statement has not been adopted yet, JI has made other public commitments to respect IHL principles, including the prohibition of the use of medical facilities for military purposes.<sup>254</sup> As these examples indicate, direct engagement with NSAGs has in some cases led to the adoption of child-protective policies that facilitate disengagement, although non-compliance with these policies is widespread.

<sup>245</sup> Interview with Karam (19, former AS combatant from Idlib) in Sanlurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

<sup>246</sup> Geneva Call, Deed of Commitment Under Geneva Call for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict, 5 July 2014. Available from [https://genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm\\_uploads/2014/07/2014-5july-YPG-YP-J-syria-children.pdf](https://genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2014/07/2014-5july-YPG-YP-J-syria-children.pdf).

<sup>247</sup> Geneva Call, “Syria: Kurdish Armed Forces Demobilize 149 Child Soldiers,” 7 July 2014. Available from <https://genevacall.org/syria-kurdish-armed-forces-demobilize-149-child-soldiers>.

<sup>248</sup> Dirar Khatab, “أبناء القضية، قصص أطفال مجتدين في صفوف وحدات حماية الشعب”، *Northern Syria Observer*, 17 June 2017.

<sup>249</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Maybe We Live.”

<sup>250</sup> Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army, “A Statement about the Recruitment of Child Soldiers,” 26 June 2014. Available from [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related\\_material/A%20statement%20about%20the%20recruitment%20of%20child%20soldiers%20.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/A%20statement%20about%20the%20recruitment%20of%20child%20soldiers%20.pdf).

<sup>251</sup> Geneva Call, “Syria: 4 Brigades of the Free Syrian Army Commit to Prohibit Sexual Violence and the Use of Child Soldiers,” 3 July 2017. Available from <https://genevacall.org/syria-4-brigades-free-syrian-army-commit-prohibit-sexual-violence-use-child-soldiers>.

<sup>252</sup> Geneva Call, “Syria: General Commanders of Four Free Syrian Army Brigades Make Humanitarian Commitments in Geneva,” 15 November 2017. Available from <https://genevacall.org/syria-general-commanders-four-free-syrian-army-brigades-make-humanitarian-commitments-geneva>.

<sup>253</sup> Geneva Call, “Syria,” accessed 2 January 2018. Available from <https://genevacall.org/country-page/syria>.

<sup>254</sup> Jaysh al-Islam General Command, “استجابة لبيان منظمة أطباء بلا حدود الصادر بتاريخ اليوم ١ أيار ٢٠١٧ نعلن ما يلي”، Twitter, 1 May 2017. Available from <https://twitter.com/jaishalislam/status/85904244339163957/photo/1>.

## 8 Obstacles to Disengagement and Reintegration

The potential for reintegration of any particular child is dependent on his or her individual motivations for engagement and experiences within the group, as well as the reasons for and circumstances of disengagement. Children reintegrate into many different contexts – other areas of Syria, neighbouring countries, or destinations farther removed from the conflict – and the challenges associated with these particular settings and the resources available therein have a significant impact on a child's trajectory. Disengagement and reintegration appear to be nonlinear processes with high rates of recidivism. Even children who have physically disengaged from armed groups face steep psychological, social, economic, security, and legal barriers to reintegration. Those who remain in close proximity to the Syrian conflict are particularly at risk for recidivism and reengagement. In general, children who are learning to be civilians again, often for the first time in years, face the following obstacles and challenges.

**LIMITED ACCESS:** Many children are recruited by NSAGs in active conflict areas that are not accessible to the United Nations and other international interveners. Local actors who try to extract children from NSAGs, including parents, may face reprisals. This is particularly true in the case of ideologically motivated NSAGs that regard military service as a moral or religious obligation. Parents who try to extract their children from Islamist NSAGs are frequently accused of apostasy. One man from Raqqa who visited an IS recruiting centre to inquire about the whereabouts of his son, who had joined the group without his permission, was arrested and detained for three days. Upon release, he was warned that if he asked about his son again, he would be executed for “interfering with the obligation of jihad.”<sup>255</sup> Parents of children recruited by the YPG have faced similar challenges, including punishment for “treason,” imprisonment for months on false charges of “collaborating with IS,”<sup>256</sup> and the extortion of payments of up to \$4,000 for the release of their children.<sup>257</sup>

**FIGURE 7A**  
A Child's Drawing  
Depicting Public  
Executions in Mosul



**NO EXIT:** The process of exiting NSAGs and the territory they control may be equally or more dangerous than continued engagement. Some NSAGs, notably IS, impose severe punishments on deserters, including death.<sup>258</sup> Additionally, members of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States or other countries may be targeted by smugglers and bounty hunters hoping to trade them in for a profit. For example, Gulf states have reportedly paid large sums in exchange for the return of captured IS fighters.<sup>259</sup>

**PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS:** Children who have been engaged with NSAGs have been socialized to self-identify as adults and are often unwilling to resume activities that they associate with childhood (e.g., school and sports). Additionally, in the case of children who initially joined NSAGs in pursuit of a meaningful and dignified life, some of those who disengage struggle with feelings of worthlessness and disempowerment, particularly if they are unable to find social and vocational fulfilment among civilians. Tarek, who joined JN at the age of

14 and was interviewed in southern Turkey while temporarily disengaged in order to receive medical treatment for a leg injury, reported feeling “lost,” as if his life had “no purpose,” saying, “I am nothing without a weapon.”<sup>260</sup>

<sup>255</sup> Interview with Nizar (38, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 18 September 2016 (recounting the experience of a friend from Raqqa).

<sup>256</sup> Dirar Khatab, “أبناء القضية، قصص أطفال مجتدين في صفوف وحدات حماية الشعب” *Northern Syria Observer*, 17 June 2017.

<sup>257</sup> Syria MRM, “Summary of MRM4Syria Verification.”

<sup>258</sup> Yasser Allawi and Jalal Zein al-Deen, “One Fighter’s Recruitment – and Escape – from ISIS,” *Syria Deeply*, 12 May 2016. Available from [www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/05/12/one-fighters-recruitment-and-escape-from-isis](http://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/05/12/one-fighters-recruitment-and-escape-from-isis).

<sup>259</sup> Erika Solomon and Ahmad Mhidi, “The Black Market Trade in Isis Fighters,” *Financial Times*, 8 January 2017. Available from [www.ft.com/content/c7a7d804-d357-11e6-b06b-680c49b4b4c0?mhq5j=e1](http://www.ft.com/content/c7a7d804-d357-11e6-b06b-680c49b4b4c0?mhq5j=e1).

<sup>260</sup> Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.



**FIGURE 7B**  
A Child's Drawing Depicting  
Public Executions in Mosul

Children formerly engaged with NSAGs have experienced a range of traumas. Triggers for these painful memories are diverse and unpredictable. A UNICEF programme officer in Lebanon related the case of a 12-year-old boy from Idlib who refused to join in a sports rehabilitation activity because he had witnessed incidents in which IS had decapitated prisoners and encouraged children to play soccer with the severed heads.<sup>261</sup> In Figures 7a and 7b, drawings by children from Mosul illustrate their memories of public executions, which persist long after their exposure to violence.<sup>262</sup>

**SOCIAL BARRIERS:** Some children have difficulty reintegrating into civilian communities, either as IDPs in Syria or refugees in other countries, because of stigmas attached to former combatants or other prejudices. Anas, who disengaged from JI in 2015, has found it difficult to adjust to civilian life in Turkey due to a combination of underemployment and discrimination against Syrian refugees. He tried working for two different businesses owned by Turks – a butcher shop and a hardware store – but eventually quit both jobs because his “Turkish coworkers would say bad things about Syrians, and I felt embarrassed and angry.”<sup>263</sup> In Iraq, tribes have formally banished individuals who are believed to have supported or joined IS, often publishing lists of their names.<sup>264</sup> Under tribal law, these alleged collaborators can be killed if they return.

Another feature of tribal law, both in Syria and Iraq, is the attribution of collective guilt to the family or tribe of the perpetrator, such that the relatives of an

IS member can be held vicariously responsible for crimes that he or she committed individually.<sup>265</sup> As a result, women and girls who married members of NSAGs—and their children—often have difficulty returning to their former communities after the cessation of conflict, even if their husbands or parents are dead or missing. In Iraq’s Hajj Ali IDP camp, widows of IS members interviewed in December 2017 said that they hoped to stay in the camp indefinitely because they believed that they and their children would be safer there than in their former homes in Hawija, where family members of IS members are vulnerable to retaliatory violence. One widow of an IS member, whose brother’s house in their village near Hawija was attacked with grenades as a result of his family ties to the group, said, “I am afraid that if I return, my neighbours would kill me in my sleep.”<sup>266</sup>

Another social barrier to the reintegration of children is that collective identities formed during engagement with NSAGs tend to persist in programming settings. A UNICEF officer in Lebanon reported that children formerly engaged with rival NSAGs do not mix well and sometimes fight.<sup>267</sup>

**ECONOMIC BARRIERS:** Children who are too old or unwilling to return to school often turn to low-wage employment. Such jobs usually do not present opportunities for capacity-building or upward mobility, and in many cases may expose children to exploitation by employers. Those who are unable to earn a living or find themselves in unfulfilling or dangerous jobs often second-guess their decisions to leave armed groups and may look for opportunities to reengage.

Marwan, who joined the FSA at the age of 14 and later fought for JN, eventually fled in 2016 to Turkey, where he found a job at a vegetable oil factory in the city of Sanliurfa. He dislikes the job and complained about a cheating boss who underpays him, saying, “I would rather be fighting in Syria because at least there, I could protect myself and my rights. Now, I am powerless and taken advantage of every day.”<sup>268</sup>

<sup>261</sup> Interview with a UNICEF programme officer in Tripoli, Lebanon, 24 March 2017.

<sup>262</sup> The left-hand drawing was made by an IDP from Mosul at a school in Khazir Camp. The right-hand drawing was made by an elementary school student in a Mosul neighbourhood recently liberated from Islamic State.

<sup>263</sup> Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>264</sup> For example, in the Iraqi Governorate of Salah ad-Din, several tribes published a list of the names of 113 individuals who are accused of association with IS and therefore banished from the community. Hashim al-Hashimi, “التنموا لداعش وفرقتهم عنديهم الى منازلهم عشائر البيوتعمة الجبورية في صلاح الدين تعلن الزاارة من 113 شخص”, Twitter, 12 January 2018, Available from <https://twitter.com/hushamalhashimi/status/951763690784743424>.

<sup>265</sup> Nabih Bulos, “In Iraq, Punishing Family Ties to Islamic State and Compensating Victims of the Violence”, *Los Angeles Times*, 9 October 2016. Available from <http://beta.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-ig-iraq-qayarah-snap-story.html>.

<sup>266</sup> Interview with Laila (40, widow of an IS combatant from a village near Hawija) in the Hajj Ali IDP camp in Ninewa, Iraq, 14 December 2017.

<sup>267</sup> Interview with a UNICEF officer in Tripoli, Lebanon, 24 March 2017.

<sup>268</sup> Interview with Marwan (19, former FSA and JN combatant from Aleppo) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

Many Syrian children find it impossible to imagine a non-violent future as long as they are confronted with daily reminders of the conflict.

**LEGAL BARRIERS:** Children may face legal barriers to reintegration, whether as IDPs inside Syria or as migrants to other countries. The Syrian government, which enacted a sweeping counter-terrorism law in 2012,<sup>269</sup> engages in mass arrests of people fleeing besieged and contested areas, and systematically detains fighting-age males, especially Sunni, who are believed to be associated with opposition groups.<sup>270</sup> Torture of detainees, including children, is widespread in Syrian prisons<sup>271</sup> and has also been alleged in Iraq as well.<sup>272</sup> In northern Syria, the PYD has imprisoned individuals accused of having ties to IS for up to a year without a trial or even formal charges, based on thin evidence.<sup>273</sup> The Iraqi government has detained more than 7,000 individuals on IS-related charges since 2014, including hundreds of children,<sup>274</sup> some as young as 13.<sup>275</sup> In the absence of amnesty guarantees, children who want to disengage from NSAGs risk harsh treatment under domestic criminal or antiterrorism laws.

Even if children are not arrested or prosecuted, they may face legal difficulties as a result of their lack of valid identification or personal-status documents. Thousands of children have been born and marriages officiated in areas of Syria and Iraq controlled by NSAGs. Although IS issued its own birth certificates<sup>276</sup> and marriage contracts,<sup>277</sup> these documents are not recognized as valid by the Syrian or Iraqi governments. Lack of documentation makes it difficult

for children to access health care and education and, if their nationality cannot be established, renders them vulnerable to statelessness.<sup>278</sup>

An additional layer of legal difficulties awaits children who leave Syria and Iraq. Those who cross borders illegally and do not register as refugees may not be able to obtain lawful employment, enrol in public schools, or access health care.<sup>279</sup>

**PROXIMITY TO CONFLICT:** Many Syrian children find it impossible to imagine a non-violent future as long as the conflict is ongoing. Anas, who has been working in Turkey since disengaging from JI at the age of 15, was at a loss for words when asked what he hopes to accomplish in his life. “It’s pointless to think about my future now. As long as the war is still going on, my only goal is to return to Syria to fight alongside my brothers,” he said, adding that he is actively looking for a new brigade to

join, either with JI or the FSA.<sup>280</sup> In Mosul and other areas previously controlled by IS, schools have reopened, but children are confronted with daily reminders of the conflict. Behind one elementary school is a makeshift cemetery where at least 11 bodies were buried during the liberation offensive because the road to the real cemetery was closed (Figure 8). One teacher estimated that it will take 20 years “for this neighbourhood to feel normal again.”<sup>281</sup>

Even refugee camps, where civilians supposedly go to escape the dangers of armed conflict, are not safe from predation by NSAGs. In Damascus, the Palestinian-majority Yarmouk neighbourhood has been the site of intense fighting between NSAGs including IS, HTS, the FSA, and Palestinian factions aligned with the Syrian government. IS has recruited children as young as 12 from the neighbourhood.<sup>282</sup> NSAGs are also able to project their influence transnationally into refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Operatives sent from Syria by IS and JN/HTS have recruited hundreds of young people in Lebanese refugee camps.<sup>283</sup> Children in refugee camps are vulnerable not

<sup>269</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Counterterrorism Court Used to Stifle Dissent,” 25 June 2013. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/25/syria-counterterrorism-court-used-stifle-dissent](http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/25/syria-counterterrorism-court-used-stifle-dissent).

<sup>270</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Syria: 2016 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices,” 3 March 2017, pp. 4–5. Available from [www.state.gov/documents/organization/265732.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265732.pdf).

<sup>271</sup> United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, 27 January 2014, S/2014/31, p. 6. Available from <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N13/627/07/PDF/N1362707.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>272</sup> Human Rights Watch, “KRG: Children Allege Torture by Security Forces,” 29 January 2017. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/29/krq-children-allege-torture-security-forces](http://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/29/krq-children-allege-torture-security-forces).

<sup>273</sup> Amnesty International, “Syria: Arbitrary Detentions and Blatantly Unfair Trials Mar PYD Fight Against Terrorism,” 7 September 2015. Available from [www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/09/syria-abuses-mar-pyd-fight-against-terrorism](http://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/09/syria-abuses-mar-pyd-fight-against-terrorism).

<sup>274</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Flawed Justice: Accountability for ISIS Crimes in Iraq,” 5 December 2017. Available from [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/iraq1217web.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/iraq1217web.pdf).

<sup>275</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Hundreds Detained in Degrading Conditions,” 13 March 2017. Available from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/13/iraq-hundreds-detained-degrading-conditions>.

<sup>276</sup> Photograph of a birth certificate issued by the Islamic State in Nineva Province, archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi. Available from [www.aymennajwad.org/awad/pics/large/893.jpg](http://www.aymennajwad.org/awad/pics/large/893.jpg).

<sup>277</sup> Photograph of a marriage contract issued by the Islamic State in Mosul, archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi. Available from [www.aymennajwad.org/awad/pics/large/894.jpg](http://www.aymennajwad.org/awad/pics/large/894.jpg).

<sup>278</sup> International Rescue Committee, “Identify Me: The Documentation Crisis in Northern Syria,” July 2016, p. 2. Available from <https://www.rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/document/1207/identify-me-july-2016-irc.pdf>.

<sup>279</sup> Syria Needs Analysis Project, “Legal Status of Individuals Fleeing Syria,” June 2013, p. 2. Available from [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/legal\\_status\\_of\\_individuals\\_fleeing\\_syria.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/legal_status_of_individuals_fleeing_syria.pdf).

<sup>280</sup> Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

<sup>281</sup> Interview with Sara (41, teacher from Mosul) in Mosul, Iraq, 15 April 2017.

<sup>282</sup> In May 2017, IS was reportedly posting flyers in the camp encouraging children between the ages of 12 and 14 to enrol in its “military school” to help “build a unified jihadist generation.” Ghassan Nasir, “النظام يقصف مخيم اليرموك و(داغش) يواصل تجنيد أطفال”، *Geroun*, 28 May 2017. Available from [www.geroun.net/archives/84236](http://www.geroun.net/archives/84236).

<sup>283</sup> Jack Khoury, “ISIS, Nusra Front Recruiting in Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon”, *Haaretz*, 26 July 2016. Available from [www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/isis/1.733250](http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/isis/1.733250).





**FIGURE 8**

Makeshift Cemetery  
Behind an Elementary  
School in Mosul

only to recruitment but also to early marriage. Adnan, who joined JN at the age of 14, said that at the time of his association with the group, fighters regularly visited several refugee camps in northern Syria near the border with Turkey to look for wives. According to Adnan, JN was paying women in refugee camps to “scout” for girls with particular traits desired by fighters and to negotiate with their parents.<sup>284</sup>

## 9 Conclusions

The patterns identified in this chapter suggest several broad conclusions with implications for the design and implementation of evidence-based programmes and policies.

The first is that the recruitment of children by NSAGs is **highly correlated with other forms of exploitation**, including child labour, early marriage, sexual abuse, and trafficking. Since these different practices frequently interact with and amplify each other, a child who experiences one is likely to experience others.

A second conclusion is that while the phenomenon of child recruitment and use by NSAGs has been exacerbated by the current conflict, it has **deep historical and cultural roots** in Syria and neighbouring countries. Definitions of adulthood are culturally relative and may deviate significantly from the international standard of 18. Furthermore, the Levant region has a long history of organized child recruitment by both state and non-state actors. Policies and programmes designed to address child recruitment in the current conflict must take into account these path dependencies between past and present.

A third finding is that the **absence of education, or the appropriation of educational systems by NSAGs**, can be an important factor in recruitment. Widespread closure of schools leads children to spend more time in the streets or enter the civilian workforce, where they are vulnerable to recruitment. Even when schools remain open, most in opposition-held areas are no longer accredited by the Syrian government. As a result, “children have no incentive to continue education beyond the level of basic literacy, because their degrees are worthless.”<sup>285</sup> Some armed groups have taken control of school systems and introduced curricula designed to indoctrinate children and

<sup>284</sup> Interview with Adnan (18, former combatant with JN, from Homs) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

<sup>285</sup> Interview with a child psychosocial support specialist in Gaziantep, Turkey, 23 February 2017.

prepare them for combat or supporting roles. In other cases, schools have been converted into “military academies” or training camps. Sometimes, children who disengage from armed groups are uninterested in resuming their education because they have been trained to think of themselves as adults, or because multi-year gaps in education are difficult to overcome. But others are eager to resume their education. Of the 45 children detained in Iraq on charges of joining IS who were surveyed for this chapter, 64 per cent of those who responded to the question said that if released, education was the most important resource they would need to achieve their life goals, and another 15 per cent identified vocational training as the most important resource (Figure 9).

Fourth is the significance of **family and social networks**. For children living in areas controlled by NSAGs, the decision to join is rarely made in a vacuum, but is heavily influenced by pre-existing social and familial networks. Groups of friends often join together, or a child who joins a group will encourage friends to follow suit. Tribes often join or switch allegiance between groups collectively, as do brigades. One positive implication of these social dynamics is that the decision to disengage from an armed group is also influenced and facilitated by peers. Deserters remain in contact with friends still in the armed group who may be looking for a way out and who will turn to them for advice about outside opportunities and exit strategies.

A fifth conclusion is that it is important to **distinguish between patterns of foreign and local recruitment**. Dynamics of recruiting vary greatly between areas that are controlled by armed groups and areas that are far removed from conflict theatres. Whereas recruitment in the former contexts involves coercion and real-life social networks, recruitment in the latter contexts is usually an individual process that involves clandestine engagement (often without the knowledge of family and friends) with a virtual community of militants, typically through social media. The experiences and needs of children recruited from within Syria or Iraq differ significantly from those of children recruited from beyond its borders, and programmes should be tailored accordingly.

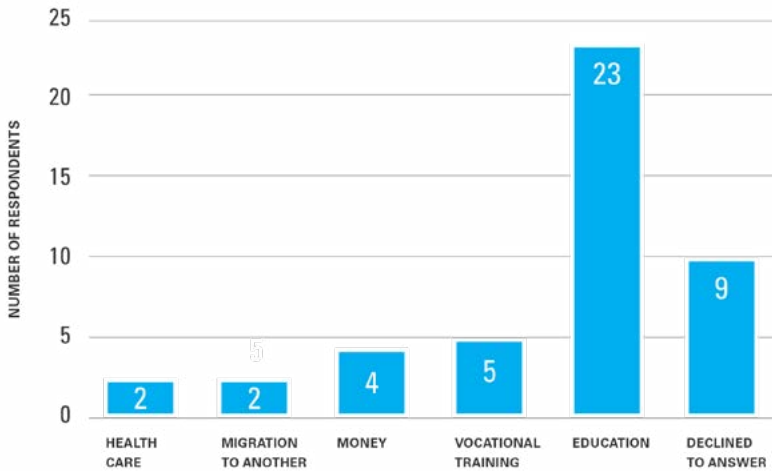
Sixth, **child recruitment, while pervasive, is not necessarily an inevitable feature of the conflicts in Syria and**

**Iraq**. Although all NSAGs have recruited children, their policies and practices vary significantly. Some NSAGs, under pressure from international NGOs or local stakeholders, have adopted child-protective policies such as minimum-age requirements and incentives to return to school. As these examples indicate, direct engagement with NSAGs has proven to be a successful strategy for promoting the adoption of child-protective norms and policies.

A seventh finding is that **states overwhelmingly treat children recruited by NSAGs as security threats rather than victims of exploitation**. Children who join or support NSAGs often do so under conditions of extreme manipulation, coercion, and duress. State security forces, acting on the basis of sweeping counter-terrorism laws, do not properly differentiate between children and adults, nor do they adequately prioritize the prosecution of more serious offenses (directly participating in terrorism or armed conflict) over lesser ones (for example, providing logistical support). And regardless of the severity of

their alleged offenses, children are entitled to due process and other minimum human rights guarantees by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which the Iraqi and Syrian governments are signatories. Finally, existing counter-terrorism approaches do not take into account the circumstances of duress and coercion that lead many children to become associated with NSAG – for example, the 17-year-old Iraqi boy surveyed for this chapter who joined IS for the sole purpose of receiving free medical treatment for his heart condition.<sup>286</sup> Another 16-year-old Iraqi boy who joined IS because “my family was starving” deserted as soon as the battle for Mosul began, after receiving only one month of weapons training. After voluntarily surrendering to Kurdish forces, he was convicted

**FIGURE 9**  
 Juvenile Detainees in Kurdistan: “What would you need to achieve your life goals?”



<sup>286</sup> Survey Respondent #41 (17, from Erbil, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 13 August 2017.



**FIGURE 10**

Drawing by an Iraqi Elementary School Student in Mosul.

of terrorism charges and is now serving a prison sentence that will seriously impact his future.<sup>287</sup> Decisions to disengage from NSAGs are often punished rather than incentivized. An additional concern is that many children fleeing conflict areas have been falsely accused and wrongfully detained because mere proximity to a NSAG has tainted them with suspicion.

Iraq, Syria, and the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey are struggling to process and accommodate large populations of refugees and IDPs. In an effort to identify and contain persons who are believed to pose a threat to national security, regional governments have imposed over-inclusive “screening” procedures that authorize the detention and interrogation of IDPs and refugees fleeing areas where NSAGs are active. For example, during the battle for Mosul, Iraqi and Kurdish authorities were blanket-quarantining all “fighting-age”

men and boys entering nearby IDP camps until cleared of any ties to IS. Screening decisions are often arbitrary and based on little concrete evidence. These findings suggest the importance of revising legal frameworks that collectively punish individuals from NSAG-controlled areas and do not adequately differentiate between perpetrators and victims.

The final conclusion is that the **difficulty of maintaining neutrality in conflict areas creates intense pressures and incentives for children to align with NSAGs**. For many children (and adults), neutrality is not an option. In areas controlled by armed groups, membership or at least cooperation is necessary for survival, employment, and protection of one’s family. Civil wars are polarizing, and even those who try to remain “neutral” will be perceived by others as choosing one side or the other. The Syrian government assumes that every fighting-age male in Aleppo is a member of an opposition group on the basis of geographical and demographic traits rather than evidence of membership. The impossibility of neutrality creates strong incentives to join a faction. When civilians are treated as combatants, there is no benefit to maintaining neutrality.

Even when children successfully disengage from armed groups, or the groups withdraw from their communities, the shadow of war continues to loom large. Figure 10, drawn by an elementary school student in a neighbourhood of Mosul recently liberated from IS, depicts an Iraqi soldier comforting a young boy in a landscape littered with corpses, debris, and weapons. These experiences are not easily forgotten when the conflict continues to rage on in nearby regions of Iraq and Syria. Although beyond the scope and mandate of child protection advocates, peacebuilding is a necessary background condition for the successful implementation of the recommendations outlined above.





**GAO, MALI**  
Children walk amidst swirling winds  
during a sand storm.  
—August 2013

UN Photo/Marco Dormino





5

# **“I Joined to Save My People”**

Children and Non-State  
Armed Groups in Mali

By Jaimie Bleck, Marc-André Boisvert,  
and Boukary Sangaré

# 1 Introduction

The current Malian conflict has evolved rapidly since it started in 2012. Despite the signing of a peace agreement in 2015 and the presence of more than 10,000 international troops,<sup>1</sup> the northern and central regions of the country remain plagued by insecurity, and a significant portion of territory is governed by non-state armed groups (NSAGs). This diverse group of NSAGs includes those that have signed peace agreements, community-based armed groups and militias, and jihadist<sup>2</sup> groups with broader transnational aims.

In this context, children and youth are playing a central role. In this chapter, we outline two major pathways to NSAG membership: community mobilization and individual recruitment. In both cases, we note that children's participation can be either voluntary or forced. Currently, most recruitment is occurring at the community level, where the factors influencing child recruitment are often similar to those that motivate youth and adults. However, even in the context of individual-level recruitment, it is important to contextualize children's participation in relation to their families, communities, and broader Malian society.

First, children in Mali are among the most vulnerable in the world due to high rates of child mortality, low levels of school attendance, and high rates of child labour.<sup>3</sup> In times of peace, the expectation is that children will contribute to their family's and community's prosperity and security<sup>4</sup> – often through their own labour. War and insecurity render children's positions even more precarious, as they still are expected to help their families and communities meet their basic needs in this violent context.

If children live in a community that falls under the control of a NSAG, it is very likely that they will participate in activities that support it. Community members, including children, may fear retaliation if they do not, or they may be tempted to use resources offered by NSAGs (including guns) to conduct other lucrative illicit activities. Participation in NSAGs may include many activities that resemble the types of labour that children engage in during times of peace, but with a new orientation towards the NSAG. Later in the chapter we discuss four contextual factors that are important in understanding the broader relationship between children and NSAGs in Mali.

<sup>1</sup> The foreign security presence has increased in Mali since 2013. There is the French mission, Operation Barkhane (previously Serval), the United Nations mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the European Union Training Mission (EUTM), and the European Union civilian mission (EUCAP Sahel-Mali).

<sup>2</sup> The term "jihadist" is employed in this chapter because it is used in contemporary discourse in Malian society and by some of the groups themselves. It is generally used by Malians to refer to Islamist groups that aim to establish sharia law. While it may be used to describe groups with direct ties with Al-Qaida, it is employed to describe other groups that do not have such ties. Often it is used generally used by Malians to refer to the block of armed groups – most of which self-identify as jihadist – that the Government has thus far refused to negotiate with as part of the peace process. The term "terrorist" is not a useful designation in Mali. It is often used indiscriminately to refer to signatories of peace agreements, jihadists, criminal groups, or any faction using violence (terroristic or not).

<sup>3</sup> Mali ranks 170th of 172 countries where children are the "most threatened." Save the Children, "Stolen Childhoods: End of Childhood Report 2017," p. 3. Available from <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/stolen-childhoods-end-childhood-report-2017>.

<sup>4</sup> Children are viewed not only as symbols of wealth and status but also as contributors to their families. From an early age, children work, often to the detriment of their education.

**KIDAL, MALI**

A faded flag for Azawad - the now-defunct unrecognized state that declared independence from Mali in April 2012 - painted on a wall in Kidal.

—December 2016

UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

Second, it is important to note that in Malian society, adulthood is determined by life events, such as marriage,<sup>5</sup> rather than by numeric age.<sup>6</sup> This tradition has many implications in times of war. Minors under 18 may be viewed as eligible combatants and providers; there may not be a significant distinction between unmarried youths, no matter if they are legally adults or minors. For instance, in some nomadic communities, males as young as 13 may consider themselves adults.<sup>7</sup> In addition, NSAGs' presence can both disrupt and facilitate children's transitions to adulthood. While insecurity and underemployment can profoundly restrict economic opportunities, and thus retard male youth's transition to adulthood in the eyes of the community, child and youth participation in armed conflict conversely can also facilitate this transition.

Third, child association with NSAGs in Mali must be viewed against the context of familial and community relations and expectations. Mali remains a very hierarchically structured communitarian society. Status and respect are conferred to children and youth who meet expectations for contributions to the familial unit and larger group. Association with an armed group can allow children to meet both obligations – to contribute financially to one's family and help protect one's community.

Fourth, the weakness of the Malian state, including its inability to protect territory or resolve conflicts, and, in some instances, the army's indiscriminate use of violence against certain nomadic groups, has fuelled communities' alliances with NSAGs.<sup>8</sup> The Malian state does not control the majority of territory in central and northern Mali. Historically, the state has been mostly absent in these zones, seriously limiting the application of the rule of law. In many communities the judiciary is viewed as corrupt and easily bought off, and bureaucratic offices are perceived as exploitive and predatory. Conflict has compounded the damaging effects of climate change, demographic pressure, and land shortages on the northern economy, which is dependent on cattle-herding and subsistence agriculture. The state has been unable to assist communities struggling to deal with these challenges, generating further frustration. Where they are active, NSAGs can offer protection and administer justice in the broad swaths of the Malian country where the bureaucratic state is absent. Consequently, populations are often supportive of NSAGs even when they are not predisposed to embrace insurgent ideologies. Further, some nomadic ethnic communities, notably the Tuareg, Arabs, and increasingly the Peul, are frustrated by perceived state favouritism towards sedentary groups, which is fuelling distrust and greater empathy with insurgent causes.

Fifth, community-level mobilization appears to be the dominant form of child recruitment in Mali, except in the case of some jihadist groups. Most NSAGs mobilize along existing inter-ethnic or intra-ethnic cleavages, or align with communities with historical grievances against the state or those that need protection. These groups recruit children by mobilizing the community, rather than directly targeting children. In contrast, most jihadist groups in central Mali specifically target individual children.

Against this backdrop, the association of individual children, or whole communities of them, with NSAGs in Mali comes into better focus. The rest of this chapter seeks to explain the structural-, social-, and individual-level factors that influence child association with NSAGs in Mali. It also examines the available evidence on how and why children are used by NSAGs, and navigates the very limited evidence we have on how and why children leave – or are likely to leave – NSAGs. This chapter concludes by discussing obstacles to children leaving armed groups to reintegrate into civilian society in Mali.

<sup>5</sup> The official marriage age in Mali's Family Code is 16 for girls (18 for men), but about 15 per cent of girls are married before they turn 15. A married girl of 14 can be considered a woman in many communities. In contrast, the concept of youth can extend all the way to 40 years of age for those who have not married or reached other milestones. Fifty-five per cent of girls are married at 18, and two out of every three girls aged 19 have already entered into reproductive life. Twenty per cent of children are married before the age of 20. Edilberto Loaiza Sr. and Sylvia Wong, "Marrying too Young: End Child Marriage," United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2012. Available from [www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MarryingTooYoung.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MarryingTooYoung.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Doumbia Mama Koité, "Justice doit être rendue pour que la paix puisse revenir au Mali," *Canard Déchainé*, 5 March 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Sahel expert, correspondence, September 2017.

<sup>8</sup> On violence against Peuls, see Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Unchecked Abuses in Military Operations," 8 September 2017. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/08/mali-unchecked-abuses-military-operations](http://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/08/mali-unchecked-abuses-military-operations). On violence against Tuaregs and other northern groups, see Hannah Armstrong, "Crisis in Mali: Root Causes and Long-Term Solutions," Peace Brief 149, United States Institute of Peace, 31 May 2013. Available from [www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB149-Crisis%20in%20Mali-Root%20Causes%20and%20Long-Term%20Solutions.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB149-Crisis%20in%20Mali-Root%20Causes%20and%20Long-Term%20Solutions.pdf). And Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, "State, Secession, and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali," *African Security*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2015).

## 2 Background to the Conflict

Since gaining its independence from France in 1960, Mali has faced four separate rebellions in the north that have generated a quasi-permanent state of violence and insecurity for the populations in the affected areas. Each rebellion has begun with an uprising by the Tuareg people. The history of Tuareg rebellions concerns more than a quest for independence and territorial control: It is a complex chain-reaction of events set off by the inevitable jockeying for resources that occurs when groups with competing needs share a vast and ungoverned piece of land. Before independence, the Tuaregs had already expressed the desire for autonomy during talks with France about creating a Saharan state incorporating parts of Mali, Algeria, Chad, and Niger, which was hypothetically named the Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes (O CRS), in an attempt to diminish Algeria's influence over the Sahara.<sup>9</sup>

While France abandoned the project, the Tuaregs remained motivated by such a desire. They were uncomfortable joining a country controlled by a majority from the south, thousands of kilometres away.<sup>10</sup> At independence, many Tuareg leaders felt excluded by state policies that sought to encourage nomadic populations to settle permanently in one place.<sup>11</sup> This discontent led to the first uprising (1961–1963), directly after independence, which was met with a harsh repression campaign by the state in which many Tuareg leaders were killed or forced to flee to neighbouring countries.<sup>12</sup> The second rebellion was launched in 1990 by young Tuaregs who had fled to Libya after the first rebellion and during several periods of drought in the 1970s and 1980s, amid the crumbling dictatorship of Moussa Traoré. Fighting in the north of Mali continued for the first half decade of the democratic era (early 1990s). In 1991, a coup instigated by Amadou Toumani Touré deposed Moussa Traoré, leading to Mali's first democratic elections. While violence and tensions diminished during the democratic consolidation in the 1990s, they resumed in the next decade, confronting the elected president – Alpha Oumar Konare – with both ongoing rebellion and

heightened intercommunal violence in the north. In May 2006, a third rebellion was initiated by the Alliance Démocratique pour le Changement (ADC). On 4 July 2006, a peace agreement was signed in Algeria, but the Alliance Touareg Niger-Mali, which had been excluded from the agreement, continued attacks through 2009.

The fourth and most recent rebellion was initiated in 2012. This rebellion was amplified by concurrent events, including an unprecedented shift in the balance of power due to the flow of weapons and fighters from Libya after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi and the infiltration of global "terrorist" networks into the region.<sup>13</sup> The rebellion quickly destabilized a state already weakened by corruption, injustice, and complacency.<sup>14</sup> Initially, the main goal of the Tuareg Nationalist Movement – the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) – was the independence of the Azawad, the northeastern area of the country that encompasses the regions of Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, and the northern part of Mopti.<sup>15</sup>

MAP OF KEY LOCATIONS  
IN NORTHERN &  
CENTRAL MALI



<sup>9</sup> Pierre Galy, *La Guerre au Mali* (Paris: La Découverte 2013), p. 22. This project was discussed between 1957 and 1960 and would have given special status to Tuareg regions using local assemblies. Sahel expert, correspondence, September 2017. Also see Baz Lecocq, "That Desert Is Our Country: Tuareg Rebellions and Competing Nationalisms in Contemporary Mali (1946–1996)", PhD dissertation, Université d'Amsterdam, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Boilley, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh. Dépendances et révoltes: du Soudan Français au Mali Contemporain* (Paris: Karthala, 1999), p. 151.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Whitehouse, "Political Participation and Mobilization after Mali's 2012 Coup", *African Studies Review*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2017); M. E. de Bruijn, W. E. A. van Beek, and J. W. M. van Dijk, "Antagonisme et solidarité: les relations entre Peuls et Dogons du Mali central", chapter in M. E. de Bruijn and J. W. M. van Dijk, eds., *Peuls et Mandingues: Dialectique des Constructions Identitaires* (Paris: Karthala, 1997), p. 243.

<sup>12</sup> Macartan Humphreys and Habaye Ag Mohamed, "Senegal and Mali: A Comparative Study of Rebellion in West Africa", in Paul Collier and Nicolas Sambanis, eds., *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis, Volume 1: Africa* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2005), pp. 247–302.

<sup>13</sup> Chena Salim and Antonin Tisseron, "Rupture d'équilibres au Mali: Entre instabilité et recompositions", *Afrique contemporaine*, Vol. 245, No. 1 (2013)

<sup>14</sup> Susanna Wing, "Mali: Politics of a Crisis", *African Affairs*, Vol. 112, No. 448 (2013); Baz Lecocq, Gregory Mann, Bruce Whitehouse, Dida Badi, Lotte Pelckmans, Nadia Belalimat, Bruce Hall, and Wolfram Lacher, "One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analysts: A Multivocal Analysis of the 2012 Political Crisis in the Divided Republic of Mali", *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 40, No. 137 (2013).

<sup>15</sup> This area would eventually incorporate the administrative regions of Taoudenni and Menaka, which were implemented in 2016.





#### KIDAL, MALI

A member of the Guinean Contingent serving with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) patrols the airstrip. —September 2015

UN Photo/Marco Dormino

MNLA sought to expel Malian armed forces and state agents from the territory and partnered with jihadist allies to achieve these goals. The first insurgent victories in the north contributed to the successful coup against President Amadou Toumani Touré in Bamako on 22 March 2012, as the military was dissatisfied with his management of the crisis. The coup led to a breakdown in the military chain of command, which contributed to the loss of two-thirds of Malian territory to rebels, resulting in a de facto division of the country into two areas, a Government-controlled South and a rebel and jihadist-control North.<sup>16</sup> But soon enough, the MNLA was pushed aside by its jihadist allies, including a Tuareg-led jihadist group, Ansar Dine, and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), or Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), an AQIM splinter group that first appeared in 2011, also operated in some areas.<sup>17</sup>

In 2013, Mali's Government invited international intervention in the conflict. In January of that year, in response to a jihadist attack on the main city of the Mopti region, the Government, fearing that this would become a direct threat to Bamako, demanded military support from France. A French intervention – code-named Serval<sup>18</sup> – succeeded in pushing most insurgent groups out of Malian territory<sup>19</sup> and paved the way for elections and peace negotiations six months later. The French intervention was followed by the establishment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013. Each mission was intended to provide security in areas where the Malian armed forces were not fully deployed and to support the peace process, albeit with different mandates. While the operation Serval, later renamed Barkhane, focused on counter-terrorism and providing rapid support for ongoing military operations, MINUSMA had a more comprehensive mandate to help stabilize the country and support the political process towards a negotiated resolution of the conflict, but did not include a counter-terrorism component.<sup>20</sup> Both missions were initially welcomed warmly by the northern population.

<sup>16</sup> Several areas of the Mopti region have been under jihadist and rebel control since 2012. While those areas are considered the centre of the country, the authors include them occasionally in their broader discussion of the "north" of Mali based on the post-March 2012 division, wherein Mopti and Sévaré sat to the north of the demarcation between the Government-controlled south and northern Mali, which was in parts rebel controlled or uncontested. The authors acknowledge that there are geographical and social complexities beyond the political division of what, at the start of the latest crisis, were the limits of Governmental control.

<sup>17</sup> Ansar Dine is headed by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Tuareg leader who broke with the MNLA following disputes over leadership and religious orientation. AQIM has been present in the area since the late 1990s. The Algerian-born group used the name GSPC (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat) prior to joining the Al-Qaida network in 2007. While MUJAO remains affiliated with the Al-Qaida network, it originally aimed at developing stronger regional ties in West Africa. In 2017, the three entities merged into one, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM). While there are leadership tensions among these movements, they remain focused on bringing "jihad" in Mali and imposing sharia law on its populations.

<sup>18</sup> The subsequent French mission, launched on 1 August 2014, was named Barkhane. While the previous mission, Serval, was first intended to support the Malian troops in re-establishing sovereignty over the north while also chasing out jihadist groups, Barkhane aimed exclusively at continuing the effort to vanquish terrorist groups, leaving all aspects of civilian protection and application of the peace agreements to MINUSMA.

<sup>19</sup> The peace agreements created a stalemate. The MNLA was allowed to remain in Kidal region. While the agreements provide for the gradual return of governmental forces into communities, they have not yet been fully implemented, which leaves areas such as Anéfis controlled by the Plateforme.

<sup>20</sup> See United Nations Security Council Resolution 2100, S/RES/2100 (2013) and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2364, S/RES/2364 (2017).

State retreat and weakness created political opportunities for armed groups, which have provided security and justice where the state cannot.

Today, insecurity has returned and expanded throughout the region. MINUSMA has suffered more casualties than any other ongoing peace operation.<sup>21</sup> Hardline Islamist groups, including Ansar Dine, AQIM, and MUJAO, have controlled much of the country's northern territory, and an increasing part of the centre, from as early as 2012. Meanwhile, pro-Government and anti-Government armed groups have persisted in fighting, despite the peace agreement.<sup>22</sup> As peace remained elusive and these missions' objectives became misunderstood, they were increasingly seen by some Malians as favouring parties already at the negotiating table. Critics from civil society and opposition parties felt that negotiations could be exploited by political elites looking to improve their own plight rather than restore peace.<sup>23</sup>

The conflict has spread to the centre of the country, where irredentist groups began to arm themselves.<sup>24</sup> Starting in 2014, state retreat and

weakness created political opportunities for both ethnic-based and jihadist groups, which have provided security and justice where the state cannot. In addition, new jihadist groups have sought to leverage tensions in the region. These groups, in affiliation with other jihadist actors, have pushed into the regions of Mopti and Segou, giving the current conflict a larger geographic reach than that of previous rebellions.<sup>25</sup>

### 3 Malian NSAGs

Three main blocs of NSAGs (represented in Table 1) have emerged over the course of the peace process, although allegiances among members are constantly changing. The Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) gathers all pro-autonomy and non-jihadist groups from the north, including the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA), the Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad (HCUA), and the Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (MAA). The Plateforme is an umbrella movement of all pro-Government groups in Mali, including the Groupe d'Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA), a community-based armed group led by an Imghad (Tuareg) general from the national army, and several irredentist groups. This bloc comprises groups that are natural allies and enemies, and includes several known leaders of prior rebellions.<sup>26</sup> These two blocs are included in peace talks. A third bloc includes all Islamist groups, which are precluded from negotiations due to their "terrorist" affiliations.<sup>27</sup> The five major jihadist movements unified under a single name, Jama'a Nusrat Al-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM), in 2017. This bloc represents some of the most adaptive NSAGs and has made inroads with the population of central Mali.

While jihadist groups have become increasingly unified, the signatories of the peace agreements, the CMA and Plateforme coalitions, have fragmented, mostly on the basis of local leadership.<sup>28</sup> Peace negotiations have failed to keep up with the changing dynamics of the conflict. Several newer, non-aligned armed groups have appeared in the central region but have not been included in peace discussions, despite the fact that they do not have

<sup>21</sup> United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, "United Nations Peacekeeping: Fatalities by Year, Mission and Incident Type up to 30 Nov 2017." Available from [http://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/statsbyyearmissionincidenttype\\_5a\\_1.pdf](http://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/statsbyyearmissionincidenttype_5a_1.pdf). Kevin Sieff, "The World's Most Dangerous UN Mission," *Washington Post*, 17 February 2017. Available from [www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2017/02/17/the-worlds-deadliest-un-peacekeeping-mission/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2017/02/17/the-worlds-deadliest-un-peacekeeping-mission/).

<sup>22</sup> The June 2015 Peace Agreement was intended to end violent conflict between signatories. Since then, however, the two sides, the CMA and the Plateforme, have continued fighting to expand their territorial control in the region and maximize profits from the agreement. The control of Anéfis, as well as issues surrounding the DDR process, sparked further fighting from May to September 2017. In October 2017, after several rounds of negotiations, an agreement was reached about Anéfis. Since then, there has been a detente in the Kidal region, even if skirmishes still break out.

<sup>23</sup> Johanna Siméant, *Contester au Mali: Formes de la Mobilisation et de la Critique à Bamako* (Paris: Karthala, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Irredentist groups consist of several militias, mostly recruited from among Songhoys, each of which claims to be the rightful owner of the land. These include the Mouvement Patriotique Ganda Koy, its split-off movement Ganda Izo, and several local initiatives.

<sup>25</sup> Africa News, "Islamist Groups in Mali Merge, Pledge Allegiance to Al-Qaeda," video, YouTube, 3 March 2017. Available from <https://youtu.be/PyYrThawBQ>.

<sup>26</sup> Belief within certain groups, notably within the Plateforme, that they did not get their share of the deals in the earlier peace processes has contributed to their assertiveness.

<sup>27</sup> The JNIM contains both national groups (Ansar Dine and Katibat du Macina) and foreign ones (AQIM and Al-Murabitun). The MUJWA is not included in the JNIM, as it played a significant role in integrating Peul pastoralists from the Hayré and the Seeno (northeast of Mopti region) in 2012. The MUJWA, as a single entity, has disappeared, and members joined other groups, including Al-Murabitun, the Katibat du Macina, and An-Saroul, a movement led by the Burkinabe Peul preacher Malam Ibrahim Dicko that is not involved in the Malian crisis.

<sup>28</sup> Table 1 provides the full history of the tensions. The most significant example remains the CMFPR, which is part of the Plateforme. Some elements seceded to join the CMA and become the CMFPR-2. Then, following a leadership shakeup, a part of CMFPR-2 decided to go back on the Plateforme's side, becoming the CMFPR-3.



#### KIDAL, MALI

A member of Coordination des Mouvements de l'Aza-wad (CMA) stands guard in Kidal as a UN delegation from Bamako passes through the city.  
—February 2016

UN Photo/Marco Dormino

jihadiist aims. This includes those groups that Malians refer to as “bandits,” small criminal groups without any ideology or political objectives that terrorize populations in order to rob or gain personal benefits. Concurrently, the growth of transcontinental drug trafficking through the Sahel has changed the political economy of the region, privileging centralized trafficking networks and generating a large new revenue source. In an area where extensive and diverse trafficking occurs and few other economic opportunities exist, criminal networks involved in illicit economies can exert influence over the leadership and activities of NSAGs and the population more broadly.<sup>29</sup> The latest round of peace talks, on 6 July 2017, confirmed the stalemate; while some newer NSAGs, often splinters of existing signatory groups, have been included in the Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination (MOC), a lingering leadership conflict among groups fosters further divisions, and the proliferation of splinter groups creates opportunities for signatories to bypass the provisions of peace agreements.<sup>30</sup>

This attempt at categorization is for the sake of explanation, but in reality, the boundaries between those movements are porous and have changed according to their interests and leadership over the course of the crisis, with members moving from one to the other. There is evidence of communities shifting allegiances between NSAGs and movements depending on who exerts the greatest strength on the ground, since local security is more important than the macro-political dimensions of the conflict. In most instances, survival strategies trump ideological factors.

<sup>29</sup> For a background discussion on the impact of trafficking in northern Mali, see Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in Twentieth Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> While the authors have made every effort to provide a definitive list of armed groups in Mali, the pace at which existing groups splinter and new groups emerge will likely render the list provided herein outdated by the time of publication.

**TABLE 1 — NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS IN MALI**

AFFILIATION	GROUP	AREAS	LABELS	CREATION
COORDINATION DES MOUVEMENTS DE L'AZAWAD-CMA	MNLA. National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad	Kidal	Tuaregs	2011
	HCUA. Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad. High Council for the Azawad Unity	KIDAL	Tuareg; Ifoghas.	May 2013
	MAA-Sidatt. Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad-Sidatt. Arab Movement of the Azawad, Sidatt section.	Timbuktu	Berabiche Arabs	June 2014
	CPA. Coalition du Peuple pour l'Azawad. Coalition of the Azawad People.	Timbuktu and Gao	Tuareg and Arabs	March 2014
	CMFPR-2, Coordination des mouvements et Front patriotique de résistance 2. Coordination of the mouvements and Patriotic Resistance Front 2.	Gao and Mopti	Irredentist Groups and Tuareg Imghads	2013
	MSA - Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad	Menaka	Dosahaks	2016
	MSA 2 - Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad	Alata, Anchawadj	Chamnamass	2016
	MBJEN - Mouvement Bellah pour la Justice et l'équité dans le Nord	Kidal	Bellas	2016
	CJA - Congres pour la Justice dans l'Azawad	Timbuktu	Kal Ansar	2016
PLATEFORME	MDP. Mouvement pour la Défense de la Patrie. Movement for the Homeland Defense	Mopti	Peuls	
	CMFPR Coordination des mouvements et Front patriotique de résistance . Coordination of the mouvements and Patriotic Resistance Front.	Gao	Songhai	2013
	CMFPR-3. Coordination des mouvements et Front patriotique de résistance 3. Coordination of the mouvements and Patriotic Resistance Front 3.	Gao	Songhai	
	MAA- Sidi Mohamed	Gao and Timbuktu	Arabs	April 2012
	GATIA. Groupe d'Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés. Imghad Tuareg Self Defense Group and Allies.	Gao and Kidal	Tuareg Imghad.	August 14, 2014
UNALIGNED - NON-SIGNATORY MOVEMENTS OF THE PEACE AGREEMENTS	Ganda Izo- Cissé	Gao et Mopti	Songhoy	
	Ganda Izo-Sidibé	Gao and Timbuktu ( Gourma region)	Songhoy	
	Ganda Lassal Izo	Gao	Songhoy	
JNIM (JAMA'AH NUSRAH AL-ISLAMIYA WAL-MUSLIMI-INA)-GROUPE DE SOUTIEN À L'ISLAM ET AUX MUSULMANS (UNIFIED IN 2017)	Ansar Dine or Ansar al-din al-salafiya	Kidal	Islamists, Ifoghas	2011
	Katiba Macina. Also known, in some media as the FLM. Front de Libération du Macina. Macina Liberation Front.	Mopti and Ségou	Peuls	2016
	Al-Mourabitoune (les Signataires par le sang), Al-Murabitun	Sahel and Sahara		2012
	AQMI, Al-Qaeda au Maghreb Islamique, Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb	Sahel and Sahara		2009
	MUJAO, Mouvement pour l'unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest. Movement for the oneness and jihad in West Africa	Mali (Gao and Mopti), Mauritania and Niger	Peuls	2011



	AIMS	LEADER	STRENGTH*
	At its creation, it aims at the independence of the Azawad. Following the peace process, it aims at an "autonomy". It gathers several Tuareg groups.	Bilal Ag Acherif	3,000#-10,000*
	This movement is dominated by the Ifoghas, a noble Tuareg tribe. It merge two dissidents movement, the Haut Conseil de l'Azawad (HCA) and the Mouvement islamique de l'Azawad (MIA).	Alghabas Ag Intalla, brother of the current Amenokal is brother Mohamed Ag Intalla, who succeed to their father Intalla Ag Attaher	500*
	This movement includes mostly Arabs that deserted the army in 2012, and is a break-up of the MAA. They share strong ties with the HCUA Ifoghas made them natural allies.	Sidi Ibrahim Ould Sidatt, former mayor of Ber	500*
	This movement has been created following tensions at the leadership of the MNLA. It aims at protecting Tuareg and Arab communities in the North. la c est membre de la CMA et prétend protéger et sécuriser les communautés Touaregs et arabes du Nord	Led by Ousmane Ag Mohamedoune from Kal Afhazaf community-Timbuktu. He is increasingly close to the Government of Mali after the Peace agreement. The first leader, Ibrahim Ag Mohamed Ag Assaleh, resigned to join back the MNLA	300*
	This group is a break-up of the CMFPR, a Plateform group that included several irredentist and nomadic self-defence groups. They do not support the autonomist vision of the CMA, but have joined them to participate in peace negociations.		700-900*
	Community-based armed group of Dosahak affiliated to GATIA against Terrorist groups in Menaka region. It was affiliated to MNLA and its Secretary general - Moussa Ag Acharatoumane was a member fondateur of MNLA	Moussa Ag Acharatouman	500-1,000
	Community-based armed group of Chamnamass. It was affiliated to MNLA and its Secretary general - Assalat Ag Habi, a former Malian Officer.	Assalat Ag Habi	300-500
	Affiliated with the CMFPR-2, this group includes members of the lower cast of the Tuareg hierarchy, often perceived as slaves.	Ag Intazoume Moussa Dicko,	Unknown
	Community-based armed group of Kal Ansar. It was affiliated to HCUA and remains supporting Azawad. However another CJA (CJA-Bamako led by Azarock) is close to the Governemnt of Mali	Azarock Ag Inaborchad, who replaced Hama Ag Mahmoud, a former malian Minister based in Mauritania.	150-300
	This group aims at defending the Peuls communities in the Niger Delta. They aim at self defence against unlawfulness, insecurity and injustice in the Mopti region.	Hama Founé Diallo	250*
	This Songhai-dominated group brings together several self-defense militias. This movement is the original CMFPR. It includes several member of irredentist groups.		1,000-1,200*
	This group is a break-up of the CMFPR-2, who decided to come back in the pro-government side.		Unknown
	The original MAA movement was created in opposition to the application of the Sharia by the Islamists, and against the independence of the Azawad in April 2012, following the beginning of the occupation of the North.	Sidi Mohamed.	Unknown
	The GATIA was created on August 14, 2014. It was created following the withdrawal of the Malian Armed forces from Kidal, on May 21st, following fightings initiated by the Prime Minister's visit. The movement includes mostly Imghad fighters loyal to General Gamou, but also some member of irredentist groups.	Mali Armed Forces General El j-Hadji Ould Gamou	1000*
	This movement is a break-away from signatory groups, following leadership issues within the Ganda Izo movement. The Ganda Izo has always been a loose alliance of several local self-defense group and has never had a unified leadership.		Unknown
	This movement is a break-away from signatory groups, following leadership issues within the Ganda Izo movement. The Ganda Izo has always been a loose alliance of several local self-defense group and has never had a unified leadership.		Unknown
	This movement is a break-away from signatory groups, following leadership issues within the Ganda Izo movement. The Ganda Izo has always been a loose alliance of several local self-defense group and has never had a unified leadership.		Unknown
	This islamist group was created in 2011 by former Tuareg rebel Iyad Ag Ghali following the refusal of the MNLA to provide him the leadership of the movement. It mostly includes member of the Tuareg Ifoghas community. à fonder la Jum'a appellation traduite en français par les défenseurs de la foi. Iyad Ag Ghaly now heads the JNIM, since its creation in 2017.	Iyad Ag Ghali	300*-500#
	This Peul movement has been created to implement the jihad in Central Mali and to defend Peuls community. His enigmatic leader, Peul preacher Amadou Kouffa has remained discrete.	Amadou Kouffa	Unknown
	This group is a break-away from AQMI. It claim responsibility for the attacks in Bamako (Hotel Radisson), Ouagadougou and Grand Bassam (in Ivory Coast). Having strong ties with the Algerian GSPC, it intends to participate in the "global jihad".	Mokhtar Belmokhtar	200#-1000*
	AQMI is tied to the Algerian GSPC which rebrands itself in 2009.	Abdelmalek Droukdel	800-1000*
	The MUJAO is a break-away from AQMI in an attempt to rebrand itself in an attempt to increase its presence outside of the Sahara. It targeted recruitment among Peul pastoralists.	Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou	500#

# 4 The Use of Children by NSAGs

No definitive census exists on the recruitment and use of children by armed groups. Secondary reports suggest that all NSAGs operating in Mali have used children either directly or indirectly. In 2016, the United Nations identified more than 442 cases of children being recruited and used by NSAGs (78 verified), of which 54 were confirmed to be from the Plateforme, 18 from the CMA, three from Al-Murabitun, and three from unknown groups; the rest were unidentified.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, 14 girls were used by the pro-Government militia GATIA in the Gao region.<sup>32</sup> The numbers of children affiliated with NSAGs officially recorded have steadily grown: 57 in 2013,<sup>33</sup> 84 in 2014,<sup>34</sup> and 127 in 2015.<sup>35</sup> Given the high levels of community involvement in NSAG-controlled territory,<sup>36</sup> these figures likely dramatically underrepresent the numbers of children affiliated with armed groups in Mali. Indeed, according to some journalistic accounts, children enrolled in jihadist groups allegedly numbered over 1,000 as early as 2012,<sup>37</sup> and the overall number of children enrolled in NSAGs is likely many thousands.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast, the authors found no accounts that governmental forces have used or recruited children.<sup>39</sup> However, the Government has tacitly supported militias, and these groups have used children in the past, including Ganda Izo and the Mouvement Patriotique Ganda Koy. Similarly, at least 76 children were found in 2016 among the GATIA.<sup>40</sup>

While armed groups in Mali appear to have used children from the outbreak of the crisis, the intensification of the conflict has coincided with a rising number of children participating.

Given that Malian society may treat individuals who are younger than 18 as adults, it is not surprising that most or all groups were using children between the ages of 16 and 18. In some instances, eyewitnesses have reported that younger children are being recruited and used. In 2012, a woman fleeing Timbuktu recounted: "While we were about to take the ferry to cross the river, there was this kid, probably around 12 to 13 years, with an automatic gun. He was telling me that I did not wear gloves. I just ignored him. Boys don't do that here."<sup>41</sup> She was shocked to see such young children working for the Islamist group Ansar Dine. An NGO field worker who was in Ber in 2016 said that she saw 11-, 12-, and 13-year-olds who were so small that their guns "pulled their shoulders down."<sup>42</sup> A woman from Tenenkou reported that children have been recruited from Diafarabe, Dia, and Konna, while other children from villages surrounding Tenenkou went "missing."<sup>43</sup> A woman from Bourem explained that in 2012 she and her brother were on a bus stopped at a checkpoint, when a child around 11 years old boarded the bus holding a gun and instructed her to

change seats, spouting Islamist ideology that he claimed forbade her from sitting next to any man who was not her husband. There are reports of children as young as nine being trained and "brainwashed" by NSAGs.<sup>44</sup> While NSAGs in Mali appear to have used children from the outbreak of the crisis, the intensification of the conflict in the centre of the country has coincided with a rising number of children under the age of 16 participating.<sup>45</sup> In section 5, the authors discuss the various ways that children participate in and support NSAGs.

<sup>31</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, 24 August 2017, A/72/361–S/2017/821, p. 17. Available from [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/821&Lang=E&Area=UN-DOC](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/821&Lang=E&Area=UN-DOC).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, 15 May 2014, A/68/878–S/2014/339, p. 22. Available from [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/878&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/878&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC).

<sup>34</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, 5 June 2015, A/69/926\*–S/2015/409\*, p. 21. Available from [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/69/926&Lang=E&Area=UN-DOC](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/69/926&Lang=E&Area=UN-DOC).

<sup>35</sup> There is a possibility that even if official numbers grow – as they did from 2013 to 2015 – child recruitment and use may be systematically underrecorded. Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, 20 April 2016, A/70/836–S/2016/360, p. 16. Available from [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/836&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/836&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC).

<sup>36</sup> The number of disappeared children and the child victims of mass casualties thought to be perpetrated by armed groups may also signal high rates of child involvement in armed groups in Mali. Reuters, "U.N. Finds Mass Graves in North Mali", 6 August 2017. Available from <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKBN1AM07O-OZATP>.

<sup>37</sup> Associated Press, "Islamists in Mali Recruit, Pay for Child Soldiers", 3 October 2012. Available from [www.cbsnews.com/news/islamists-in-mali-recruit-pay-for-child-soldiers](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/islamists-in-mali-recruit-pay-for-child-soldiers).

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2017: Events of 2016". Available from [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/wr2017-web.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/wr2017-web.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> The army recruits 18-to-23-year-olds, and asks for proofs of age. Demand for jobs in the army outstrips the number of available jobs; thus, there is a lower likelihood that underage applicants would have access to these jobs.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Trafficking in Persons Report", June 2017, p. 272. Available from [www.state.gov/documents/organization/271339.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/271339.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> "Refugees Fleeing Northern Mali", IRIN, 25 April, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Female NGO worker SVJB9, March 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Resident of Tenenkou SVJB7, March 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Displaced Woman SVJB8, Respondent 1, March 2017.

<sup>45</sup> With the exception of militia groups, most NSAGs do not use women in active combat roles. However, although their roles in NSAGs are often downplayed by the literature, women and girls play important roles, including mobilizing boys and men to fight, collecting intelligence, making declarations of war, and engaging in combat support activities. Frédéric Deycard, "Les rebellions touaregues du Niger: Combattants, mobilisations et culture politique", PhD dissertation, Science Po Bordeaux, 2011, p. 243. For data on the use of children across armed groups in Mali since the outbreak of the crisis, see A/72/361–S/2017/821, p. 17; A/68/878–S/2014/339, p. 22; A/69/926\*–S/2015/409\*, p. 21; A/70/836–S/2016/360, p. 16.

## 5 Data and Methodology

This chapter is based on 65 interviews and 12 focus groups conducted with more than 190 respondents in Bamako, Sévaré/Mopti, Douentza, and Gao in March 2017.<sup>46</sup> Individual respondents were selected due to their direct exposure to armed groups and child recruitment in various geographic regions in Mali. Respondents included Government officials, religious officials, displaced persons, NGO monitoring agents, and other members of civil society. In addition, approximately 15 of the interviews and focus groups were conducted with youth respondents. A full list of interviews and focus groups is included in Appendix 1. The authors also draw on a two-day conference

in Bamako that gathered more than 30 experts from NGOs, academia, and international institutions, as well as eight youth focus groups conducted in social clubs (locally referred to as *grins*) in Mopti and Sévaré.

The authors utilize secondary interviews and focus groups with 32 child respondents in Bamako and Sévaré in July 2017 from a study commissioned by United Nations University (UNU).<sup>47</sup> All interviews have been anonymized and all names have been changed to aliases. In addition, the authors draw on relevant materials from our own research in Mali, including one author’s field notes from visits to Gao and Mopti from 2012 to 2015, a second author’s field notes from dissertation work on armed groups conducted in 2012 in the Mopti region, and a third author’s fieldwork with Malian youth in Bamako and Sévaré from 2014 to 2016. The authors use this body of evidence to inductively build arguments about factors that influence youth and child recruitment into armed groups.

### SÉVARÉ, MALI

Ganda Koy has recruited IDPs, including women and minors, into its ranks. —December 2012

Marc-André Boisvert



## 6 Modes of Child Recruitment

Child trajectories into NSAGs in Mali follow two primary paths: community-level mobilization<sup>48</sup> or individual recruitment, coercion, or enticement. The former occurs when children and youth are mobilized to join armed groups along with a broader community effort. In these contexts, it is much more important to understand community histories and the expectations about a child’s role in the family and community than to understand individual-level variation in child recruitment. Cases of community recruitment are more likely to occur in places where the state is absent and where NSAGs control territory.

In other instances, children are recruited individually. NSAGs target vulnerable and marginalized children: under- or unemployed youth from marginalized families, Qur’anic students living far from home, children working as herders in dangerous areas, orphans or children from dysfunctional or poor families, and migrants who are separated from family support structures. Even when recruitment is individual in focus, due to the communitarian nature of Malian society, it needs to be contextualized in relation to the child’s home community. NSAGs can prove attractive to children who are searching for respect and a position in their home communities and society at large.

<sup>46</sup> To protect the identities of the interviewees and focus group respondents, the authors have generated a series of unique identifiers to reference information provided by them or quotes attributed to them (e.g., FGSV1, Respondent 4 refers to the fourth respondent in the first Sévaré focus group). Where appropriate, additional information about the informant (e.g., occupation, gender) may be provided for added context.

<sup>47</sup> “Understanding Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in Mali”, focus groups commissioned by United Nations University (UNU), August 2017. This research included five focus groups in Mopti and Sévaré, totalling 32 participants (boys and girls largely between the ages of 13 and 15 years old). Many in the focus group discussions were IDPs from the north of the country. Given the age of the participants, the questions were specially tailored to ensure their comfort and safety.

<sup>48</sup> Community factors including support for armed groups and community exclusion by the Government have been identified as the predominant forces fuelling youth recruitment. Mercy Corps, “We Hope and We Fight”: Youth, Communities, and Violence in Mali; July 2017. Available from [www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Mercy%20Corps\\_Mali\\_Hope%20and%20Fight\\_Report\\_Enq\\_Sept%202017.pdf](http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Mercy%20Corps_Mali_Hope%20and%20Fight_Report_Enq_Sept%202017.pdf).

While NSAGs in Mali differ, most of them use a mixed strategy of individual and community-level recruitment. There is also a high degree of permeability between groups. It is not unimaginable that a combatant for the CMA might find himself fighting alongside the Plateforme or a jihadist group. Social connections facilitate this type of movement. For instance, as is evident from Table 1, connections exist between HCUA (part of the CMA) and the jihadist group Ansar Dine. Therefore, the authors caution against making stark distinctions between groups and their individual recruitment strategies.

Armed groups can prove attractive to children who are searching for respect and a position in their home communities and society at large.

Many groups use vertical strategies of recruitment – drawing on community hierarchies to mobilize recruits and supporters. This approach works particularly well in hierarchical Tuareg societies, where lineage and mobility matter. Other NSAGs employ a more horizontal approach, like the GATIA, which tries to make alliances with a diverse set of community groups.<sup>49</sup> Groups also use marriage as a way to form bonds with local communities. AQIM was able to gain initial ground in the north through marriage alliances more than a decade before the outbreak of the recent rebellion.<sup>50</sup> Other jihadist groups have constructed ties with communities using similar strategies, which simultaneously subvert traditional kinship patterns.<sup>51</sup> In other instances, chiefs in ideologically aligned villages in northern Mali, which already practiced hardline versions of Islam, actively sought to support jihadist groups by providing children and youth as tributes, further strengthening the ties between the two.<sup>52</sup>

Individual recruitment is primarily pursued by groups that have weaker community ties, notably jihadist groups. NSAGs appear to use mixed recruitment strategies, perhaps relying on materialistic offers, such as a motorcycle or the money necessary for marriage, in exchange for a child's involvement. Jihadist groups are accused of using ideological appeals to recruit children – who are seen as more malleable – and of instilling the sense that fighting conforms to a devout practice of Islam. While NSAGs make ideological and material appeals, the evidence about their effect on children and youth is mixed. As the next section will show, children in Mali appear to join or align with NSAGs due to a number of factors.

## 7 Pathways into Malian Armed Groups

This section explores the structural-, social-, and individual-level factors that can influence child recruitment at both the community and individual levels. The authors broadly understand structural-level factors to be those that affect all communities in specific geographic regions, while social-level factors affect certain communities, or affect them disproportionately compared to others in the same geographic zone. Since much child recruitment happens through community channels, it is critical to understand these broader relationships between citizens, the state, and NSAGs and how the conflict context has impacted them. Individual-level factors apply to individual-level vulnerabilities that might lead to heightened probability of recruitment. In some instances, factors that increase children's probability of recruitment also pertain to adults and youth in the same communities. The authors will try to highlight this when pertinent.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Leibovich, "Reconstructing Local Orders in Mali: Historical Perspectives and Future Challenges," Local Orders Paper Series, Brookings Institution, July 2017; Baz Lecocq, "The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes and Pitfalls on the Saharan Front," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2007).

<sup>50</sup> Djallil Lounnas, "Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique et la crise malienne," *Sécurité globale*, Summer 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Lemine Ould Salem, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara. Sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar* (Paris: Éditions La Martinière, 2014), p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> Female NGO worker SVJB9, March 2017.



## A. STRUCTURAL-LEVEL FACTORS

Several factors that affect the entire country are key to understanding the context in which child participation in Malian NSAGs occurs.

### PROTECTION AND MOBILIZATION

Child recruitment and mobilization into armed groups takes place against the backdrop of the current Mali crisis. In much of northern and central Mali, non-state armed groups, rather than the Malian army or MINUSMA, control disproportionate amounts of territory. The Government and its allies have succeeded in re-establishing limited control only in certain major cities and their vicinities. Children in these communities have grown up with NSAGs patrolling their territory for more than a decade. Communities have watched as state agents fled during the initial occupation – when they were at their most vulnerable.<sup>53</sup> Even when United Nations troops patrol some of these areas, communities are largely left on their own to defend against outside armed groups. Communities must provide for their own protection, by taking up arms or making alliances with those who have them. Respondents from focus groups in the Mopti region stressed again and again that they did not at all feel adequately protected by the Malian army or the United Nations.<sup>54</sup> While respondents did not make clear distinctions among the security forces, their main critiques were often reserved for the Malian armed forces, which they described as under-resourced<sup>55</sup> and often unprofessional.<sup>56</sup> At least one focus group respondent explained that citizens are scared to provide information to the army because they do not feel that they will be protected and believe they could easily be targeted and killed by armed groups.<sup>57</sup>

This insecurity and uncertainty fuels competition to defend and control territory. In many regions of the north, armed groups affiliated with communities seek to extend their control to areas outside those communities to prevent the development of a security vacuum that foreign actors might seek to fill. Community groups have increased patrols as part of an expansion drive that goes beyond their traditional realms. One NGO agent working in the Gao and Timbuktu regions explained that many of these smaller community-based armed groups are not at all ideological, but in place to protect territory. Once they have guns, they are also able to exploit their power by using their weapons to intimidate others and assert social status.<sup>58</sup>

In these contexts, children are mobilized along with everyone else to provide for their community's protection. In some cases, children join their community's self-defence group. In others, children align themselves with the outside NSAG that offers to provide for the community's general security.<sup>59</sup> Numerous NSAGs in northern Mali use the promise of protection to gain support from local communities. For example, in February 2017, a jihadist group killed two young men who had been attacking people at weekly markets in the Cercle of Douentza to demonstrate to the local population that the group cared about their security and was able to address threats to the community.<sup>60</sup>

### RULE OF LAW AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION MECHANISMS

The mobilization of children into armed groups is also influenced by inter-community conflict over resources and the need for dispute resolution structures to adjudicate them. Climate instability, demographic pressure, lack of economic opportunities, and a shortage of land for farming and livestock have been longstanding problems in a region that is dependent on cattle-herding and subsistence agriculture. These existing challenges have been exacerbated by the conflict. In this context, there is a heightened need for dispute resolution, and the state's inability to provide rule of law and conflict adjudication has heightened scepticism about the central state.<sup>61</sup>

Maliens have been forced to look for alternative providers of justice. Rural Malians throughout the country complain that judicial judgments go to the highest bidder and that judges will play each side of a dispute in order

<sup>53</sup> Jaimie Bleck and Kristin Michelitch, “The 2012 Crisis in Mali: Ongoing Empirical State Failure,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 114, No. 457 (2015).

<sup>54</sup> FGSV2, FGSV4, FGM2, FGM3.

<sup>55</sup> FGSV3, Respondent 4.

<sup>56</sup> Specific complaints include harassment of the population and soldiers' pursuing girls and women in their communities. FGSV1, Respondent 3; FGM1, Respondents 2 and 4; FGSV2, Respondent 1.

<sup>57</sup> FGSV4, Respondent 5.

<sup>58</sup> Female NGO worker SVJB9, March 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Ibrahima Maïga, “Armed Groups in Mali: Beyond Labels,” West Africa Report, Issue 17, Institute for Security Studies, June 2016, p. 12. Available from <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/WestAfricaReport17.pdf>. Lori-Anne Thérault-Bénoni and William Assanvo, “Mali's Young ‘Jihadists’: Fueled by Faith or Circumstance?,” Policy Brief 89, Institute for Security Studies, 26 August 2016. Available from <https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/malis-young-jihadists-fueled-by-faith-or-circumstance>.

<sup>60</sup> Local radio director DTZBS1, March 2017. The men who were killed had been accused of being affiliated with the jihadist group, and the jihadist group sought to demonstrate distance from them.

<sup>61</sup> A. Dakouo and A. Mbaye, “Accès à la Justice et Droit des Citoyens,” Cahier d'Analyse, ARGA, Consulté le 30 Juin 2017 (September 2011). Available from [http://base.africque-gouvernance.net/fr/corpus\\_bipint/fiche-bipint-909.html](http://base.africque-gouvernance.net/fr/corpus_bipint/fiche-bipint-909.html). Diana Goff, Madina Diallo, and Anca-Elena Ursu, “Sous le Microscope: Les Systèmes de Justice Coutumiers dans le Nord du Mali,” Rapport de la CRU, Clingendael, July 2017.



GCNU 114280

**NORTHERN MALI**

A MINUSMA convoy to supply remote UN  
bases in the north of the Mali.  
— February 2017

*UN Photo/Sylvain Liechi*





to maximize their own income.<sup>62</sup> This is a problem not only in conflict-affected regions but throughout Mali; citizens are concerned about law and order, access to equitable justice, and the lack of honest arbiters for citizens who seek to settle land claims or other disputes.<sup>63</sup> However, the conflict has aggravated the problems with the justice system and public frustration with it. In several areas, traditional justice existed between communities, notably between cattle-herder and sedentary societies, but armed groups challenged these justice mechanisms, leaving communities in the north with no alternative for settling disputes in a peaceful way.

In addition, the incursion of more armed actors into central Mali has facilitated a cycle of violence, as mercenaries are hired to pursue adversaries. Individuals, including political leaders, in affected communities align themselves with armed actors to protect themselves and settle scores, as well as gain status and influence.<sup>64</sup> The 2017 communal elections, which were plagued by violent threats against candidates, are a good example of this dynamic. In a community in the Douma Commune (Mopti), a candidate for the communal elections was beaten to death, and the mayor was threatened by jihadists.<sup>65</sup> After the elections, the mayors of Boni and Mondoro were killed and several elected officials threatened.<sup>66</sup> A number of mayors and prefects have not taken their posts, fearing for their lives. Beyond political vendettas, score settling continues, notably between Peuls and Bambara communities. This violence led to over 50 deaths in the Ké-Macina region in February 2017.<sup>67</sup> Child recruitment occurs against this violent backdrop as armed groups gain leverage and prominence in communities when they become the de facto dispute arbiters.

#### NORTHERN MALI

Villagers from Kabara and Tarabangou bring their livestock to drink at a MINUSMA-led community water project.  
— March 2017

UN Photo/  
Harandane Dicko

#### ECONOMIC GRIEVANCES

Child recruitment and mobilization into armed groups in Mali takes place amid dire economic circumstances. The economic situation for many residents of northern and central Mali has always been precarious. Since 2012, the crisis has exacerbated their impact and, as a result, those populations now face unprecedented economic insecurity. In the summer of 2017, an estimated 4.1 million Malians, 22 per cent of the total population, were in need

of humanitarian assistance.<sup>68</sup> As a result of the fighting, local economies have been shattered as trade has stalled because of the security situation. Increasing banditry has created fear among cattle herders who are reluctant to go to markets to sell their animals. In “occupied” areas, such as Tenenkou, many of the large markets have closed or dramatically diminished.

The Mopti region, which once drew more than 250,000 tourists a year, has seen those numbers decline to almost nothing since the crisis began.<sup>69</sup> Many tour guides and chauffeurs (as well as their dependents) have been left without any source of income.<sup>70</sup> More broadly, banditry, curfews, and insecurity limit freedom of movement and association, which has further stunted the economy.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, services offered by the state, which might have helped impacted communities, have contracted. Many state services have been either reduced or simply closed down in the north and centre of Mali, further slowing the economy and restricting hiring and monetary flows



<sup>62</sup> The Malian state is supposed to provide access to justice to every Malian. However, courts are based in the regional centres, and it is expensive for many rural dwellers to cover the travel costs necessary to use them. Several judges are renowned for taking bribes, offering justice to whomever pays the most. Many communities have turned to alternative justice mechanisms, including the use of traditional institutions, notably elders or chiefs. Some of those traditional institutions are also tainted with accusations of corruption. See I. Dougnon and B. Sangaré, “Local Conflict and the Call for Justice”, in “Perception Study on the Drivers of Insecurity and Violent Extremism in the Border Regions of the Sahel”, UNDP and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2016. Available from <https://fr.scribd.com/document/337403846/Local-conflict-and-the-call-for-justice-Mali-National-Report>.

<sup>63</sup> Over time, these practices have bred mistrust in the court system; 53 per cent of Malians report they have no or very little trust in the court system – the lowest rating for any institution in the country. Eric Little and Carolyn Logan, “The Quality of Democracy and Governance in Africa: New Results from Afrobarometer Round 4 – A Compendium of Public Opinion Findings from 19 African Countries, 2008”, Working Paper No. 108, Afrobarometer Network. Available from <http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Working%20paper/AfropaperNo108.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> Focus group in Mopti-Sévaré FGM3, Respondent 3.

<sup>65</sup> Christian focus group SV10, Sévaré, March 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Local radio director DTZBS1, March 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Focus group of religious leaders SVBS1, March 2017.

<sup>68</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Mali: Humanitarian Brief”, December 2017. Available from [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha-mali-hum-brief-20171215\\_002\\_0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha-mali-hum-brief-20171215_002_0.pdf).

<sup>69</sup> Ministry of Tourism of Mali, “État du Tourisme”, press release, 9 November 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Focus group FGSV3, Respondents 1 and 2. English-speaking guides have been spotted working as baggage handlers at the airport in Bamako.

<sup>71</sup> Focus group FGSV2, Respondent 2.



in local areas. Vulnerable populations have resorted to criminal activities, as weapons are increasingly available. Some young people turn to banditry or extort travellers in remote areas by creating roadblocks.

The security crisis worsened the economic situation, and directly led to children joining armed groups, which are seen as one of the only ways to provide a steady income and a career track with potential upward mobility. The logic of joining strong NSAGs is not unlike the logic that drives many young people to try to gain positions in the army, which has always been an option that secures young men, and more rarely women, a sustainable financial situation. During a Malian armed forces recruiting campaign, many young Malians said their main reason for joining was to gain employability. “There is no money ... Joining the army is the guarantee of having money for the rest of your life. This is why I want to join,” explained a young man in Bamako.<sup>72</sup> As a result of economic pressure, many young people have joined NSAGs in an attempt to benefit from future DDR benefits or out of the hope that one day they can transfer to a job within the Malian security services. To the last point, participants in the Sévaré IDP focus group said they joined NSAGs for a chance to be recruited by the Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination (MOC), which facilitates the integration of members of armed groups recognized by the accord into the army.<sup>73</sup>

The security crisis worsened the economic situation, and directly led to children joining armed groups...

While the civilian population in northern and central Mali has suffered economically as a result of the crisis, the economic strength of AQIM and other NSAGs has grown. Through the use of hostage taking, AQIM-affiliated groups have been able to amass substantial wealth, which they leverage to buy arms and lure prospective recruits.<sup>74</sup> Armed groups and criminal networks involved in these illicit economies use their disproportionate resources to influence communities or recruit unemployed and underemployed youth into their ranks.

Other youth join NSAGs in order to keep a job that they already have in this precarious economy. One study found that factors such as access to food, protection for cattle and family, opportunities to earn money by escorting pastoralists who need protection, and the ability to use NSAG weapons or resources for banditry or extortion were important factors motivating alignment with NSAGs even for those who already had some employment.<sup>75</sup>

## PUBLIC SERVICES

The inability of the state to provide services, particularly education, to northern and central Malian populations is a factor in the recruitment and mobilization of children into armed groups. Even before the crisis, the state’s provision of services was limited. Despite extensive outside assistance, the state remains unable to provide a wide variety of services (including security), leading Malians to look to armed groups for support. Since independence, the Malian Government has failed to provide even the most basic support to many rural dwellers living in its vast expanse of territory in the north and has leaned heavily on NGOs and other external groups to provide services to rural regions.<sup>76</sup> Indicative of this reliance, donor funding has historically made up over one-quarter of the national budget.<sup>77</sup> Instead of building state capacity, outside support appears to have undermined it. The decentralization process, supported by several donors, does not appear to have succeeded in empowering local populations and improving their ownership over development programmes, as the focus has often favoured superficial democratic stability over local appropriation.<sup>78</sup> For instance, the 2006 Algiers Accords, an internationally negotiated agreement that sought to end an earlier conflict, included provisions to limit the military presence of the Malian state in the north. Dealing with nascent insurgencies in this context, donors encouraged the Malian president’s “conflict management strategy, which mixed imperfect decentralization, laissez-faire co-optation, and significantly after 2010, ‘militarization’ as the Government and the army supported, directly and indirectly, militias to securitize the

<sup>72</sup> Interview with seven potential recruits during an armed forces recruitment activity, Bamako, October 2016.

<sup>73</sup> The expectations of some of these young people will not be fulfilled. There are limits on how many former armed group members will be integrated into the Malian forces. Some who go through the MOC will ultimately be demobilized. So far, participation in the MOC only applies to the groups of the Coordination des Mouvements de l’Azawad (CMA) or the Plateforme. Minors are being demobilized through a different mechanism.

<sup>74</sup> Mathieu Pellerin, “Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel”, *Notes de l’IFRI*, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, February 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Thérèse Bénoni and Assanvo, “Mali’s Young ‘Jihadists’”.

<sup>76</sup> Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>77</sup> Isaline Bergamaschi, “The Fall of a Donor Darling: The Role of Aid in Mali’s Crisis”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2014).

<sup>78</sup> Virginie Baudais, *Les Trajectoires de l’État au Mali* (Paris: Karthala, 2016).

north.<sup>79</sup> Past attempts to target the north with special development funds have also been hampered by corruption, as money was often diverted by northern elites in Bamako before it could reach intended communities.<sup>80</sup> In a 2013 survey of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled armed groups in the north, approximately 70 per cent of respondents believed the northern regions to be the most marginalized in the country – a narrative exploited by armed groups.<sup>81</sup>



#### NORTHERN MALI

A MINUSMA armored personnel carrier provides protection for the supply convoy heading to UN bases in the north of Mali.  
—February 2017

UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

The state programmes and services that did exist before the crisis broke out were corrupt, nepotistic, and exploitative, contributing to mounting grievances against the state. In the years leading up to the most recent rebellion, particularly during Amadou Toumani Touré's second term as president, Malians perceived corruption to be increasing,<sup>82</sup> a sentiment corroborated by World Bank data, which confirms such a trend between 1996 and 2010.<sup>83</sup> In some instances, state service agents have also utilized their positions for personal benefit and engaged in predatory behaviour. Scholars have long documented extortion by forestry agents in northern Mali who tax villages for firewood consumption.<sup>84</sup> Citizens and communities who feel exploited by state agents are attracted to armed groups that promise fewer taxes, protection, the fair application of justice, and, in some instances, the provision of services such as health care and electricity.<sup>85</sup>

#### INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION

The international intervention in the Malian crisis also has been an important factor for understanding the appeal of armed groups in the country. International forces are now present in Mali in unprecedented numbers. Today, France, through the Barkhane operation, maintains about 4,000 soldiers in the country with three mandates: support local security forces, strengthen coordination with other international operations (notably MINUSMA), and destroy terrorist havens in the region.<sup>86</sup> In 2013, the United Nations Security Council established the Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation au Mali (MINUSMA). While its mandate has evolved over time, MINUSMA's core mission has remained helping stabilize the country, supporting the peace processes and reestablishment of state authority, protecting civilians and United Nations personnel, promoting human rights, and supporting humanitarian access, while not being involved in counter-terrorism activities.<sup>87</sup> MINUSMA has upwards of 15,000 military and police as well as civilian personnel throughout Mali.<sup>88</sup> Yet the security situation continues to worsen. This international presence adds to the complexity of the crisis. For some Malians, particularly those who do not welcome Barkhane for protection, French intervention is perceived as an attempt by France to reassert its

<sup>79</sup> Isaline Bergamaschi, "French Military Intervention in Mali: Inevitable, Consensual Yet Insufficient," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2013).

<sup>80</sup> Nicolas Van de Walle, "Foreign Aid in Dangerous Places: The Donors and Mali's Democracy," Working Paper No. 2012/61, United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research, July 2012, p. 28. Available from [www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/wp2012-061.pdf](http://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/wp2012-061.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> Jaimie Bleck, Abdoulaye Dembele, and Sidiki Guindo, "Malian Crisis and the Lingering Problem of Good Governance," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (November 2016).

<sup>82</sup> Massa Coulibaly and Michael Bratton, "Crisis in Mali: Ambivalent Popular Attitudes on the Way Forward," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2013).

<sup>83</sup> Caryn Peiffer and Pierre Englebert, "Extraversion, Vulnerability to Donors, and Political Liberalization in Africa," *African Affairs*, Vol. 111, No. 444 (2012).

<sup>84</sup> Tor R. Benjaminsen, "Does Supply-Induced Scarcity Drive Violent Conflicts in the African Sahel? The Case of the Tuareg Rebellion in Northern Mali," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 45, No. 6 (2008).

<sup>85</sup> David Nieves Bullejos and Boukary Sangaré, "Control social y territorial del norte de Mali por el Yihadismo en un Contexto de Crisis," *Revista Policia y Seguridad Publica*, Año 6, Vol 1. (January–June 2016).

<sup>86</sup> "Operation Barkhane, Dossier de Presse," December 2017. Available from [www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/492362/8406707/DP-BARKHANE-0118.pdf](http://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/492362/8406707/DP-BARKHANE-0118.pdf).

<sup>87</sup> For MINUSMA's evolving mandate, see S/RES/2100 (2013) and S/RES/2364 (2017).

<sup>88</sup> United Nations, "MINUSMA Fact Sheet," accessed on 10 October 2017. Available from <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>.

economic and geo-strategic hegemony over its former colony.<sup>89</sup> Others view France as supporting an independent Azawad state, in a bid to seize Mali’s resources and undermine the Government.<sup>90</sup> This perception is fuelled by France’s concession to the MNLA to control Kidal (an arrangement in place since the 2013 intervention began).<sup>91</sup> This anti-foreign sentiment is echoed by jihadist groups, who perceive foreign intervention and Western values as an enemy against which to fight.<sup>92</sup> Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb has built a strong anti-French discourse over the years, which retains an appeal among some Arab, Tuareg, and, recently, Peul communities. Although northern and central Mali communities are generally supportive of the role of MINUSMA and Barkhane, seeing them as potential providers of security, in Bamako public opinion towards them remains negative.<sup>93</sup> While it is unclear if there are any direct links between the increased international presence and recruitment into NSAGs, it is apparent that the presence of international forces has failed to provide citizens with a sense of security and continues to feed into NSAGs’ narratives.

## B. SOCIAL-LEVEL FACTORS

Like structural-level factors, social-level factors are intertwined and re-enforce child recruitment and use in NSAGs. These factors do not uniformly affect all communities in the same geographic area.

### COMMUNITY GRIEVANCE AGAINST THE STATE

While many of the social-level community factors that influence child recruitment in Mali mirror structural-level conditions discussed above (e.g., grievances against the state), several deserve separate treatment because of the narrow targeting of particular communities. In addition, specific intercommunity conflicts and NSAG exploitation of them influence community decisions to generate their own armed elements or align with outside groups, decisions that inevitably influence child engagement in the conflict. Additionally, the particular characteristics of communities – whether their sedentary nature or ideological leanings – have influenced community relations with the state and armed groups, and as such the recruitment and mobilization of children and youth.

When community leaders choose to mount their own armed group or to align with a NSAG, children and youth are encouraged to mobilize behind those groups. In some areas, communities have settled on a tribute system, forcing each family to provide a boy or male youth for fighting.<sup>94</sup> In such community-driven recruitment contexts, children and youth have little say in their participation.

Children and youth are involved in local affairs with the same commitment as adults. This involvement is not necessarily a conscious choice for the children, but is the result of several factors, including their parents’ influence. As described by a researcher working in northern Mali, “children cannot be dissociated from their society, as they are as much involved as adults in the identity-based movements. As an example, it is common to see children from Kidal saying, ‘No to Mali, Yes to Azawad.’ They are sometimes instrumentalized by their own parents within movements, without much conviction.”<sup>95</sup> Traditional chieftancy and local leadership also play a role, which, in some cases, leads to tensions between state officials, civil servants or members of the Government, and local representatives and leaders. In some areas, such as the Kidal region, community leaders influenced mobilization and recruitment of the youth into terrorist groups, while not officially backing those NSAGs.<sup>96</sup>

The ethnic nationalist movements, including groups associated with the CMA but also some of the newer Islamist groups operating in the centre of the country, draw on past abuses or neglect by state agents or neighbouring communities to mobilize associated communities. In many communities, family, peers, and elders pressure young people to avenge old outrages. Many Tuareg youth participating in the current conflict cite century-old grievances

<sup>89</sup> This rhetoric was used to delay foreign intervention by the junta and some of its supporters in 2012. Bruno Charbonneau, “The Imperial Legacy of International Peacebuilding: The Case of Francophone Africa,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (July 2014).

<sup>90</sup> Johanne Siméant and Laure Traoré, “Mali: Le Putsch et le Nord Vus de Bamako”, CERI-Sciences Po, September 2012, p. 8.

<sup>91</sup> Wing, “Mali: Politics of Crisis,” p. 483.

<sup>92</sup> Jean-Christophe Notin, *La Guerre de la France au Mali* (Paris: Tallandier, 2017), p. 124.

<sup>93</sup> Aurélien Tobie, “A Fresh Perspective on Security Concerns among Malian Civil Society”, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, No. 2017/2 (July 2017). Available from [www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/sipriinsight\\_1707\\_2\\_mali\\_1.pdf](http://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/sipriinsight_1707_2_mali_1.pdf).

<sup>94</sup> Child protection officer, Malian Government SV8, March 2017. Also noted by female NGO worker SVJB9, March 2017.

<sup>95</sup> Researcher working in the north BKO2, March 2017.

<sup>96</sup> Sahel expert, correspondence, September 2017.

or claim to fight to avenge their relatives who died in previous rebellions.<sup>97</sup> Younger Peul generations hold the same grievances that their ancestors held against the Malian state, including predatory action by the Water and Forestry protection agents;<sup>98</sup> increasingly, they have also felt targeted by the military (arrests and abuse). In the Tuareg communities, women and girls did not play an active role in combat during previous rebellions, but they often encourage their sons and husbands to fight. In these communities, men who take up arms are seen as desirable partners.<sup>99</sup>

Other communities are motivated to align or send youth to fight with outside NSAGs by insecurity concerns, rather than previous interactions of violence and injustice at the hands of the state. In 2012, Peul youth joined NSAGs at the behest of their leadership. Nomadic pastoralist leaders, following growing insecurity and the theft of livestock by Tuaregs, selected boys and young men (15- to 30-year-olds) to undergo military training by the MUJAO.<sup>100</sup> Recruitment was based on a trade-off with jihadists, where the latter guaranteed to provide protection and security in exchange for recruits. Among Peul communities, children have also been individually joining jihadist groups, possibly because they are perceived as strictly adhering to Islam, in line with Peul community values.

### SEDENTARINESS

In Mali, whether a group takes up arms and against whom is largely influenced by its degree of sedentariness. Nomadic communities, including the Tuareg, Arabs, and Peuls, argue that decentralization policies have been shaped without consideration for them. As a result, these groups have been least able to take advantage of public reforms and policies. For instance, while sedentary groups, including the Songhoy, Bambara, and Dogon, have been able to grow politically within the post-1991 democratization framework, Peuls remain socially, economically, and politically marginalized. State-sponsored programmes – whether structures for political participation, schools, or health clinics – have remained oriented to the needs of sedentary groups, and were not adapted to the realities of nomadic populations' lifestyles. Peul children and youth, as members of nomadic groups, are excluded from the state strategy, as Bamako's policies towards nomadic and pastoralist groups remain limited.<sup>101</sup> Thus, Peul children and youth are more willing to turn to other entities, including armed groups, for protection and opportunities.

### MOBILIZATION IN RESPONSE TO STATE VIOLENCE AGAINST SPECIFIC COMMUNITIES

The targeting by Mali's security forces of particular communities, including indiscriminate use of violence and arbitrary arrests, has fuelled more tensions, as groups are sceptical that the state is there to protect them. In turn, grievances against the state have grown, and targeted communities have sought alternative sources of protection, and in doing so have mobilized their children and youth. This dynamic has gotten significantly worse over the course of the conflict as military operations against nomadic groups intensified with the threat of jihad.<sup>102</sup> During the authors' fieldwork, several respondents expressed concerns about abuses and torture by Malian security forces against targeted groups. One knowledgeable respondent from Mopti region observed:

*A lot of Peuls have joined jihadist movements out of fear of being targeted and victimized by the Malian army. In the region of Mopti, multiple innocent people have been arrested, bullied, and accused of being jihadists or having collaborated with jihadists. That is why, once they are liberated, they join jihadist movements – with the logic that it is better to be with them [the jihadists] and be arrested than to be innocent and submit to the illegal detention by both sides [Government and the jihadists].<sup>103</sup>*

A focus group respondent explained that simply having a beard or wearing a boubou<sup>104</sup> might lead the army to suspect you were a jihadist: "Many were victims ... They [the army] didn't seek to understand, everyone was their enemy."<sup>105</sup> The suspicion the population faced did not come from the army alone: "In certain localities, the jihadists

<sup>97</sup> Expert focus group Bamako BKO4, March 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Water and Forestry protection agents (in French: agents des Eaux et forêts) are a militarized guard responsible for protecting the environment – they have repressive and coercive powers – but they are often perceived as corrupt or biased against local nomad communities.

<sup>99</sup> Frédéric Deycard, "Les Rebellions Touaregues du Niger", p. 243; and participant in past rebellion BKOJB3, March 2017.

<sup>100</sup> Former law worker, resource person SVBS3, March 2017.

<sup>101</sup> NGO Worker SVBS2, March 2017.

<sup>102</sup> International Crisis Group, "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?"; Africa Report No. 238, 6 July 2016. Available from [www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/central-mali-uprising-making](http://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/central-mali-uprising-making).

<sup>103</sup> Local Radio Director DTZBS1, March 2017.

<sup>104</sup> A type of clothing worn in West Africa.

<sup>105</sup> FGM1, Respondent 1. Other focus group respondents also explained that they shaved their beards in 2012 out of fear of being targeted by the army.



**MOPTI, MALI**

A Peul herdsman takes care of his cattle on the shore of the Niger River.  
— March 2017

Marc-André Boisvert

have started their own inquisition – threatening the people who oppose their plans. The communities suffer from both sides.”<sup>106</sup>

New jihadist threats on the border of Mali and Burkina Faso have also led to cross-border actions by the Burkinabè armed forces, leaving local populations facing abuses from all sides.<sup>107</sup> For example, the Burkinabè armed forces have conducted military operations in the Malian village of Kobou, arresting and brutalizing alleged accomplices of the Burkinabè group Ansaroul, including two young men who died in custody at the Djibo prison.<sup>108</sup> Those arrests are symptomatic of the human rights abuses that occur with impunity in the region, and significantly add to local frustration, as it is particularly difficult to hold foreign troops accountable. From our interviews, abuses by security forces and the labelling of particular communities as security threats have become a trigger for communities to seek protection by

making allegiances with jihadist groups. As one youth leader explained, “The armed and security forces are meant to protect and secure people. If they are committing abuses against citizens, it makes sense for [communities] to seek protection ... The conflation of [certain ethnic] communities and terrorist groups must stop, or new extremists, jihadists, and terrorists will rise every morning.”<sup>109</sup>

## INTERCOMMUNAL TENSION

Intercommunal conflicts contribute to the mobilization of children and youth into armed groups. NSAGs capitalize on intercommunity tensions that were reignited and inflamed as the state retreated and jihadist groups gained control of territory in order to recruit individuals and mobilize communities.<sup>110</sup> During the initial outbreak of the conflict, armed groups recruited along existing ethnic cleavages: MUJAO mobilized non-Tuareg ethnic groups in Gao in response to the abuses committed by Tuareg-led MNLA.<sup>111</sup> A member of MUJAO in Gao explains: “The MNLA plundered, robbed, and killed. I joined to save my people and my region against these bandits.”<sup>112</sup>

Jihadist rule deepened cleavages between ethnic groups, as some were favoured over others.<sup>113</sup> Following the application of sharia law, intercommunity tensions rose, as did the score settling, banditry, and vendettas, further undermining community cohesion. As a result, ethnic groups moved to protect themselves from competitors and rivals. The Songhoy ethnic group revived militias used in previous periods of conflict. The Mouvement patriotique Ganda Koy (MPGK) and its splinter group Ganda Izo were created to protect mainly Songhoy communities against Tuaregs and Arabs. Dogons have also slowly built their own defence militias. In the central region, Peuls initially sought to build their own militia, the Mouvement pour la Defense de la Patrie (MDP), but many Peuls have also been recruited into jihadist organizations, reflected in the fact that the Katibat du Macina had greater success in controlling territory near the Niger Delta than the MDP in 2016.<sup>114</sup> Peuls made these alliances in response to their long-running conflicts with Bamana and Dogon communities.<sup>115</sup> Meanwhile, Bamana groups have called for the help of Donzow, traditional brotherhoods of hunters, from the south to protect their communities, generating more tensions as outsiders enter what were previously localized conflicts.<sup>116</sup> By recruiting along existing ethnic

<sup>106</sup> DTZBS1.

<sup>107</sup> Military intelligence has provided several accounts of collaboration between jihadist Peul groups from the Hayré-Seeno (Koro-Bankass-Douentza) and the Burkinabè group Ansaroul Al Islam, led by Malam Ibrahim Dicko. Interview with foreign military advisor, 2016.

<sup>108</sup> Local Fulani leader BKOBS4, March 2017.

<sup>109</sup> Hotel manager and youth leader DTZBS4, March 2017.

<sup>110</sup> Child protection officer (Malian Government) SV8, March 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Marc-André Boisvert, “Failing at Violence: The Longer-Lasting Impact of Pro-Government Militias in Northern Mali since 2012,” *African Security*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2015).

<sup>112</sup> Thérèse-Bénoni and Assarvo, “Mali’s Young ‘Jihadists’”, p. 3.

<sup>113</sup> For example, when MUJAO occupied the Cercle de Douentza, Peuls joined the armed group as a way to gain favourable judicial decisions from the sharia law courts.

<sup>114</sup> It was only around 2016 that the MDP, led by Hama Founé, sought to gather several Peul leaders, including General Ismaila Cissé.

<sup>115</sup> BKO3, Assembly member. And in June 2017, a violent conflict erupted between Peuls and Dogons and led to several dozen deaths in Dioungani surroundings (Koro).

<sup>116</sup> Peul and Bambara ethnic groups had violent clashes in Kareni from 30 April 2016 until 5 May 2017. Between 38 and 50 people were killed. Bambara communities have called fellow Donzow from the south, alleging that the Peuls have committed violence against them with the support of the Katibat du Macina. Peuls accused the Bambara of using weapons delivered by the army to kill and rob members of their community. The two communities still face harsh tensions. Former Member of Parliament BKO1, March 2017.

cleavages, many jihadist groups have been able to garner support from those specific communities. For instance, Iyad Ag Ghali, a key leader of Ansar Dine, now merged with JNIM, also uses his credentials as a member of the Ifogha community to mobilize supporters. These groups can use self-defence rhetoric to mobilize community members, including children, to join these militias.

### SOCIAL STATUS

NSAGs can also exploit hierarchies among members of the same ethnic groups by targeting lower-caste members for recruitment. Strict social hierarchies among Peul and Tuareg communities have motivated several lower-caste strata of the groups, children and youth among them, to join armed groups making ideological appeals to justice, equality, and social mobility.<sup>117</sup> This is the case for the Peul SeedooBe (nomadic pastoralists) who have challenged the power of the governance of the local elites (WeheeBe) by pledging allegiances to new armed groups, notably the MUJAO, during the occupation and Katiba du Macina and Ansaroul Islam (from 2015 to now). A similar scenario has been developing among Tuaregs since the 1990 rebellion where the state has tried to play lower-caste groups against the elites, notably the Imghad, who are overrepresented in the pro-Government militia GATIA. This strategy has weakened the position of the traditional ruling castes, notably the Ifoghas, and forced them to negotiate with the state. Since the 2012 rebellion, hierarchies have been challenged within some groups. Le Mouvement des bellah pour la Justice et l'Égalité au Nord (MBJEN) or the Movement of the Bellas, which represents the lowest caste of the Tuareg hierarchy, often perceived as slaves or former slaves, has been able to fight marginalization by pushing for its inclusion in peace talks. Similarly, several irredentist groups, through their inclusion in the GATIA, have been able to increase their visibility and voice during national negotiations.

### DISPLACED PERSONS

NSAGs have targeted vulnerable populations for recruitment, notably refugee and displaced populations, a sizeable share of whom are children and youth. In 2017, there were still 51,961 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and

139,597 refugees as a result of the Malian conflict.<sup>118</sup> The MNLA has played on the vulnerabilities of populations in refugee camps, either in Burkina Faso or in Mauritania, to recruit into its ranks, and it remains fairly easy for refugees to cross back over the border.<sup>119</sup> Porous borders and the absence of proper identity papers raise the possibility that children can be recruited in neighbouring countries, allegations of which have been recurrent. Irredentist groups, such as the Donzow, MPGK, and Ganda Izo, have launched similar recruitment campaigns aimed at IDPs in Mopti and other southern regions.<sup>120</sup>

These children and their families, who are living in very difficult conditions, particularly with regard to poverty,<sup>121</sup> are vulnerable to recruitment. The violence and difficulties that IDPs and refugees faced and continue to face were highlighted by our IDP focus group in Sévaré, in which several children explained that their brothers joined NSAGs to avenge family members who were killed in 2012.<sup>122</sup> Displaced children also participate in NSAGs to provide economic support to their families. These

children assert that they have really suffered and live in miserable conditions without a stable home. For example, a 12-year-old girl stated that she lost her father during the fighting in the north, and her brother, a Qur'anic student, begs in order to make sure that she eats at least once a day.<sup>123</sup>

**BURKINA FASO**  
Malian Tuareg children in Djibo  
refugee camp.  
—November 2013  
Marc-André Boisvert



<sup>117</sup> The creation of Ansar Dine and the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghali itself originated from a leadership problem among forces that would become the MNLA, and a leadership issue among nobles from the Tuareg Kel-Adagh.

<sup>118</sup> UNHCR, "Mali Situation: March–May 2017," 30 June 2017. Available from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/58455>. Displacement peaked in the summer of 2013 and has been slowly declining since.

<sup>119</sup> Marc-André Boisvert, interviews conducted in IDP camps in Dori and Djibo (Burkina Faso), Nouakchott (Mauritania), 2012–2013.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.; and U.S. State Department, "Trafficking in Persons Report."

<sup>121</sup> UNICEF, "Mali Humanitarian Situation Report, April–June 2017," 20 June 2017. Available from <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Mali%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20-%20April-June%202017-.pdf>.

<sup>122</sup> Focus groups in Sévaré conducted as part of "Understanding Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in Mali," focus groups commissioned by UNU, August 2017.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

### c. INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL FACTORS

This next section examines the factors that influence individual trajectories into armed groups in Mali. These individual-level factors should be viewed against the backdrop of structural- and social-level factors discussed above. As discussed, family and community dynamics can create significant expectations and pressure for children to align with armed groups, and those structural- and social-level factors affect the individual choices of the children.

#### CONTRIBUTING TO THE FAMILY’S ECONOMIC NEEDS

At a very young age, children engage in labour inside and outside the household for the benefit of their families. The crisis increases pressure on children to provide financially – not only for themselves, but for their families. Just as it exacerbates economic needs, the crisis has simultaneously reduced economic opportunities. Some girls and women have turned to prostitution to raise money;<sup>124</sup> many young people who have lost their jobs have gone to work in the gold mines or migrated to neighbouring countries such as Equatorial Guinea and Cote d’Ivoire to seek employment. Others turn to banditry (separate from the NSAGs). Finally, some youth join NSAGs.<sup>125</sup>

“Lack of hope, at a certain point, pushes humans into the devil’s arm[s].”

– FOCUS GROUP RESPONDENT FROM MOPTI

Some insurgent groups are in a position to offer high-paying salaries, material goods, and community support in the context of pervasive insecurity. Several movements (Katiba du Macina, Ansar Dine, MUJAO) have offered money in exchange for service. Certain Peul recruits from the central region have received between 250,000 and 300,000 CFA (\$500-\$600) to join jihadist groups. Respondents spoke of NSAGs distributing motorcycles, which can travel off-road over sand and are locally referred to as “sanouelis,” to new recruits.<sup>126</sup> These motorcycles provide youth with mobility, which improves their position, status, and economic prospects within their community. There is such a strong association between the insurgent groups, recruits, and motorcycles that the vehicles have been banned in many parts of central Mali.

Children are not necessarily fighting for a political cause, but because they need security or support. A member of a youth focus group in Sévaré explained: “Many [young people] don’t know why they are armed. They do it for the promise of money or to avoid paying taxes. Many people cooperate with the jihadists because they feel they will have greater security.”<sup>127</sup> The sums offered by NSAGs dwarf the amount that someone can hope to earn working within the local economy. Whereas herders make as little as 15,000 CFA per month (around \$30),<sup>128</sup> some armed groups are thought to offer monthly salaries around \$120.<sup>129</sup>

Economic necessity and cultural expectations for children and youth to contribute have led to a degree of acceptance of NSAG association in some communities. One international NGO monitoring agent was surprised that when he asked a rural woman in the Timbuktu region about child recruitment by NSAGs, she glared at him and responded, “A minor who provides for his family is not a minor.”<sup>130</sup> The extent of this acceptance was made clear by our youth focus groups. One youth respondent didn’t hesitate to state his willingness to join the jihadist movements if he does not get a job: “Eh! A lot of young people have gone abroad, others have joined the ranks of armed groups – because there is no money. Even me – if there is nothing done so that I have a job – I promise you – I will go [join] the rebellion!”<sup>131</sup> This individual wasn’t alone. In describing peers, one respondent said, “Lack of hope, at a certain point, pushes humans into the devil’s arm[s] ... Most of the kidnappings in the regions are made by unemployed youth ... They sell their kidnapped to jihadists ... [and] a kidnapped Westerner can be sold to jihadists for 5 million FCFA.”<sup>132</sup> These responses suggest that continued economic uncertainty might drive even more young people to join or collaborate with armed groups.

<sup>124</sup> Youth leader from Tenenkou SVJB7, March 2017.

<sup>125</sup> Focus group FGSV3, Respondent 1, March 2017. Male and female youth from Sévaré SVJB6, March 2017.

<sup>126</sup> NGO monitoring agent BKOJB1, March 2017; and NGO agent working south of Djenne, March 2017.

<sup>127</sup> Focus group FGSV2, Respondent 2, March 2017.

<sup>128</sup> Male and female youth from Sévaré SVJB6, March 2017.

<sup>129</sup> The monthly salary offered by jihadists in 2013 was around €90 (\$121). Paul Hyacinthe Mben, Jan Puhl, and Thilo Thielke, “Darker Sides: The Vast Islamist Sanctuary of ‘Sahelistan’”, *Spiegel*, 28 January 2013. Available from [www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-lawless-sahel-offers-a-vast-sanctuary-to-islamist-extremists-a-880056.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-lawless-sahel-offers-a-vast-sanctuary-to-islamist-extremists-a-880056.html).

<sup>130</sup> International NGO worker doing monitoring visits in Timbuktu region BKOJB2, March 2017.

<sup>131</sup> Focus group FGM3, Respondent 1, March 2017.

<sup>132</sup> Focus group FGM1, Respondent 2, March 2017.

## RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN SEPARATED FROM THEIR FAMILIES/COMMUNITIES

NSAGs in Mali also seek to take advantage of the children and youth who have become vulnerable due to a disturbance of community ties and routines during conflict. Certain groups of children who lack a strong support system are particularly vulnerable, including orphans, children whose schools have closed, unaccompanied children herding livestock, and students living and studying away from their families. In the central and northern regions of Mali, it is not uncommon for economically vulnerable parents to send one or more of their children to live with an Islamic scholar in order to study the Qur'an.<sup>133</sup> Qur'anic pupils were often made to beg in order to cultivate humility and endurance among children from elite families. Today, that tradition has continued, and as a result young boys can be found all over Mali begging on the streets for their daily pittance. In some instances, Qur'anic students who leave home to study in another location find themselves without adequate support and supervision, and are being blatantly exploited. One focus group respondent explained the plight of a Qur'anic student from Bankass:

*I believe that Qur'anic education is a form of slavery these days. Children spend their days in the street begging. Nobody teaches them anything. It's a business, I think. Last year, there was a talibé that came here from Bankass. His master left him in the street to beg. He had to bring a daily amount. He got sick and did not have any support. We [the grin he belongs to] had to take him to the hospital for care. We had to pay for his medication. For me, this kind of education provides no future for children. A kid left in the street will make a social renegade. The street does not make exemplary citizens. And, you see, there is no empathy within the heart of those children. Street life has already stolen all of it.<sup>134</sup>*

## OUSMANE'S STORY DECEPTION IN RECRUITMENT

Ousmane, a Peul under the age of 16, was recruited by the Katibat du Macina while under the supervision of a Qur'anic master in Sévaré. At the time, Ousmane was living in difficult conditions, with barely enough to eat, and was forced to beg to pay his master 500 FCFA (approximately \$1) per day. If he couldn't gather the 500 FCFA, his master would beat and insult him. Ousmane's sole dream was to finish his Qur'anic schooling and go back to his home in Ouenkoro. One day he met two men who proposed to introduce him to a nicer, more generous teacher in Douentza, and he accepted. The two did not tell him that the arrangement would require fighting and weapons training, something he would not have willingly undertaken. He then spent two weeks studying the Qur'an and learning how to handle an AK-45 with other recruits. He was fed and treated well. After the second week, he was scheduled to be part of a raid against a Malian armed forces post in Boni. Not familiar with the geographic area of the attack, Ousmane got lost on the way to the attack and was arrested by Malian forces.\* Ousmane's story demonstrates how children become involved in NSAGs through deception or without fully understanding what they are getting into in their pursuit of a better life.

\* Member of the National Assembly BKO3, March 2017.

Jihadist groups know these marginalized children are vulnerable to recruitment, and many children studying in the Mopti region's Qur'anic schools, particularly those who are living away from their families, end up in armed groups.<sup>135</sup>

## OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN

School closures make children more vulnerable to involvement in NSAGs. In Mali, school attendance is low, with rates around 28 per cent for all levels.<sup>136</sup> Low school attendance in Mali is the result of numerous factors, many of which predate the crisis, including communities' refusal to send their children to Western schools, insecurity leading to teacher flight, and the lack of maintenance of public infrastructure. Economic conditions also undermine school attendance; of the IDP children interviewed in Sévaré, 40 per cent abandoned schooling due to their inability to afford school fees and their families' preference that their children work.<sup>137</sup>

In addition, there is an explicit strategy by jihadist groups to close schools, which are viewed as propagating Western culture and symbols of the Malian state.<sup>138</sup> As of March 2017, 507 schools in five northern/central regions of Mali had been

<sup>133</sup> This practice was instituted by Sekou Ahmadou's Diina in the Macina Kingdom. At the time, each family had to send one son to study the Qur'an and thus contribute to the Islamic legitimacy of the Peul kingdom. International Crisis Group, "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?"; p. 4.

<sup>134</sup> Focus group FGM5, Respondent 2. Grin refers to an informal social club where Malians gather daily around a teapot.

<sup>135</sup> Member of the National Assembly BKO3, March 2017.

<sup>136</sup> Institut national de Statistique du Mali, confirmed by Conseil des Ministres on 9 August 2017.

<sup>137</sup> Secondary data based on three focus groups (two for girls, one for boys), including 25 children. Interview with a boy.

<sup>138</sup> This strategy has also been adopted in Nigeria by Boko Haram, whose members regard Western education as incompatible with their version of Islam and believe it should be banned. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, "Boko Haram and Politics: From Insurgency to Terrorism", in Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, ed., *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014), p. 135.





GAO, MALI

School children in a classroom.  
—December 2014

UN Photo/Marco Dormino

shut down due to insecurity, arson, or direct threats by jihadist groups; the number of school closings has risen significantly since then.<sup>139</sup> School closings are an important factor affecting child recruitment. First, in many villages these schools represent the only physical presence of the state; school closures mean the symbolic removal of the last vestiges of the state in occupied territory. Second, when cohorts of children are without education options, they are likely to be marginalized further and are vulnerable to exploitation. Some of the focus group participants were students who went to work as domestic servants in Mopti and Sévaré when their schools were closed. They believed that there was a higher likelihood that children who were not attending school could resort to prostitution, banditry, or even membership in armed groups, as these youths feel they have nowhere else to turn.<sup>140</sup> A respondent from a focus group explains:

*The future of children [in jihadist-controlled areas] has become a race: Some will succeed, but most are bound to failure, to banditry or crime. We play belotte [cards] with many principals here [who came to Sévaré after their schools were shut down by jihadists] from the Tenenkou and Youwarou area. Over 50 schools are closed since the beginning of the crisis.<sup>141</sup>*

Without a place to go, education to occupy them, or teachers as role models, these children are more vulnerable to the armed groups that are monopolizing resources in the area. A displaced Songhoy mother living in Sévaré explained: “Children need schooling to understand the world around them. Otherwise they start looking for something else [to orient them].”<sup>142</sup>

### ECONOMIC EXPRESSION, SOCIAL STATUS, AND SELF-REALIZATION

Mali remains a very hierarchically structured communitarian society, and status and respect are conferred by family and community to children and youth who meet expectations for contributions to the familial unit and larger group. Young people, especially males, face tremendous pressure from their families to earn a salary. As one young man from Sévaré explained, work “is a question of dignity ... If you aren’t doing anything for your family, they will denigrate you.”<sup>143</sup> As a focus group member from Mopti explained, youth are desperate to be economically productive, as this is viewed as an essential marker of a worthy life:

*An idle youth will always be tempted to sell its soul to the devil. I am pretty sure that assailants are all Malian youth who suffered from precarious backgrounds. For example, the government just destroyed several jobs by destroying Bamako [market] stalls. This social upheaval can push several youths into armed groups ... Everyone needs to express himself economically.<sup>144</sup>*

This youth references economic productivity or “expression” as a key to human dignity. In poor areas, armed groups can help youth and children to earn a wage. In a different focus group, members from Mopti/Sévaré described membership in criminal or jihadist groups as a form of self-expression: “The reason why children become robbers, rebels, or jihadists, it’s because they can express themselves through this.”<sup>145</sup> Economic self-expression in this regard is the non-monetary benefit one receives from meeting the societal expectation that successful men will provide for their families.

<sup>139</sup> UNICEF, “Mali Humanitarian Situation Report, January–March 2017,” 31 March 2017. Available from <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Mali%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%2C%20%20Jan-Mar%202017.pdf>.

<sup>140</sup> Female schoolteacher Sévaré SVJB3, March 2017. Focus group FGSV4, Respondent 4. The same respondent said that his friend who was a teacher in a school closed by the jihadists saw his students working as household servants in Sévaré. Focus group FGSV3, Respondent 2. Focus group FGM1, Respondent 2. Focus group FGSV4, Respondent 1.

<sup>141</sup> Focus group FGM3, Respondent 1.

<sup>142</sup> Displaced Songhoy women SVJB4, March 2017.

<sup>143</sup> Male youth from Sévaré SVJB6, March 2017.

<sup>144</sup> Focus group FGM4, Respondent 1. The respondent is referring to the urban “beautification” project that took place in the lead-up to the Africa-France Summit. Throughout Bamako the governor destroyed many informal buildings and markets that did not have proper permits.

<sup>145</sup> Focus group FGSV4, Respondent 2.



#### SÉVARÉ, MALI

Training at the irredentist group Ganda Koy's Sévaré camp.

—December 2012

Marc-André Boisvert

Earning an income also affects male youth's ability to hit important lifetime milestones – notably marriage – a cultural requirement to transition from childhood to adulthood. Combined with insecurity, the larger financial crisis has stalled the capacity of youth to become adults, a deadlock that can be broken by joining a NSAG if in doing so one can earn the wage necessary to pay a bride price. For instance, in Tenenkou, where most markets have been shut down due to insecurity, many young traders do not have enough money for a bride price,<sup>146</sup> so the rate of marriage has slowed. If a young male can't marry, he will remain categorized as a socially inferior "youth". In some instances, alliances with armed groups can bring youth closer to achieving adulthood, as an armed group can either provide the money for the bride price, or facilitate the process of getting a wife. A young person from Katiba du Macina reported, "Joining [a NSAG] became the fastest way to marry a woman, especially if her family owns a lot of animals."<sup>147</sup> Armed groups can provide access to resources and status to woo women, even those from wealthy families.

Earning an income also affects male youth's ability to hit important lifetime milestones – notably marriage – a cultural requirement to transition from childhood to adulthood.

Even absent this incentive, membership in an armed group can help to fulfil psychological needs for respect and identity. Serving as a soldier for a cause provides youth with a culturally grounded sense of identity. In many communities in Mali, there is a long history of warriors who gain power and status through battle.<sup>148</sup> Uniforms and arms are associated with respect and honour. Militias and armed groups provide members with an official group identity. In Sévaré, members wear Ganda Izo t-shirts and carry official membership cards that resemble government-issued documents.<sup>149</sup> One member claimed this document enables the bearer to avoid confrontations with police, which is a palpable form of status typically reserved for the rich and powerful.<sup>150</sup> Many youths see joining armed groups as a path to joining the military and a long-term career. In an environment with very limited career paths, positions in the army are one of the only ways that children and youth can imagine their futures.<sup>151</sup>

<sup>146</sup> SVJB4, Treasurer Migrants Group from Segou Region.

<sup>147</sup> Thérèux-Bénoni and Assanvo, "Mali's Young 'Jihadists'".

<sup>148</sup> Bruce Whitehouse, "The Force of Action: Legitimizing the Coup in Bamako, Mali", *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 47, Nos. 2-3 (2012). Available from <http://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/afsp/article/viewFile/552/550>.

<sup>149</sup> Male Ganda Izo member SVJB5, March 2017.

<sup>150</sup> Female Ganda Izo member SVJB2, March 2017.

<sup>151</sup> Focus group with five Malian army recruits during recruitment process, Marc-André Boisvert, PhD dissertation fieldwork, Bamako, October 2016.

The militias that allow female participation in combat are seen as providing young women an opportunity to redefine themselves outside of gendered roles.

#### GIRLS’ SELF-EXPRESSION THROUGH AFFILIATION WITH NSAGS

While armed groups in the north of Mali have not traditionally used women or girls in combat,<sup>152</sup> in some instances, militias allow them to participate like their male peers, affording them unprecedented opportunities for defining themselves outside of their positions as wives and mothers. In Malian society, gender inequality is tremendously high.<sup>153</sup> Many women are constrained by their fathers, husbands, and in-laws. The militias that allow female participation in combat are seen as providing young women an opportunity to redefine themselves outside of gendered roles. A current member of the Ganda Izo militia in Sévaré explained that she left Bamako to join the group in order to fulfil a childhood dream of joining the armed forces: “When I was in third grade I told my teacher that I wanted to be someone who wears a uniform [police, army, gendarmes]. I had always wanted to be a soldier. I was in high school and saw that same teacher again, and he told me that they were recruiting for the militia in Sévaré. I joined in June 2016.”<sup>154</sup>

One Ganda Izo member described the militia as a pathway to the army; she has already submitted her paperwork to try to be recruited there. She observed of her participation in the militia: “I think it [the crisis] had a worse impact on women than men, but [at the same time] it opened up doors for women.”<sup>155</sup> For female participants in militias, membership also allows them to transgress patriarchal gender rules and transform their social roles in their communities. For example, in Ganda Izo women and girls sleep in different barracks than men, but do all of their exercises together. In 2012, in a Ganda Izo training camp in Soufouroulaye, in the Mopti region, a female recruit explained it this way: “Here I am not a woman. I am a soldier. Like the others.”<sup>156</sup> For her and the other women of the camp, membership was about moving away from traditional female functions, like housekeeping. In spite of these examples, enrolment of women into active combat roles is a rare phenomenon in the vast majority of NSAGs.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS FOR PROTECTION AMPLIFIED BY TRAUMA

As the conflict has worn on and children have come to realize that their communities cannot offer them protection, their psychological need for security has grown. Trauma likely heightens this need. When communities fail to provide security, children look to NSAGs as possible protectors. Oumar Karim is a 14-year-old IDP who witnessed violence between the Malian armed forces and jihadists in Gourma-Rharous in 2016. He was horrified: “It was a Monday. Very early. At around 6 a.m. we heard a lot of weapons. Since we live not far from the military camp, I went to there one hour later. There was blood everywhere, burnt motorcycles and a burnt car with a [dead] soldier inside. It affected me a lot. I have had nightmares about it.”<sup>157</sup> Another 15-year-old child from Timbuktu also witnessed a clash between jihadists and the military:

*Rebels attacked the National Guard at 3 a.m. and killed four guards. There was a guard that was immunized against bullets, but he was hit against a wall by a rebel’s vehicle. The guards arrested one jihadist, cut one of his fingers off and shot him in the foot. When we went back, between Rharous and Gossi, jihadists shot our car, but we ... narrowly avoided bullets.*<sup>158</sup>

These types of experiences may make children hypervigilant and prompt them to seek out affiliation with armed groups as a way to secure protection. Further, regular exposure to violence can normalize children’s acceptance of it and make them more willing to tolerate violent tactics of armed groups.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Female NGO worker SVJB9, March 2017.

<sup>153</sup> In 2015, Mali was ranked 156 of 159 countries on the UNDP’s gender inequality index. See UNDP, “Table 5: Gender Inequality Index.” Available from <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII>.

<sup>154</sup> Female Ganda Izo member SVJB2, March 2017.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Ganda Izo recruits, Soufouroulaye, December 2012.

<sup>157</sup> Focus group with IDP children (boys from several northern regions) FGSVBS2. Respondent’s name was changed for his protection.

<sup>158</sup> Focus group with IDP children (boys from several northern regions) FGSVBS2. Being immunized against bullets is a belief commonly held in Mali that charms and mystical preparation can make one bulletproof.

<sup>159</sup> While not focused specifically on armed groups, this study finds that exposure to violence significantly impacted “aggression, normative beliefs about aggression, and aggressive fantasy.” Nancy G Guerra, L. Rowell Huesmann, and Anja Spindler, “Community Violence Exposure, Social Cognition, and Aggression Among Urban Elementary School Children,” *Child Development*, Vol. 74, No. 5, (Se2003), p. 1561.





**NORTHERN MALI**

Training at the irredentist group  
Ganda Koy's Sévaré camp.

—December 2012

*Marc-André Boisvert*





Additionally, in some areas jihadists and armed groups have altered gender relations through forced weddings.<sup>160</sup> Islamists have forced weddings of 14- and 15-year-old girls – against the communities’ wishes, who see this as ideologically incompatible with Islam – as a way to create alliances with local communities.<sup>161</sup> These types of traumatic events will require community-level efforts to administer justice or restore a sense of normalcy, but to date communities have been slow to respond.

## 8 Armed Groups’ Use of Children

Evidence suggests children are involved in a wide range of activities within NSAGs in Mali. Children have been observed in active combat roles, notably during the occupation of the north by jihadist groups, and have been seen carrying weapons in a variety of other roles, including as guards and at checkpoints. In some instances, children are being used to set explosive devices, as they are less likely to draw attention to themselves because they are perceived to merely be playing in the dirt.<sup>162</sup> In addition, children assist armed groups by performing the types of daily tasks that they would have done for their families or communities before the conflict, like fetching water or running errands. For example, in Boulikessi, where MAA and the HCUA are active, children were observed making tea for combatants.<sup>163</sup>

Patterns of child recruitment reflect both the gender norms of the communities from which children are recruited and the needs of each armed group.

Children’s roles are multiple and often fluid within NSAGs. For example, while the MNLA has reportedly armed children in active combatant roles, they also employed children for several support activities, from daily clean-up to protests. There are some reports that children are systematically relegated to certain types of tasks – as guards, spies, and preparers of food and tea – when they are not viewed as strong enough for combat.<sup>164</sup> Children have also been used to advance NSAG political goals, and serve as symbolic advocates of the armed struggle. For instance, in multiple incidents over the course of the crisis, Tuareg children and women “protest-ed” on the tarmac of the Kidal airport to block Malian Government planes from landing.<sup>165</sup>

Across groups, children appear integrated with adults within Malian NSAGs. In the Plateforme and the CMA, children are often integrated along their parents and members of their community. In the MNLA, during protests and combat children have been observed alongside members of their families or communities. The authors found no evidence that armed groups have created child-only units, like those in Liberia or Sierra Leone.<sup>166</sup>

In general, how children are used across armed groups in Mali varies by gender. Although militia groups provide women and girls with actual combat roles, most NSAGs in Mali do not use women and girls in direct conflict positions but instead in support roles – whether coerced or by choice. The MNLA, while having few women in active combat roles, has several prominent women as leaders. Groups coming from more traditional communities, notably the MAA, use women and girls in various supporting roles, but not as combatants or for political duties. In sum, patterns of child recruitment reflect both the gender norms of the communities from which children are recruited and the needs of each armed group. Consequently, patterns in how children are used vary, even within the same armed group, and may fluctuate over time.

<sup>160</sup> Boukary Sangaré, “Le Centre du Mali: épicentre du djihadisme ?”, Note d’analyse, GRIP, 20 May 2016. Available from [www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES\\_ANALYSE/2016/NA\\_2016-05-20\\_FR\\_B-SANGARE.pdf](http://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES_ANALYSE/2016/NA_2016-05-20_FR_B-SANGARE.pdf). Dougnon and Sangaré, “Perception Study”.

<sup>161</sup> There are signs that when fighters have relative autonomy and leadership is weak – as was the case with MUJAO – armed group members often operate in violation of sharia, the very code of conduct that they intended to impose on the population. In contrast, Moktar Belmoktar exercised much greater discipline over his fighters, who adhered to the strict code of conduct that they tried to impose on the population. Rukmini Callimachi, “Terrorists Use New Tactics to Spare Muslims”, Associated Press, 30 September 2013. Available from [www.southbendtribune.com/news/nation/terrorists-use-new-tactics-to-spare-muslims/article\\_faf94d94-29b6-11e3-8461-0019bb30f31a.html](http://www.southbendtribune.com/news/nation/terrorists-use-new-tactics-to-spare-muslims/article_faf94d94-29b6-11e3-8461-0019bb30f31a.html).

<sup>162</sup> BKO2, March 2017.

<sup>163</sup> UNICEF officer SV9, March 2017.

<sup>164</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, “Child Soldier’s Tale Illustrates Mali’s Dirty War”, Associated Press, 26 January 2013. Available from [www.yahoo.com/news/child-soldiers-tale-illustrates-malis-dirty-war-121007549.html](http://www.yahoo.com/news/child-soldiers-tale-illustrates-malis-dirty-war-121007549.html).

<sup>165</sup> BKO4, March 2013. Respondent worked in Kidal, which has remained under CMA control since the French intervention in 2013.

<sup>166</sup> Carrie E. Kimmel and Jini L. Roby, “Institutionalized Child Abuse: The Use of Child Soldiers”, *International Social Work*, Vol. 50, No. 6 (2007); and Bill Berkeley, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe and Power in the Heart of Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).



**SÉVARÉ, MALI**  
The Entrance to the Ganda  
Koy training camp.  
—December 2012

Marc-André Boisvert

## 9 Exit – How and Why Children Leave NSAGs in Mali

In comparison to the suspected number of children involved, the number of children known to have disengaged from NSAGs remains small. This disparity is likely due to two principal reasons. First, in an active conflict where most children and youth became engaged with NSAGs because of community arrangements (e.g., alliances, quota pledges), it is unlikely that they would voluntarily stand down during continued instability. Most children in Mali do not leave their community to fight, but remain within it, which contributes to the difficulty of identifying these invisible populations and complicates access. Furthermore, given that for many children the engagement with a NSAG is fluid, a clean break may not be possible. Until a peace agreement is fully implemented, security returns, and definitive and sustainable solutions to persistent problems endured by northern and central communities are addressed, it is unlikely that the majority of NSAG-associated children and youth will disengage. Second, it is quite likely that there are children who have not been afforded child-specific disengagement services – and thus have not been enumerated – because they were unable to offer proof of their age.

The children in Mali who have gone through a formal disengagement process were all encountered during military operations by foreign or Malian troops. For example, four children from three different regions (Yirima, Boulikessi, and Serma-Cercle de Douentza) were arrested in June 2017 by French troops during a joint operation on the Mali/Burkina border.<sup>167</sup> During the 2013 operations in northern Mali, about 50 children were arrested during fighting, transferred to two centres in Bamako, and later released.<sup>168</sup> However, it is unclear that this number captures all of the children who have been processed over the course of the conflict. A Malian Government official stated that between 2012 and 2017, 68 children were apprehended during military operations, 11 of whom came from the Cercle de Douentza and Doro (Mopti region). A United Nations official stated that 114 children were released and handled by implementing partners from 2015 to 2016.<sup>169</sup> After evaluation, some were reunited with their families.

<sup>167</sup> The centre offers psychological and social support to a broad range of distressed children (young women rejected by their families for having a baby out of wedlock, orphans, children facing legal problems, etc.). It has a national staff, including qualified social workers, and partners with UNICEF Mali and the Malian Government. Meanwhile, other entities (the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] and Mali's National Directorate for the Promotion of Children and Families) identify parents or legal guardians.

<sup>168</sup> As of March 2017, 56 children had been transferred to the centres and all but two released. Most have been reunited with their families. The four children captured in June 2017 bring the total number of children known to have been captured in the conflict to 60. Minors without proper documentation probably remain in adult prisons in Bamako.

<sup>169</sup> Of the 114 released children, 43 were recruited prior to 2014 (starting in 2008), 19 were recruited in 2014, 40 in 2015, and 12 in 2016. Of those 71 recruited after 2014, 18 were associated with CMA (4 with MNLA, 14 with HCUA), and 53 with Plateforme (16 with GATIA, 10 with Ganda Koye, 15 with Ganda Izo, 12 with MSA). Correspondence with MINUSMA official, November 2017.



For many children, exiting will only be realistic when their communities are no longer fighting.

Others were sent to a centre in Bamako offering socio-psychological support for distressed children, which at the time of writing still had custody of the children.<sup>170</sup> The centre receives children from regions where fighting is most active; it has most recently taken in children from the Tabankort area, where there were skirmishes between the GATIA and the CMA.

Many Malians view external efforts to disengage children from armed groups and reintegrate them into civilian life with confusion and suspicion. One of the chiefs from a village in the Mopti region said that he knows the parents of some of the children at the centre, and that he is seeking an authorization to visit the children. The parents are concerned about their children's fate. The chief describes the confusion about the situation of child combatants by their parents and their community: "When I tell their parents that they are in good hands, they don't believe me. They think I am lying to them. Some even say, 'Why are they still in Bamako if they are not imprisoned? Why are some of the jihadists arrested at the same time now back in the village, while the children are still there?'"<sup>171</sup>

It is possible that more children have disengaged from NSAGs than have been counted and put into appropriate programmes because they have been treated as adults. In a country where most inhabitants have no official papers with them, the inability to verify identity and age limits the armed forces' abidance by the law. A soldier who has participated in several military operations described the conundrum: "How do you check the age of someone that shoots at you? We are not specialists. This is a war. We have no means to check this."<sup>172</sup>

For the children who were released and reunified with their families, a lack of resources and continued instability constrained the social services team's ability to do follow-ups. There is little available information on where those children are now and how they have fared post-NSAG involvement. The National Directorate for the Promotion of Children and Families (Direction nationale de la promotion

de l'enfant et de la famille [DNPEF], under the Ministry of Women, Children and Families) is limited in that it helps children who were brought in by security forces, but it has no way to ascertain whether those who are released remain disengaged from armed groups.<sup>173</sup>

So far, authorities have failed to generate strategies to prevent minors' integration into armed groups or offer effective reintegration programming for most of the children involved. While it is presumed that many children are still fighting, many move between their daily life and support roles for armed groups, challenging our notion of NSAG "membership" and suggesting a fluid association with armed groups. Thus, for the children who are involved in armed groups as part of a community effort, exiting will only be realistic when their communities are no longer fighting. At this time, it appears very few children have permanently withdrawn from involvement in NSAGs, and that even fewer did so of their own initiative.

How the state and international responses incentivize (or disincentivize) children to break their association with NSAGs in Mali deserves more attention. Anecdotal accounts suggest that a punitive state response can dissuade children from leaving a NSAG. While there are international protocols and a proposed Malian legal framework<sup>174</sup> for handling associated children in these contexts, the latter has not been legally formalized and international protocols are often loosely applied, especially in those areas that are underresourced and where the presence of the state is limited to military operations.<sup>175</sup>

In response to child recruitment and use by armed groups, the Malian Government created a children's court and a specialized centre in Bamako for the detention, rehabilitation, and reinsertion of minors in conflict with the law, run

<sup>170</sup> Malian Government official SV8, March 2017.

<sup>171</sup> Local Peul leader BKOB4, March 2017.

<sup>172</sup> The soldier acknowledged that some of the persons he arrested might be "almost 18 years old"; but said he has not encountered children who were clearly under 18. Interview with soldiers. Focus group with five Malian army recruits during recruitment process, Marc-André Boisvert, PhD dissertation fieldwork, Bamako, October 2016.

<sup>173</sup> Child protection officer (Malian Government) SV8, March 2017.

<sup>174</sup> While the rights of children are inscribed in the Malian constitution, Mali has also ratified the main international framework concerning children's rights, including the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Following those signatures, Mali has incorporated several aspects of the code into its national laws. In 2002, a presidential decree created the Children Protection Code, which established the basic rights and principles to protect children. This code, however, was never adopted by the National Assembly of Mali, rendering it legally null and void. A new version of the code was revised and finalized in 2015, but has yet to be presented to the National Assembly for adoption.

<sup>175</sup> Proper application is contingent on the training of national contingents. Interview with a Malian officer, Marc-André Boisvert, PhD dissertation fieldwork, Bamako, October 2016.



**KIDAL, MALI**

A rocket-hit container is seen in the aftermath of the terror attack during which six peacekeepers were killed and many others injured at the MINUSMA Camp.  
— February 2016

UN Photo/Marco Dormino

by Direction Nationale de l'Administration Penitentiaire et de l'Education Surveillee and under the purview of the Ministry of Justice (known as the Bolle centre). There are also children's quarters in several regions of Mali, notably in Mopti and Bamako. By law, all children arrested as active combatants face criminal charges, but due to the Hand Over Protocol signed by the Malian Government with the United Nations in 2013, those children are now put under the supervision of the DNPEF and sent to another NGO-run centre to await family tracing and reunification.

In practice, these legal and operational frameworks to respond to associated children face challenges in their application due to lack of resources. As previously mentioned in the chapter, parents of some of the detained children have expressed concern for the well-being of their children at the centre and

remain suspicious of the Government's efforts to disengage them. There has been little follow-up with children who have gone through the centre to evaluate their experiences and determine if they have remained unaffiliated after release.

For youth and adults, there are disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes planned for Mali, but they have been delayed and there are concerns that this setback may be undermining stabilization efforts. The 2015 peace accord did not specifically mention children associated with armed groups: It simply stipulated that adult former combatants (thought to be about 10,000) from signatory groups, who have not already integrated into the Malian armed forces, would go through DDR programmes to ease their transition back to civilian life.<sup>176</sup> As a result, eight priority cantonment sites, which include child reception centres to receive minors before their transfer to relevant child protection actors, were constructed in December 2016, but at the time of writing the actual process had not been launched.<sup>177</sup> During the delay, and since DDR access is based on lists<sup>178</sup> provided by the NSAGs, several NSAGs have launched recruitment drives to boost the number of their enrollees, including teenage recruits, to increase the benefits the community and/or group will receive<sup>179</sup> and to bolster their position in the peace process more broadly. Expectations that submitting a weapon will be an eligibility requirement for DDR have also potentially led to an increase in arms stocks among signatory groups. Relatedly, many young people have sought to join NSAGs in the delay period in hopes of getting access to DDR benefits or out of the belief that when they are demobilized there will be opportunities to integrate into the Malian security services.<sup>180</sup> Additionally, combatants from the signatory armed groups have become increasingly frustrated in the absence of promised programming and benefits. There are some indications that many of these combatants in limbo have been engaging in banditry to support themselves in the meantime, further contributing to the instability in the north.<sup>181</sup>

MINUSMA launched a community violence reduction (CVR) programme in Mali in 2014 to thwart recruitment into NSAGs and help enable conditions for DDR. Since then, more than 89 CVR-related projects<sup>182</sup> including short-term employment schemes and the rehabilitation of water, electricity, and infrastructure facilities, were implemented to reduce violence in communities around proposed cantonment centres and prevent the recruitment of youths at risk in criminal groups not identified as NSAGs.<sup>183</sup> In addition, MINUSMA engaged in some CVR activities, predominantly infrastructure projects (e.g., schools and health centres), that hire local youth in an effort to stem

<sup>176</sup> Accord pour la Paix et la Reconciliation au Mali: Issu du Processus D'Alger, 15 May 2015, pp. 8–9. Available from <https://photos.state.gov/libraries/mali/328671/peace-accord-translations/1-accord-paix-et-reconciliation-francais.pdf>. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and Community Violence Reduction (CVR) Section, DPKO, correspondence, 24 August 2017.

<sup>177</sup> DDR and CVR Section, DPKO, correspondence, 24 August 2017. Additionally, the Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination (MOC) in Gao has been launched but is not operational; the MOC in Kidal and Timbuktu still hadn't been implemented at the time of publication. Sahel expert, correspondence, September 2017.

<sup>178</sup> And additional eligibility requirements.

<sup>179</sup> Several sources indicated as much, and the increase in confirmed cases of child recruitment (from 127 to 442) from 2015 to 2016 supports this assessment. See A/70/836-S/2016/360 and A/72/361-S/2017/821, respectively.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with potential recruits, Bamako, February 2016. These hopes have been further encouraged by the recruitment drives the Malian military has launched and by Malian army trainers' involvement with DDR programmes. Boisvert, "Falling at Violence"; and notes from the recruitment camps in 2012.

<sup>181</sup> Child protection officer, Malian Government SV8, March 2017.

<sup>182</sup> The interventions took place in Gao, Kidal, Mopti, and Timbuktu, with a focus on areas with limited state penetration.

<sup>183</sup> Robert Muggah, "Revisiting Community Violence Reduction," Background Paper for United Nations–World Bank Flagship Study, "Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict," World Bank, 2017, p. 11.

Existing rules already marginalize women and children, and jihadists have exploited those rules, rather than subverting them.

the recruitment of youth and create conducive conditions for the DDR process that will eventually follow.<sup>184</sup> The impact of these efforts is largely unknown, particularly with regard to curbing banditry or recruitment aimed at bolstering NSAG DDR rosters or drives, however, the programmes are relatively new and there are some anecdotal indications – although no definitive data – that suggest that their community-based approach has the potential to positively impact conflict-affected communities.<sup>185</sup>

In addition, the state and the international community have not even begun to address the damage NSAGs inflict on children who do not fit our definition of armed group members, but who will remain tied to these groups without some sort of intervention. This is particularly true for women and girls who have been forced into marriages with NSAG fighters. Certain communities have not reacted, fearing reprisals. Even in communities

where jihadists have been pushed out, victims of forced marriage remain silent. In Gao, civil society organizations have inventoried about 10 forced marriages.<sup>186</sup> Societal norms are likely to play an important role in ending those illegal marriages, as cultural rules transfer the authority of the girl from the father to the husband. Cancelling this transfer, even where there is a strong legal basis, being that the bride is under age or that the marriage is contrary to local customary laws, is a major challenge. Jihadists have rebutted certain customs and traditions and enforced Islamic rules, but this has not altered significantly the subordinate role of women and girls among those traditional societies. Existing rules already marginalize women and children, and jihadists have exploited those rules, rather than subverting them. For girls, exiting the shadow of NSAGs is unlikely without communities' acknowledging them as victims.

## 10 Conclusion: Obstacles to Release and Reintegration

While not ignoring that individual recruitment occurs in Mali, it appears that, in the current situation, the majority of children are engaged in NSAGs as part of a community-led mobilization. As long as the security situation in the north remains volatile, it is extremely unlikely that any interventions will be able to stem child participation in NSAGs. Direct hostilities continue, and communities are vulnerable to violence. The state is severely limited in its capacity to provide security and other services to populations, particularly children.

As communities continue to actively protect themselves against violence, so too will children. In this context, the international response, components of which have faced constant attacks, has been able to provide only limited and patchy emergency services.<sup>187</sup> As instability persists, the economy lags, and services to address basic needs remain insufficient, further child recruitment and use by NSAGs is expected. Indeed, active recruitment reportedly is still occurring. Until stabilization is accomplished, the conditions for the release and the reintegration of children are certain to remain unfavourable.

A combat armistice alone will not be enough to curb recruitment. The absence of rule of law through existing dispute resolution mechanisms has been shown to be a critical factor in determining populations' openness to NSAGs<sup>188</sup> or to the implementation of sharia as an alternative justice system.<sup>189</sup> Stabilization will require not only the provision of security, but consistent, fair, and effective provision of the rule of law. A sustainable peace settlement

<sup>184</sup> DDR and CVR Section, DPKO, correspondence, 24 August 2017.

<sup>185</sup> MINUSMA, "La MINUSMA travaille pour la paix et la stabilité au Mali", Available from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvpl0aYW5aU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvpl0aYW5aU).

<sup>186</sup> Programme officer in an NGO GOBS6, March 2017.

<sup>187</sup> These include PTFS (Partenaires Techniques et Financiers) and the MINUSMA Quick Impact Project, as well as infrastructure and gender-targeted measures in Tenenkou, Youwarou, and Douentza.

<sup>188</sup> Ana Arjona, "Institutions, Civilian Resistance, and Wartime Social Order: A Process-Driven Natural Experiment in the Colombian Civil War", *Latin American Politics and Society*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (2016).

<sup>189</sup> Brandon Kendhammer, *Muslims Talking Politics: Islam, Democracy, and Law in Northern Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

will not be possible without the re-establishment of the state in northern and central Mali, and most notably of fair, predictable, and unbiased justice that will offer the opportunity to solve issues by means other than intercommunity violence. This is especially important as climate change will likely further limit resource access and increase the likelihood of intercommunal clashes. Fighting child recruitment in armed groups will depend not only on the re-establishment of state dispute resolution institutions, but also on the implementation of basic laws concerning the protection of children, and on changing the social norms that allow the involvement of children in the first place.

Just as familial and community structures and expectations play a large role in explaining child recruitment and use by NSAGs in Mali, they too can play a role in stemming it. It is important to understand communities' position vis-à-vis the state and armed groups. As the authors have stressed, children's involvement in conflict often hinges on their parents' and leaders' decisions. The hierarchical and communitarian nature of Malian society means that children are particularly likely to join a NSAG if their communities support the armed group. As long as their legal guardian does not understand that participation in an armed group undermines a child's future, and thus the family's, no strategies in the current context will be effective in limiting that participation. Similarly, families and communities will have to do more to assist children who have already been associated with NSAGs, notably jihadist groups, because of their marginalized status.

Given the role of economic conditions in explaining why children and youth become associated with NSAGs, it is essential that they see an economic and social future for themselves outside of NSAGs. Male youth's ability to integrate into their broader community and transition to adulthood is limited by lack of economic opportunities and ongoing insecurity (e.g., school and market closings).

Education, or the lack of schooling that prepares children for being economically resilient adults, is a primary factor. Widespread school closings have played a role in child recruitment in Mali. Improving education access and support will be key in keeping children safe and occupied during the conflict, and giving them prospects for after it ends. Children need to be able to imagine an alternative adulthood where they are safe, secure, and economically productive, and where pursuing their aspirations and being recognized and respected members of their communities don't hinge on association with a NSAG.



**BANKI IDP CAMP**

Internally displaced children wait for  
the distribution of food.  
— August 2016

© UNICEF/Andrew Esiebo







6

# Beset on All Sides

Children and the  
Landscape of Conflict  
in North East Nigeria

By Hilary Matfess,  
Graeme Blair, and Chad Hazlett

# 1 Introduction

Discussions of violence in the North East region of Nigeria have, in recent years, focused largely on the destabilizing impact of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), more widely known as Boko Haram.<sup>1</sup> The group was founded in the early 2000s in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, by Mohammed Yusuf, as a largely peaceful Salafist organization. It is important to note that the Boko Haram conflict is not the first insurrection justified by Qur'anic interpretation that North East Nigeria has endured; a number of violent groups, including Maitatsine and Kalo Kato, preceded Boko Haram, likewise condemned Western influence, and advanced the implementation of sharia law. What most distinguishes Boko Haram from its predecessors is its lethality: Between 2009 and 2017, the group claimed more than 35,000 lives, abducted thousands, and displaced millions, plunging the region into a humanitarian crisis.<sup>2</sup> Boko Haram's acceleration in lethality since 2010 can be traced to the Government's heavy-handed counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency practices, beginning with a 2009 crackdown on the group that killed an estimated 700 to 1,000 people, including Yusuf.<sup>3</sup> This raid brought the group under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, who has engaged in a much more aggressive and deadly campaign against the Nigerian state.

Though Boko Haram is the principal instigator in the deadliest conflict in Nigeria in a half century (and is the most lethal insurgent group on the African continent), it is far from the only armed organization in the region. The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), an umbrella group of vigilante and self-defence militias, reportedly boasts more than 26,000 members at varying levels of engagement,<sup>4</sup> constituting one of the world's largest pro-Government

<sup>1</sup> The authors use the term "Boko Haram" – a reference to the group's denunciation of Western education (and Western culture more broadly) – throughout this chapter, as it is the name given to the group by the residents of Maiduguri, is widely used by local populations, and is used by many international organizations, including the United Nations Security Council. (The exception is when directly quoting organizations that use the term "JAS.")

<sup>2</sup> 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). See also "Boko Haram Favors Women, Children as Suicide Bombers," CNN, 11 August 2017. Available from <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/10/africa/boko-haram-women-children-suicide-bombers/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Office of the Special Representative and Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC), "Nigeria", accessed 15 September 2017. Available from <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/countries-caac/nigeria>.

Children in the region are often stuck between two bad choices, with a number of groups competing to bring them into their respective ranks and punishing those who refuse to join their side.

militias.<sup>5</sup> In reality, a multitude of smaller community self-defence forces – some armed only with handmade weapons or none at all – also exist, with varying degrees of formality and varying relationships with the state, leaving observers to disagree over their organizational identities and boundaries. Many of these predate the current conflict, though they have changed form and magnitude since Boko Haram’s rise, resulting in a patchwork of militant movements and armed groups, many of which depend on children’s participation in their activities to function. Given the CJTF’s prominence among self-defence forces in the region, much of the information available on child participation in vigilante groups in Nigeria is related to the CJTF. This should not be interpreted to mean that the CJTF is the only community self-defence militia to use children, but rather that it is the vigilante group for

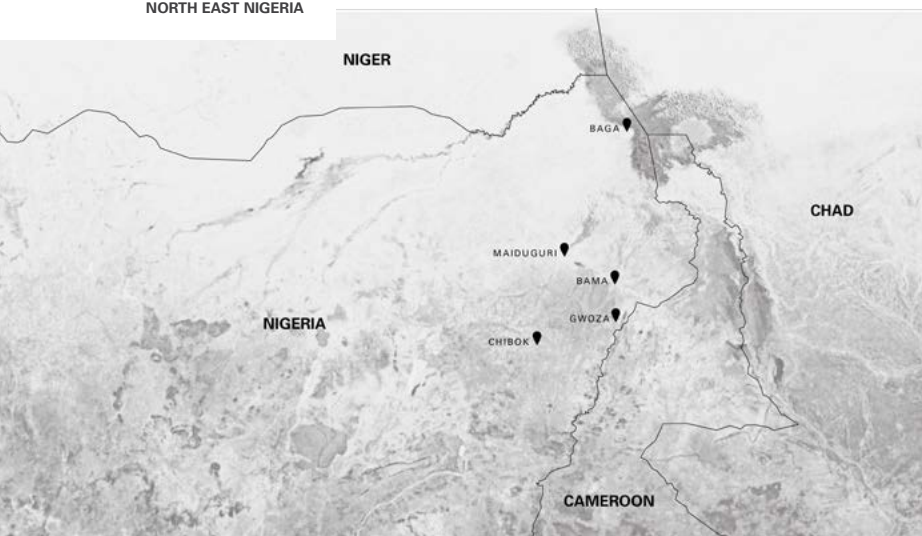
which the most information is available. Children in the region are thus often stuck between two bad choices, with a number of groups competing to bring them into their ranks and punishing those who refuse to join their side. As one woman noted, “If you are a part of the [civilian] JTF, they [Boko Haram] will target you, and if you refuse, the [civilian] JTF will target you.”<sup>6</sup> Whether the decision is this stark depends on children’s particular circumstances and the activities of the armed groups active where they live. It is clear, however, that for many, not participating in an armed group on one side or another is not an option.

This chapter focuses on the dynamics of children’s participation, both within Boko Haram and in community defence militias. No reliable number of children associated with these groups is available. A May 2014 assessment concluded that more than 1,800 children were “directly or indirectly associated with armed forces or groups” in the

region.<sup>7</sup> A former security official noted that 2,000 children have been demobilized, and suggests that plans are being made on the assumption that there will be five times this estimate – i.e., 10,000.<sup>8</sup> Over 8,700 children were “encountered in the field” by the Nigerian military between 2013 and 2016.<sup>9</sup> Of those encountered in the field, 4,000 are thought to have been associated with Boko Haram.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the figure, it is not unreasonable to assume the number has climbed since these estimates were made. Regarding self-defence organizations, the fluidity of membership, the informality of vigilante groups characterized as CJTF, and the lack of “encountered in the field” estimates<sup>11</sup> have led to a paucity of reliable projections about the magnitude of the problem. One potential indicator based on admissions from CJTF leaders about the size of membership and the percentage of children

involved suggests that upwards of 6,000 children may be associated with the CJTF, and likely more when including child membership in the less formal community self-defence vigilante groups.<sup>12</sup>

MAP OF KEY LOCATIONS IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA



<sup>5</sup> Sabine C. Carey, Neil J. Mitchell, and Will Lowe, “States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence: A New Database on Pro-Government Militias,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2013).

<sup>6</sup> Janine Morna, “Who Will Care for Us?” Grave Violations against Children in Northeastern Nigeria; Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, September 2014. Available from [http://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/2111-Watchlist-Nigeria\\_LR.pdf](http://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/2111-Watchlist-Nigeria_LR.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

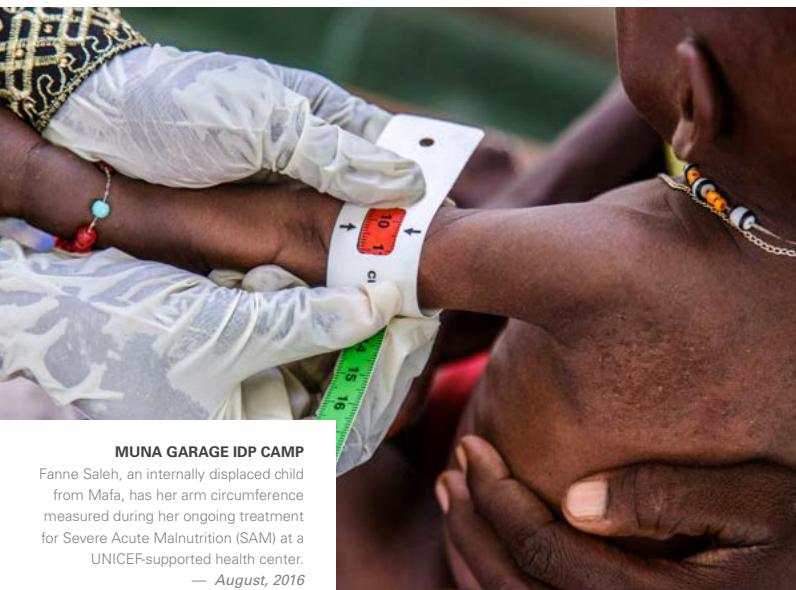
<sup>8</sup> Blair and Hazlett field notes, Abuja, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Nigeria, 10 April 2017 S/2017/304. Available from [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/304&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/304&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC).

<sup>10</sup> “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence,’” Expert Level Working Meeting, Abuja, 4-5 July 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Even though CJTF children may be utilized by the Nigerian military, they are not usually detained by it, and thus are not counted in “encountered in the field” estimates.

<sup>12</sup> This calculation is based on a 2016 CJTF leadership estimate of its strength (26,000 members) and the admission by some CJTF leaders the year before that roughly one-quarter of the force were children. See OSRSG CAAC, “Nigeria”; and Philip Obaji Jr., “How the Fight against Boko Haram Is Turning Thousands of Children into Soldiers and Spies,” *Their World*, 4 February 2015. Available from <http://theirworld.org/voices/how-the-fight-against-boko-haram-is-turning-thousands-of-children-into-soldiers-and-spies>.



#### MUNA GARAGE IDP CAMP

Fanne Saleh, an internally displaced child from Mafa, has her arm circumference measured during her ongoing treatment for Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) at a UNICEF-supported health center.

— August, 2016

© UNICEF/Andrew Esiebo

This chapter seeks to provide an overview of what is known about the recruitment and use of children by these armed groups. Section 2 briefly discusses the methodology and sources of information used. Section 3 focuses on what is known about children's pathways into these armed groups, examining factors that are thought to drive or pull children into Boko Haram or community self-defence forces. These include broad, structural-level factors such as poverty and political and economic marginalization that set the stage for vulnerability, as well as the particular social factors (e.g., community, familial, and institutional influences) and individual factors and choices that play a role. Section 4 discusses the roles children have played in these organizations, after which section 5 describes how and why children exit these groups and the processes they go through when doing so. The authors briefly discuss the challenges of assisting children post-exit, particularly the risk of recidivism, in section 6. Section 7 concludes.

## 2 Methodology

Recruitment of children into these groups, the nature of their activities and treatment once in, and how they exit are all areas in which the actors involved have incentives to keep information secret. Additionally, there is little openly available documentation and reporting on the subject. Thus, the reliable evidence required to speak confidently about these processes is scant. Accordingly, much of what is discussed about child recruitment and use by armed groups in Nigeria in the course of policymaking and programming is necessarily based on widespread perceptions and incomplete information. Our approach in this chapter is a somewhat conservative one, restricting our claims wherever possible to those well supported by evidence available to the authors, while still aiming to provide an understanding based on the information available. The evidence derives from a variety of sources:

- Field notes collected by the authors during trips to North East Nigeria between 2015 and July 2017 containing interviews and discussions with civil society, community, and religious leaders; key informants from local and international NGOs, and international organizations working in the region; as well as former and current officials from state government, the Nigerian Government, and the security services;
- Interviews with children formerly associated with armed groups in Nigeria (a study of 39 formerly associated children who were under 18 at the time of their recruitment, conducted by Nuhu Ndahu and Oluwatosin Adeniyi [of the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme] under contract with United Nations University (UNU));<sup>13</sup>
- A survey of 212 civilians living in camps in Maiduguri, displaced from Bama, Guzamala, Gwoza, Kukawa, Marte, and Ngala local government areas (LGAs), conducted by Graeme Blair and Chad Hazlett with Luke Sonnet in early 2017 on the effects of the conflict and attitudes towards Boko Haram, returnees, and Government responses;
- Fieldwork and unpublished work by Hilary Matfess;
- Newspaper reports and other secondary sources;
- Data collected by UNICEF on the conflict and the role of children in it; and
- Material from an experts meeting held by UNU and UNICEF in Abuja in July 2017.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The study is comprised of a sample of 39 children previously associated with (or in a few cases directly impacted by) Boko Haram randomly chosen from the following IDP camps: Bakassi, Teachers Village, Transit Centre, and WINNN Office. Most of the interviewees were between 12 and 20 years old, although a few didn't know their age. The interviews were facilitated by the camp staff managing the children's cases and/or were recommended by UNICEF case management officers. The interviews were conducted primarily in secluded, safe spaces within the camps, with a few conducted in the office of a local partner organization. The NSRP interviewers were extremely sensitive to the traumatic experiences these children had gone through; were clear that interviews could be terminated at any time, for any reason; and conveyed that children were not compelled to answer particular questions.

<sup>14</sup> "Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in 'Extreme Violence'"; Expert Level Working Meeting, Abuja, 4-5 July 2017.



# 3 Children's Pathways into Armed Groups

It is important to note that many of the structural and social conditions that contribute to child recruitment and use by armed groups today existed in North East Nigeria prior to the outbreak of the current conflict. The conflict, however, has itself created new and heightened existing vulnerabilities that have exacerbated child involvement in armed groups. For example, the number of orphans has skyrocketed, and food shortages and displacement crises in the region have made existence precarious for many. Furthermore, an estimated quarter million school-age children in the region are unable to go to school because of the conflict.<sup>15</sup> These familial, economic, and institutional vacuums have made coercion and conscription of children and youth into armed groups possible.

Familial, economic, and institutional vacuums have made coercion and conscription of children and youth into armed groups possible.

A number of stereotypes and misconceptions about the backgrounds and motivations of children involved in armed groups in Nigeria are generally poor predictors of vulnerability and recruitment. One report notes the common perception that children “from poor parental backgrounds; those who have not completed their education, those who are “unemployed, or not economically engaged;” or those who are involved in the informal economy, especially street hawking, are considered to be at higher risk of incorporation into armed groups.<sup>16</sup> The report notes a widely heard sentiment that “if government provided better access to education for children and employment for youths, this problem would disappear.”<sup>17</sup> While it is certainly true that greater economic and political inclusion would have many benefits and likely reduce the room for armed groups to manoeuvre, such factors alone do a poor job of explaining either change over time or

who has become engaged with armed groups. Many children who have been exposed to these same conditions do not become associated with armed groups. Furthermore, such explanations fail to recognize the multifaceted nature of child association with armed groups. Of the various factors explored in this chapter, a few trends to highlight include the role of coercion and enticement, pressure from peer groups or family members, exposure to the armed group, and/or socio-economic conditions.

The following section seeks to unpack the individual, social, and structural factors that influence various pathways into and out of armed groups in order to inform preventive policies and improve the design of release and reintegration programmes. It discusses how and why children become associated with Boko Haram, before turning to children's entrance into community defence militias (most frequently, the Civilian Joint Task Force).

## A. CHILD RECRUITMENT INTO BOKO HARAM

Despite credible estimates that thousands of children have been involved with Boko Haram, information on their pathways into the insurgency is scarce. This is the result of a number of factors, including a “highly volatile security situation, fear of disclosing identities by victims and families, and lack of access to the affected population.”<sup>18</sup> Based on new research and the few studies that have been done on this issue, a number of common themes about the coercive conditions under which children are brought into the fold of Boko Haram have emerged. The drivers explored here are outright abduction, physical threats to children's families, peer or social pressure, poverty and economic marginalization, and ideological appeals.

### ABDUCTION INTO BOKO HARAM

It is important to recognize that all child recruitment in Nigeria occurs along a coercive spectrum. The most extreme and direct form of coercive recruitment is abduction. A number of accounts document abductions of various types, including those of individuals and small groups, as well as mass abductions, such as the infamous Chibok

<sup>15</sup> Morna, “Who Will Care for Us?”

<sup>16</sup> Susan Shepler, “Analysis of the Situation of Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the Niger Delta and Northern Region of Nigeria”, Search for Common Ground, July 2012. Available from [www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/NGR\\_EV\\_Jul12\\_AnalysisOfTheSituation.pdf](http://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/NGR_EV_Jul12_AnalysisOfTheSituation.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP)/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences of Children Associated with Armed Groups in Northeast Nigeria”, 2017, p. 6. Available from [www.nsrp-nigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Research-Report-Children-Associated-with-Armed-Groups.pdf](http://www.nsrp-nigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Research-Report-Children-Associated-with-Armed-Groups.pdf).

kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from their dormitory on 14 April 2014. Though Boko Haram's abduction of women and girls has attracted the lion's share of media coverage, boys have also been targeted for abduction. In the group's largest known abduction to date, in March 2015, 300 students were taken:

*Boko Haram attacked Damasak, a trading town about 200 kilometers northwest of Maiduguri ... blocking all four roads leading into the town and trapping residents and traders. The insurgents quickly occupied Zanna Mobarti Primary School, shutting the gates and locking more than 300 students, ages 7 to 17, inside, according to a teacher at the school and other witnesses Human Rights Watch interviewed. The Boko Haram militants then used the school as a military base, bringing scores of other women and children abducted across the town there as captives.<sup>19</sup>*

Between 2013 and 2016, it is estimated that Boko Haram abducted 10,000 boys, which would make this far and away the most common pathway of entry for children into the group's ranks.<sup>20</sup> Nearly all of the children interviewed by UNU-NSRP who had been associated with the group reported having been abducted.<sup>21</sup> When they discussed other children in Boko Haram, they mostly cited abduction as the pathway into the group, but occasionally identified someone who had willingly joined and interpreted the latter's motives as financial, ideological, or status related.<sup>22</sup> In the few cases where respondents cited a child who had joined voluntarily, most didn't know he was associated with Boko Haram until he returned to attack their village or abduct girls from it.<sup>23</sup>

### THREATS TO FAMILY AND DIRECT COERCION

Many children become associated with Boko Haram due to direct or indirect physical coercion. A number of respondents suggested that they were brought into Boko Haram as a result of threats to the safety and well-being of members of their family or community. Boko Haram has used "threats to children and threats of violence towards family members to recruit both boys and girls."<sup>24</sup> In a number of instances, families "consent" to their children joining the organization in exchange for "food, money and or to obtain security guarantees."<sup>25</sup> An 18-year-old girl from Monguno recalled that "most of the girls were actually given out by their parents to marry members of the Boko Haram to protect their parents from being harmed."<sup>26</sup>

“A lot of boys joined Boko Haram because they were afraid, and people who refused to join were killed in front of them.”

— 13-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW RESPONDENT, BORNO STATE, 2017

Many children become associated with Boko Haram under direct threat of violence. According to one study, roughly one in five key informants and focus group members identified physical coercion as a driver of participation, whereas 75 per cent of children formerly associated with Boko Haram cited coercion or abduction as driving child association.<sup>27</sup> A 13-year-old boy from Baga, a town devastated by Boko Haram in a 2015 raid that killed an estimated 2,000 people in the span of just a few days, recalled that many in his community joined Boko Haram. He stated, "A lot of boys ... joined the group. All the boys who joined did so because they were afraid, and people who refused to join were killed in front of us."<sup>28</sup> For example, when concerned family members relocated a 13-year-old boy to another village, Boko Haram "retaliated by abducting

and killing two men in the family."<sup>29</sup> The boy came back to his village when he heard about the retribution and was killed by Boko Haram when he was returning from the market one day. Additionally, there are widespread reports of intimidation to coerce membership. One "teenage boy described how JAS members entered his home, visibly showing their rifles, to 'ask' his mother for permission for him to join their ranks."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: A Year On, No Word on 300 Abducted Children", 29 March 2016. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/29/nigeria-year-no-word-300-abducted-children](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/29/nigeria-year-no-word-300-abducted-children).

<sup>20</sup> "What Happened to 10,000 Boys Kidnapped by Boko Haram?" PBS Newshour, 13 August 2016. Available from [www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/happened-10000-boys-kidnapped-boko-haram](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/happened-10000-boys-kidnapped-boko-haram).

<sup>21</sup> It is possible that the children interviewed by UNU-NSRP were not entirely forthcoming about their own agency in joining Boko Haram, an example of giving socially desirable answers to certain interlocutors. Given separate observations about the prevalence of abduction and other coercive recruitment measures used by Boko Haram, however, it is also entirely plausible that the interviewees' involvement with the group was coerced, a possibility bolstered by the fact that most of those interviewed had escaped the group. UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG (children associated with armed forces and armed groups) interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Respondents 19 and 24, respectively. Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences", p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Respondent 31, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences", p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Respondent 8, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> According to the boy's aunt, Morna, "'Who Will Care for Us?'"

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



YOLA, NIGERIA

A boy tends a herd of emaciated cattle grazing  
in an arid area.

— December 2016

© UNICEF/Andrew Esiebo





## PEER AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

As with any social organization, Boko Haram relies on social networks and peer-group influence to drive recruitment. In one study of children formerly associated with Boko Haram, several cited such pressures as cementing their membership.<sup>31</sup> Beyond direct recruitment by peers, children were also more likely to join voluntarily when they saw their peers “enjoying a better lifestyle.”<sup>32</sup> In other cases, boys and men joined, forcing their wives or girls they were interested in to join as well.<sup>33</sup>

Conversations with communities in Maiduguri and Yola also suggest that family members were a frequent source of pressure to join the organization. One man in Maiduguri recalled his neighbour’s misfortune: A son of his joined Boko Haram for ideological reasons, and then tried to convert his younger siblings.<sup>34</sup> When the siblings were resistant, the son who was in Boko Haram helped organize their abduction.<sup>35</sup> One investigation documented a dozen instances in which family members facilitated recruitment into Boko Haram – including situations in which people were “given or sold” to the group.<sup>36</sup>

## SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION

Aside from direct and indirect physical violence, children may join Boko Haram for a range of reasons that vary along the coercive spectrum. Poverty and economic marginalization have been so widely felt and persistent over time in Nigeria that they provide little explanation unto themselves about why particular children join the group. Nevertheless, poverty and economic marginalization are central to understanding the backdrop against which child association with Boko Haram occurs. For example, in a 2017 survey, more than seven in ten respondents identified the motivating role of poverty as galvanizing child recruitment: “Poverty, coupled with limited opportunities were seen as increasing the vulnerability of children to the lure of monetary inducement and alternative economic livelihood system that were offered as incentives by JAS for joining up.”<sup>37</sup> The group reportedly pays a daily rate of \$6 to children who participate in attacks, and at least one report suggests that it offers \$30 for burning down schools.<sup>38</sup> In 2015, a 21-year-old man reported that Boko Haram was recruiting children and youth in northern

Cameroon, promising to pay between \$600 and \$800 a month.<sup>39</sup> In an area where employment is scarce and most available jobs pay roughly one-tenth of what Boko Haram promises, financial incentives are enticing – both economically and socially.<sup>40</sup> As one 17-year-old boy from Gwoza asserted, Boko Haram child recruits “join because they want to have money and strength.”<sup>41</sup> Beyond money, Boko Haram has also reportedly offered boys motorcycles, which have come to symbolize the group and are sometimes used in attacks on villages. In addition, in an effort to exploit both the craving for social status and physical desire, the group has used the promise of wives to lure boys into the group.<sup>42</sup>

This is not to suggest that Boko Haram is a reputable, or even attractive, employer. Some accounts suggest that Boko Haram has used “bait and switch” tactics to attract children; in northern Adamawa State, Boko Haram reportedly “gave money and employment forms to some children and later followed them to their houses telling them to join or return the money and

### MAIDUGURI, NIGERIA

A young boy walks between rows of tent shelters at the Dalori IDP camp.  
—May 2015

© UNICEF/Andrew Esiebo



<sup>31</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences”.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Sally Hayden, “‘My Father Was Shot by His Friend’: The Children of Boko Haram,” *Irish Times*, 25 August 2017. Available from [www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/my-father-was-shot-by-his-friend-the-children-of-boko-haram-1.3198611](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/my-father-was-shot-by-his-friend-the-children-of-boko-haram-1.3198611).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Morna, “‘Who Will Care for Us?’”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Philip Obaji Jr., “U.S. Troops vs. Boko Haram’s Child Soldiers in Cameroon,” *Daily Beast*, 16 October 2015. Available from [www.thedailybeast.com/us-troops-vs-boko-harams-child-soldiers-in-cameroon](http://www.thedailybeast.com/us-troops-vs-boko-harams-child-soldiers-in-cameroon).

<sup>41</sup> Respondent 27, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Blair and Hazlett field notes, Borno, 2016. Some experts convened at the UNU Abuja meeting of experts, in July 2017, also reported that the prospect of being able to have sex without marriage was used to lure boys into the group.



forms<sup>43</sup> For many who joined for economic reasons, membership was a last resort. Consider the testimony of a 17-year-old girl from Damaturu, Yobe State: “I joined about 3 years ago. I joined to earn a living. We had nothing to eat therefore when this group came they provided us enough food and we were forced. All my parents were killed so I was left with only brothers who encouraged me to join this group. I joined the group to earn a living.”<sup>44</sup>

For many, the choice was between joining Boko Haram and living in a new community with few economic opportunities as an internally displaced person (IDP). According to a religious leader who helps to organize and facilitate deradicalization and programmes to prevent violent extremism in Damaturu, “If you don’t know where to go, you joined Boko Haram ... Being an IDP is not appealing – many had not been outside of Yobe before,” and feared the unknown, “so in the choice between [being an] IDP and [being an] insurgent, many picked insurgent.”<sup>45</sup>

### IDEOLOGICAL APPEAL OF BOKO HARAM

It is difficult to determine the true motivational force of Boko Haram’s ideological appeals. On one hand, there is some popular support for some of Boko Haram’s ideological positions (e.g., sharia law), and yet many civilians do not see Boko Haram’s religious ideology as legitimate or in any way representative of Islam.<sup>46</sup> At the group level, there are indications that Boko Haram has instrumentalized religion for tactical purposes. For example, during one phase of the conflict when Boko Haram was building strength in the countryside, the group used religion to gain access to and status within communities.<sup>47</sup> In villages from which Boko Haram sought recruits prior to resorting

to violence, Boko Haram preachers would first enter villages and begin preaching their brand of Islam. This served as a test of the village’s receptivity, and an opportunity to engage with youth. Preachers were thus the primary recruiters and conduits into the group for those who joined voluntarily. Those who wish to join the group may first be tasked with imposing religious rules, such as bans on smoking. After this, they may leave the village to join the group, or may be used in an all-out attack on the village targeting those remaining there who did not fall in line.<sup>48</sup> In addition, even if the group’s appeal to individuals who joined voluntarily is of a material or political nature, religion arguably provided Boko Haram with a platform, a means of entering communities and engaging youth, and a measure of perceived authority in the early years of the conflict.

At the individual level, there is limited and mixed evidence about Boko Haram’s ideological appeal. One study has found that some individual children cite religious motivations as part of their reason for joining Boko Haram, while others have suggested that, given that any religious ideological appeal is intertwined with the group’s rejection of the

On one hand, there is some popular support for some of Boko Haram’s ideological positions (e.g., sharia law), and yet many civilians do not see Boko Haram’s religious ideology as legitimate or in any way representative of Islam.

Nigerian state, the latter may be a greater driver of association. The study in question found that 25 per cent of children associated with Boko Haram reported religious motivations to join the group.<sup>49</sup> In UNU-NSRP interviews with children formerly associated with Boko Haram, however, not a single child reported religious motivations for joining, either for themselves or for anybody else in the group.<sup>50</sup> Only one interviewee suggested that the children he knew who joined the group had done so for “jihad” – in contrast to others who mentioned general admiration for the group, money, and/or status.<sup>51</sup> The perception among many parents and observers in the North East, however, is that an incorrect “interpretation of religious ideology” motivated many of the children who joined Boko Haram.<sup>52</sup> Yet it can be difficult to isolate the appeal of Boko Haram’s religious ideology from other positions and appeals.

<sup>43</sup> In Michika and Mubi communities. NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences”, p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>45</sup> Matfess, field notes, Yobe, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Blair, Hazlett, Sonnet, Survey of IDPs, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Matfess, field notes, Abuja, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Blair and Hazlett, field notes, Borno, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP)/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences of Children Associated with Armed Groups in Northeast Nigeria”, 2017, p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Respondent 14, *ibid*.

<sup>52</sup> More than half of the key informants (none of them children). NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences”, p. 9.





**BORNO, NIGERIA**

Internally displaced women wait for food aid distribution in Banki IDP camp. —August 2016

© UNICEF/Andrew Esiebo

As mentioned, Boko Haram’s ideological appeal may lie more in its rejection of the Nigerian state than a specific religious interpretation. Boko Haram has successfully played on perceptions of injustice, lack of opportunities for youth, and government corruption to attract children and youth: “The perceived failure of government to provide for its citizens paved the way for JAS to fill the gap and attract recruits. It was highlighted that orphans or unaccompanied children, many of whom had no means of survival, were highly susceptible to being recruited through such incentives.”<sup>53</sup>

Given this orientation, the perceived actions (and inaction) of the Nigerian Government likely encourage Boko Haram recruitment. Nigeria’s counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts are frequently indiscriminate; children orphaned or targeted in such operations are likely to be sympathetic to a narrative that delegitimizes the Government.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, reports of corruption affecting the disbursement of humanitarian aid and accusations of predatory and abusive activities by the Government’s aid agencies may also contribute to the insurgency’s appeal.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the inability of the state to protect many communities from Boko Haram – and civilians’ experiences with the military retreating in the face of attacks by the group – may also undermine Government legitimacy and increase the appeal of an alternative.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> A recent United Nations Development Programme report came to this conclusion regarding recruitment into armed groups generally. UNDP, “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment”, 2017. Available from <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> Matfess, field notes, Maiduguri and Adamawa, 2017; Francisca Vigaud-Walsh, Nigeria’s Displaced Women and Girls: Humanitarian Community at Odds, Boko Haram’s Survivors Forsaken, Refugees International Field Report, 21 April 2016. Available from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5f7572ce8f8f699bb5f617d2319/1462561020546/20160421+Nigeria.pdf>; Al Jazeera, “Nigerians Displaced by Boko Haram Barter to Survive”, 3 January 2018. Available from <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/nigerians-displaced-boko-haram-barter-survive-180103083420754.html>.



### AN ASIDE ON GENDER

It is worth noting that all of the pathways described in the preceding section apply to boys as well as girls – though there is almost certainly variation in the proportion of each gender brought into the group by each pathway. Though narratives about girls in Boko Haram predominantly emphasize the role of abduction, girls have also been “attracted by charismatic leaders, peer pressure and influence,” as well as driven by “a lack of opportunities for education and employment, and financial incentives.”<sup>56</sup> Additionally, there are accounts of young women and girls seeking out members of Boko Haram for marriage, as a way “to gain status in a community.”<sup>57</sup> Despite the examples of underage girls willingly joining, a number of community members resist narratives that suggest that girls could be attracted to the group.<sup>58</sup> This is perhaps not surprising, as conventionally women’s and girls’ participation in armed groups is considered anomalous.

## B. CHILD RECRUITMENT INTO VIGILANTE FORCES

The chapter turns now to the question of recruitment into various vigilante forces in North East Nigeria. As noted in the introduction, these vigilante forces vary widely in their levels of organization and formalization, as well as their activities. While communities across the North East have mobilized to defend against Boko Haram and to mitigate the effects of the counter-insurgency effort by the Nigerian Government, the characteristics of the resultant groups vary geographically. In a number of communities in Adamawa, community self-defence militias grew from a pre-existing tradition of “hunters” groups and other vigilante networks; many communities “co-opted vigilante group members to loosely form them into a ‘CJTF’ in order to combat” Boko Haram.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, the predominant vigilante force in Borno State represents the formalized echelon of the Civilian Joint Task Force. The group’s name reflects its genesis: The Government’s Joint Task Force (JTF), comprised of members of the police and military who were largely unfamiliar with the northeastern communities they had been sent to defend, was deployed as a part of the declaration of a state of emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States in May 2013. Though the JTF did have limited success in pushing the insurgents out of the urban areas, it came at a great cost and was accomplished largely through indiscriminate violence.<sup>60</sup> The CJTF arose both to protect communities against the predations of Boko Haram as well as to help the JTF distinguish between insurgents and innocent civilians.<sup>61</sup> The resulting cooperation made CJTF members something of “hometown heroes,” and membership became a badge of honour, particularly in Borno State, where the fighting was most intense.<sup>62</sup>

There is evidence that formal and informal vigilante organizations, including the CJTF, have used children in their ranks; in fact, children may have been among the early members of the CJTF.<sup>63</sup> As previously mentioned, the Secretary-General of the United Nations Security Council’s report on children involved in armed conflict concluded that, as of late 2016, CJTF leadership estimated their strength to be 26,000 members, of which many were reportedly boys between 10 and 18 years old.<sup>64</sup> The same report cited instances of children as young as nine participating in operations.<sup>65</sup> The United Nations has been able to verify the recruitment and use of 53 children by the CJTF, though this number likely represents the tip of the iceberg.<sup>66</sup> While the formal CJTF leadership introduced a 2013 rule in its “oral code of conduct” prohibiting recruitment of children below 15 years old<sup>67</sup> and its leaders generally insist that the organization has not recruited any children, there is ample evidence, including personal observations by the authors and admissions from individual CJTF leaders, that the reality is quite different. In 2015, some CJTF leaders themselves confirmed that roughly one-quarter of the force was below the age of 18.<sup>68</sup> That same year, one senior member of the CJTF told reporters: “The insurgents are many in number, and we need as many people

<sup>56</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 13.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences.”

<sup>59</sup> Hayden, “‘My Father Was Shot by His Friend’.”

<sup>60</sup> Amnesty International, “Stars on Their Shoulders, Blood on Their Hands: War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military,” June 2015. Available from [www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/report\\_compressed.pdf](http://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/report_compressed.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> Blair and Hazlett field notes, Borno, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Matfess field notes, Borno and Yobe States, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> At the time of the CJTF’s founding, there were no age restrictions on membership. NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> OSRSG CAAC, “Nigeria.”

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> It is unclear, however, how this estimate was made. Obaji, “How the Fight against Boko Haram.”

as we can to fight them . . . These kids have lots of energy and are very important in this fight.”<sup>69</sup> There are some indications that the Nigerian military is aware that the CJTF continues to use children – including possibly unwilling recruits – as they conduct coordinated ground operations with the militias.<sup>70</sup>

After diplomatic reprimand in the U.S. State Department’s 2015 Trafficking in Persons Report,<sup>71</sup> and eventually being listed by the Secretary-General for grave violations against children for its recruitment of those younger than 18,<sup>72</sup> pressure mounted on the CJTF to end child recruitment.<sup>73</sup> In September 2017, the Civilian Joint Task Force pledged to not use children in its operations – while maintaining its implausible stance that the group had not ever engaged in such behaviour.<sup>74</sup>

“When the community comes out to respond to Boko Haram, it’s everyone, young and old.”

– CJTF LEADER, BORNO STATE

One reason for the differing claims about child involvement in the CJTF is the informality and fluidity of the group’s membership structure and ambiguity about what constitutes membership. One CJTF leader asserted: “We have never had any child soldiers in our ranks . . . I can tell you that. But when the community comes out to respond to Boko Haram, it’s everyone, young and old.”<sup>75</sup> The United Nations Security Council came to a similar conclusion, noting that the CJTF was “composed of different types of ‘members’: formal members who were trained, paid and uniformed; ‘volunteers’ who supported the formal Civilian Joint Task Force; and ‘freelancers’ used for ad hoc tasks. Reportedly, children often started performing freelance tasks before becoming volunteers and formal members.”<sup>76</sup> There also appears to be a commonly held belief among CJTF leadership that so long as children do not engage in violence directly or are not given firearms, their participation is permissible. When pressed on this, a leader of the CJTF in Maiduguri, who had previously asserted that “if you are not 18, you are not part of us – that is the truth,” justified the participation of his 17-year-old son because he

was not permitted to use a firearm.<sup>77</sup> A vigilante camp in Damaturu in 2017 housed a number of underage members who were “in training” but were not considered full members because they were not directly involved in fighting.<sup>78</sup>

Regardless of the internal distinctions made by the CJTF and vigilante groups concerning their use of children, a handful of reports suggest that the recruitment and use of children by community self-defence militias has been exacerbated as the fight against Boko Haram has progressed and taken its toll on the adult ranks of the vigilante groups. One advocacy group notes: “The Civilian JTF, along with other self-defense groups, has experienced a heavy loss in membership, because JAS increasingly targets them in their attacks. This loss may have increased the need for further recruitment of those who can fight.”<sup>79</sup>

In both the CJTF and other vigilante/community self-defence militias, children have been recruited through a number of different pathways. Mirroring how children are incorporated into Boko Haram, children often join the CJTF and other vigilante groups as a result of conscription, peer and community pressure, and extreme economic need. The dynamics of each of these pathways are unpacked below.

## CONSCRIPTION INTO VIGILANTE GROUPS

Many children are conscripted into the CJTF and other vigilante groups. Some accounts suggest that community support for the efforts of the CJTF and community self-defence militias facilitated the group’s forcible conscription

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> In June 2017, the United States Government released a report that stated plainly: “The Nigerian military also conducted on the ground coordination with the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), non-governmental self-defense militias that continued to recruit and use children possibly unwillingly and mostly in support roles and at least one of which received state government funding.” Triangle, “US to Sanction Nigeria, Others, for Using Child Soldiers,” 28 June 2017. Available from <http://thetriangle.news/us-to-sanction-nigeria-others-for-using-child-soldiers>.

<sup>71</sup> Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict, “Nigeria Included in US Department of State Child Soldiers Prevention Act List,” 2015. Available from <http://watchlist.org/nigeria-included-in-us-department-of-state-child-soldiers-protection-act-list>.

<sup>72</sup> A/70/836-S/2016/360, p. 36.

<sup>73</sup> It is possible that the Nigerian Government pressured the CJTF to do so, as the continued use of children in operations imperils the ability of Nigeria to qualify for military training and assistance from the United States. The Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 was intended to prevent the U.S. from providing military assistance to countries implicated in the annual *Trafficking in Persons Report*.

<sup>74</sup> OSRSG CAAC, “Civilian Joint Task Force in Northeast Nigeria Signs Action Plan to End Recruitment of Children,” 15 September 2017. Available from <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/press-release/civilian-joint-task-force-in-northeast-nigeria-signs-action-plan-to-end-recruitment-of-children>.

<sup>75</sup> Matfess, field notes, Borno, 2017.

<sup>76</sup> S/2017/304.

<sup>77</sup> Alexis Okeowo, “Inside the Vigilante Fight against Boko Haram,” *New York Times Magazine*, 5 November 2014. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/inside-the-vigilante-fight-against-boko-haram.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/inside-the-vigilante-fight-against-boko-haram.html).

<sup>78</sup> Matfess, field notes, Yobe, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Morna, “Who Will Care for Us?”



**MAIDUGURI, NIGERIA**

Internally displaced children  
inside Dalori camp.  
— March 2017

@UNICEF/Ashley Gilbertson



of children into their ranks. They note that members of the “self-defense groups operating in the northeast ... arrive in villages, and chiefs allow them to select any able-bodied person to assist their efforts. This has included boys as young as 13 years old.”<sup>80</sup> A woman from a community near the Lake Chad Basin recounted the following: “The chief assembles all of the villagers and the Civilian JTF asks you to join them. They take all the boys that can fight ... Some people hide their children ... If you don’t give up your children, they will beat you.”<sup>81</sup> Still other children have been forced into the ranks of vigilante groups without their agreement or that of their communities; there is evidence that children are “forcibly conscripted or deceived into joining the CJTF.”<sup>82</sup> Even members of the CJTF themselves report that recruitment “is not voluntary ... no one can refuse.”<sup>83</sup> There are also reports of boys who were detained in raids being incorporated into militias and the armed forces. There was an instance in May 2016 in which “four boys aged between 14 and 16 years, who underwent screening and were deemed to not be associated with Boko Haram, were also being used in support roles by the military at the barracks.”<sup>84</sup>

### COMMUNITY AND PEER PRESSURE

A sincere desire to protect their communities may drive many children and youth to join these groups. Similarly, they may be motivated to join by the desire to exact revenge on Boko Haram for abuses against themselves, their families, and their community.<sup>85</sup> Such motives are understandable, but it can be difficult to distinguish truly voluntary motives from community pressure and personal security incentives. For some children, community support for and lauding of the CJTF, combined with cultural expectations around masculinity, contribute to pressure for children and youth to join the CJTF. While not universally true, many communities have “celebrated individuals associated with the CJTF as heroes, irrespective of their age, making it easier for the CJTF to implement what was seen as a popular recruitment process.”<sup>86</sup> Parents, family members, and community leaders have often been supportive of children who want to join such organizations.<sup>87</sup> Some children, especially boys, have considered it their responsibility to protect their families from the insurgency and see participation in vigilante groups as the best means of doing so. The conception of manhood in the region is often such that, as one man from Konduga asserted, “at 13 and 14 ... you are a man ... [and] if you are a man, you must join” one of the community defence militias.<sup>88</sup> One former member, who was 13 when he joined the CJTF in 2013 to protect his community from Boko Haram, reported that he “found life as a soldier more comfortable than having to be forced every morning to attend ‘school classes that are boring’;” motivating him to continue his participation. Such experiences raise the critical point that the reasons people remain in armed groups may be different than what originally attracted them to join.<sup>89</sup>

### SIGNALLING AND SECURITY

Participation in community self-defence militias is a powerful signalling mechanism, used to dispel any suspicion of collaboration with or sympathy for Boko Haram. Research has found that “joining [community defence militias] provided protection from alleged indiscriminate killing and arrest ... if boys were not part of CJTF they were often suspected of being part of JAS.”<sup>90</sup> For many girls, joining the CJTF was a way to “show their solidarity for those who had been abducted.”<sup>91</sup>

### PAYMENT AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Participation in vigilante groups is incentivized by the possibility of remuneration. According to some reports, the Borno State government offers roughly \$100 a month to members of the formal CJTF.<sup>92</sup> While this payment is

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Morna, “Who Will Care for Us?”

<sup>84</sup> A/70/836-S/2016/360.

<sup>85</sup> Matfess, field notes, Yobe, 2017.

<sup>86</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Morna, “Who Will Care for Us?”

<sup>89</sup> Obaji, “How the Fight against Boko Haram?”

<sup>90</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 3.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Morna, “Who Will Care for Us?”

disbursed unevenly and infrequently, it is one of the few opportunities for employment in the region. Additionally, a number of members of the CJTF reported a belief that their service would convert into a position as a government employee; many asserted that they hoped and believed they would be incorporated into the military, police, or civil service.<sup>93</sup> Though some of the participants have been given training and pathways into formal employment, only a small minority of vigilantes have benefited from such integration programmes, and the programmes themselves have not proven to be sustainable.<sup>94</sup>

### GENDER IN VIGILANTE GROUPS

Though the majority of the recruits in vigilante groups are male, a number of females have joined their ranks. Many of these girls and young women are joining for the same reasons as boys; though girls are not faced with the same pressure to “be a man” and defend their communities through a show of strength, they may still be accused of supporting Boko Haram, and can thus use membership in the CJTF to signal their loyalties. One role in which the CJTF appears to use women and girls is at checkpoints and key installations, where they search other females for weapons.<sup>95</sup> While female participation in vigilante efforts may be a small proportion of children involved with the group, it is important to not overlook this demographic.

## 4 Children’s Roles in Armed Groups in North East Nigeria

### A. BOKO HARAM

Children have described a variety of experiences with and played numerous roles in Boko Haram. For example, those mentioned in the UNU-NSRP interviews include the following:

- “Learning to pray” and “Qur’anic studies”
- Being a wife, with little other work
- Domestic tasks: washing clothes, cleaning plates, fetching water, procuring gasoline
- Servants to the wives: plaiting their hair, catering to them
- Working on farms to harvest food
- Cleaning the armoury
- Training to fight
- Being used to kidnap more recruits
- Fighting/joining military operations
- Attending to the wounded
- Human shield (by being held in a town or village)

The section that follows describes these tasks and others for which there is sufficient evidence, by turning first to the period of indoctrination and religious conversion common to many children’s experiences in the group, then to direct and indirect support for combat, then to their role in “suicide” bombings, followed by other support and auxiliary roles. For each, the authors also discuss whether it is predominantly boys, girls, or both who are made to participate. Boys largely tend to be involved in both direct and indirect support to fighters, while girls perform a variety of support activities. There is a notable exception, however, as most “suicide bombers” are also girls.

<sup>93</sup> Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram*.

<sup>94</sup> Hamza Idris, “Borno Camps 1000 Youths for Empowerment Training”, *Daily Trust*, 9 November 2013. Available from [www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/general/orno-camps-1000-youths-for-empowerment-training/15454.html](http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/general/orno-camps-1000-youths-for-empowerment-training/15454.html). The BOYES programme was eventually stopped; it is rumoured that the military and police were uneasy about the incorporation of so many unverifiable, unvetted individuals into their ranks.

<sup>95</sup> There were suggestions that girls and women in need would be especially attracted to the financial inducements associated with this role. “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence’”, Expert Level Working Meeting, Abuja, 4-5 July 2017; NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences”, p. 17.

## INTRODUCTION AND SHARED INDOCTRINATION EXPERIENCES

There is some evidence to suggest that how a child becomes associated with Boko Haram may impact his or her initial experience within the group. Among children who joined Boko Haram voluntarily – often through recruitment by preachers in their villages – there are reported cases of their engagement in violence almost immediately as part of the recruitment process. This may include their being used as guards, beating those who break religious rules set by Boko Haram in areas they control, being used during attacks on their home villages, or even being forced to kill family members or local authority figures.

Outside of voluntary recruits, many of the children and youth who become associated with the group involuntarily report that in addition to being detained, they were made to undertake a series of religious and sometimes military trainings during an indoctrination period. A majority of children formerly associated with Boko Haram in the UNU-NSRP survey reported such an indoctrination stage. One interviewee stated, “Boko Haram came to our village and abducted us. They kept us in a big house and used to teach us how to pray and teach us Islamic studies.”<sup>96</sup> One element of this indoctrination relates to learning and abiding by the group’s dictates. For both Christians and Muslims abducted into the group, this involves a forcible religious conversion, as Boko Haram does not consider Muslims unaffiliated with their movement to be “real Muslims”. Both boys and girls who are abducted into the insurgency are routinely exposed to the group’s ideology through daily or near-daily Qur’anic instruction, supplemented by regular preaching by the insurgency’s leadership. Those who do not convert are often killed or made into “slaves”. According to a number of abductees, the Qur’anic education is broadly similar to Qur’anic education outside of the group, focusing on the Hadith and imparting doctrine to the pupils; the obvious distinguishing characteristics of the group’s Islamic education efforts are its denouncement of democracy and Western education and the introduction of a number of regulations and punishments that are ideological imports from the Middle East.<sup>97</sup>

Violence is central to this indoctrination. Boko Haram engages in corporal punishment, including public lashings and, according to some accounts, stoning for a number of transgressions.<sup>98</sup> A typical account was given by a 13-year-old boy who was abducted and trained as a fighter. He recalled, “They used to flog us if we disobey[ed] instructions; they threatened to kill anybody who tried to escape.”<sup>99</sup> A 15-year-old girl from Damasak had similar experiences:

*We were asked to pray in Islamic ways. If we didn’t pray they would flog us or if we don’t go to Qur’anic schools they will flog us. When they want to punish you they will put you in a place called hang out. There is no light in the place and they will not feed you for days or give you water to drink. Sometimes my parent sneaked food and water to come and give me there, even while I was in hang out I got injured but I was not treated.<sup>100</sup>*

Would-be defectors or escapees were threatened with death nearly constantly, according to multiple children interviewed; some even reported witnessing the insurgents kill those who had been caught during an attempt to flee.<sup>101</sup> The trauma of being threatened with death or observing others be severely punished or killed has the potential to affect children’s psyches and contribute to lasting psychological damage. A number of children formerly associated with Boko Haram, even now that they’ve left the group and are living in IDP camps, expressed fear that Boko Haram would find them.<sup>102</sup>

## POTENTIAL DRUG USE

There are few direct reports from formerly associated children about drug use while in Boko Haram; however, some evidence suggests that narcotics play a role in controlling and motivating children. In one case, a 16-year-old

<sup>96</sup> Respondent 22, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>97</sup> Matfess, field notes, Borno, 2016.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Respondent 8, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>100</sup> Respondent 6, *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>102</sup> Matfess, field notes, Borno, 2017.



boy from Michika recalled that he was given “hard drugs” over the course of the training period.<sup>103</sup> Sources involved in disengaging children from the group report widespread addiction among returnees, including young children in detention centres awaiting family reunification, eventual adoption, or community placement.<sup>104</sup> These observations are accompanied by a widespread belief that “children were brainwashed, given drugs and brutalized to prepare them for battle. The use of hard drugs (cocaine and heroin) and prescription drugs (cocaine, morphine and tramadol) to control and to prepare children for battle was perceived as common.”<sup>105</sup> Reports from the security sector following raids on camps in which drugs like cannabis and tramadol (a painkiller) were found lend credence to this conjecture.<sup>106</sup> A former security official described widespread use of “sukkada” (also known as “soak and die”), marijuana, super glue, and sniffing tires, noting that these have always been problems in the region, but that drug users are particularly vulnerable for recruitment by Boko Haram.<sup>107</sup> Another indicator of significant use of drugs among Boko Haram members is that a drug rehabilitation programme run at military demobilization centres has reportedly taken in 500 new addicts every six months.<sup>108</sup>

### COMBATANTS, SUPPORT, AND “FUTURE FIGHTERS”

Given the strict delineation of gender roles within Boko Haram’s ideology, it is unsurprising that boys and girls play different roles in the group. By and large, boys are used as porters for fighters and are trained to replace the insurgents on the battlefield, whereas girls often serve as domestic servants, slaves, and wives for male insurgents.<sup>109</sup> Though there have been rumours and anecdotal accounts of young women and girls serving as fighters and being given weapons,<sup>110</sup> these roles do not seem to be common within Boko Haram’s ranks. Disturbingly, Boko Haram has demonstrated a willingness to deploy children as “suicide bombers”<sup>111</sup> in recent years. Though the motives behind the use of this tactic are unclear, it is undeniably a pressing threat to the safety and rights of children in the region.<sup>112</sup>

"Boko Haram took us to an open field and teach us shooting range and battle engagements. They said it was necessary for us."

— 13-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW RESPONDENT, BORNO STATE, 2017

Nigerian security forces have reportedly seen children “as young as 12 fighting alongside the group.”<sup>113</sup> A 13-year-old boy from Marte relayed that he and his fellow abductees “were taught how to shoot guns, how to lie down on the ground and aim when shooting”, although he was never engaged for any operations.<sup>114</sup> Another abducted 13-year-old boy from Gwoza reported, “They took us to an open field near Bida village and teach us shooting range and battle engagements. They said it was necessary for us.”<sup>115</sup> After preliminary training, they were taken to the “Sambisa forest where we met most of their commanders and other members”, where the trainees spent three months learning how to operate and move weaponry.<sup>116</sup> Among the 20 people reportedly taken for combat training, none were girls. Though the authors find little evidence that girls participated in military training, they were often witness to it. A 13-year-old girl from Monguno recalled, “We moved from one village to another and witnessed their operations, razing villages and burning houses.”<sup>117</sup>

<sup>103</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences”, p.18.

<sup>104</sup> Blair and Hazlett, field notes, Abuja, 2017.

<sup>105</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences”, p. 18.

<sup>106</sup> Matfess, field notes, Yobe, 2017.

<sup>107</sup> Blair and Hazlett, field notes, Abuja, 2017.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Respondent 35, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>110</sup> International Crisis Group, “Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency”, Report No. 242/Africa, 5 December 2016. Available from [www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/nigeria-women-and-boko-haram-insurgency](http://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/nigeria-women-and-boko-haram-insurgency)

<sup>111</sup> The colloquial term child “suicide bomber” is problematic, as it may suggest a level of willingness and understanding of consequences that is inappropriate in this context. A more accurate term would be “person-borne IED”, or PBIED, but the authors reluctantly use “suicide bomber” or “suicide attack”, as these terms are more widely recognized.

<sup>112</sup> Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, “Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram’s Suicide Bombers”, CTC at West Point, August 2017.

<sup>113</sup> Morna, “Who Will Care for Us?”

<sup>114</sup> Respondent 34, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>115</sup> Respondent 37, *ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Respondent 30, *ibid.*



#### MAIDUGURI, NIGERIA

On Sunday, 12 December 2016, two seven-year-old girls, both suicide bombers, entered the Monday Market and detonated their explosive charges, killing one other person and wounding many more.

—March 2017

© UNICEF/Ashley Gilbertson

### THE USE OF CHILDREN AS “SUICIDE BOMBERS”

Child suicide bombers have been deployed by combatants in other conflicts globally, not necessarily as a “last resort” but because their use confers some strategic benefits upon the group. There are also tactical benefits to using children: “Owing to their physically small size and immature cognitive development, children and teens are inherently easier to coerce into suicide bombings than adult counterparts, who have relative – though oftentimes still limited – agency over their actions.”<sup>118</sup>

Though other insurgencies and armed groups have used underage suicide bombers, the frequency with which Boko Haram deploys child suicide bombers appears to be unique.

Though other insurgencies and armed groups have used underage suicide bombers, the frequency with which Boko Haram deploys child suicide bombers appears to be unique.<sup>119</sup> Boko Haram has reportedly used more than 400 suicide bombers since 2011.<sup>120</sup> Between January 2014 and February 2016, an estimated one in five of Boko Haram’s suicide bombers was a child.<sup>121</sup> Of these, approximately three-quarters have been female.<sup>122</sup> The youngest bombers the group has deployed were two 7-year-old girls, the first in February 2015 in a market in Potiskum and the second in December 2016 at a market in Maiduguri.<sup>123</sup> The pace at which Boko Haram has deployed child suicide bombers has quickened since the beginning of 2017. According to a review of the group’s use of children involved in suicide attacks from January 2011 to June 2017, “more than 40% of the child bombers deployed by Boko Haram ... have been deployed in 2017.”<sup>124</sup>

Child suicide bombers have been largely sent to soft targets, with dense civilian populations; “of the 45 targets attempted by children or teenagers, almost half were markets, IDP camps, or bus stations.”<sup>125</sup> Boko Haram’s deployment of children for suicide attacks has a high risk, high return on lethality. Surprisingly, child bombers (identified as such by news reports on their attacks) have a higher lethality per-bomber rate than of-age bombers: “When deployed singularly, they are most effective, at 11.3 casualties per bomber. However, their rates of failure are also high.”<sup>126</sup> It is unclear how Boko Haram selects children to deploy in suicide attacks, but the process

<sup>118</sup> Warner and Matfess, “Exploding Stereotypes”.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> UNICEF, “Beyond Chibok”, April 2016. Available from [www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Beyond\\_Chibok.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Beyond_Chibok.pdf).

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Warner and Matfess, “Exploding Stereotypes”.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

## Children used in suicide attacks may be unaware of the significance of their act — or that they are carrying explosives at all.

likely mirrors the ways in which children are brought into the group's ranks, along a spectrum from volition to coercion. One former fighter reported: "Nobody coerces [the children]. Nobody forces people to be suicide bombers."<sup>127</sup> He said that a number of the children, many of whom have lost family and neighbours, were angry and were enthusiastic about the prospect of being a suicide bomber. Yet social pressure and economic incentives may also lie behind the group's use of child bombers. A former insurgent observed, "A parent may volunteer a child, but the organization does not. The families are sometimes paid."<sup>128</sup> In March 2017, it was reported that a 14-year-old girl was given less than \$1 to carry an explosive device with another female bomber to a "crowded place" in Maiduguri, where they were to detonate themselves.<sup>129</sup> One

woman reported that in the Boko Haram camp where she was held, the insurgents would approach abducted women with offers of food and better living conditions if they agreed to eventually serve as bombers.<sup>130</sup> There is also evidence that children are unknowingly thrust into their roles of carrying out suicide attacks. In a rash of bombings in northern Cameroon, the insurgents deployed female bombers with infant children strapped to their backs.<sup>131</sup> Children used in suicide attacks may be unaware of the significance of their act – or that they are carrying explosives at all. Reflecting on the detonation of a female bomber who appeared to be 10 years old, a vigilante opined, "I doubt much if she actually knew what was strapped to her body."<sup>132</sup>

Though children may be deployed on suicide missions unwillingly, their use by Boko Haram increasingly has led security forces to regard any child approaching them with suspicion. In 2016, there were reports that "children as young as 10 are being killed by the military or CJTF in their effort to foil suicide bomb attacks. Children make up a growing proportion of suicide bombers, which makes them more likely to be suspects and targets, and more likely to be killed or detained."<sup>133</sup>

### AUXILIARY FIGHTING ASSISTANCE

In addition to the use of children in "direct hostilities," children – especially boys – have also been forced to play a role in numerous other violent activities or tasks that support violence, including "planting Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)-landmines, burning of schools and houses," and "support roles such as cooks, messengers and look-outs."<sup>134</sup> In addition to being trained as fighters, they have "been used as human shields to protect Boko Haram elements during military operations"<sup>135</sup> There are some reports that children are used to clear the bodies of dead fighters to hide the magnitude of Boko Haram losses,<sup>136</sup> but these claims have not been substantiated by other research. Furthermore, some boys are forced to port the group's munitions. A 16-year-old girl who spent time under the insurgents' control recalled that the boys would "pass by where we stay carrying 'bagco' (a Nigerian brand) bags. One child who was about 14 years complained that the ammunitions he carries for the group are too heavy and that he is maltreated at the slightest provocation."<sup>137</sup> Children have also been used to conduct surveillance for the group. A 13-year-old boy from Baga reported that, while in the group, "my responsibility was a watchman, to inform the Boko Haram members of any visitor or if I sight the military," but he was not considered a fighter, a role that would have to wait until he was of age.<sup>138</sup> Children who have been abducted into the group also report having to facilitate the abduction of other children. These children are "given weapons or whips to round up children and pry them from their mother's arms."<sup>139</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Matfess, field notes, Abuja, 2017.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Conor Gaffey, "Boko Haram Paid Would-Be Teenage Suicide Bomber 'Less than \$1'," *Newsweek*, 8 March 2017. Available from [www.newsweek.com/boko-haram-girls-nigeria-suicide-bomber-565195](http://www.newsweek.com/boko-haram-girls-nigeria-suicide-bomber-565195).

<sup>130</sup> Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram*.

<sup>131</sup> Warner and Matfess, "Exploding Stereotypes".

<sup>132</sup> Jenny Awford, "Bomb Strapped to a 10-year-old Girl Explodes in Busy Market in Nigeria Killing 20 and Injuring 18," *Daily Mail*, 10 January 2015. Available from [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2904497/19-dead-18-injured-Nigeria-market-blast-police.html#ixzz4rcgrNfh7](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2904497/19-dead-18-injured-Nigeria-market-blast-police.html#ixzz4rcgrNfh7).

<sup>133</sup> OSRSG CAAC, "Nigeria".

<sup>134</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences," p. 2.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> "Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment," Expert Level Working Meeting.

<sup>137</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences," p. 19.

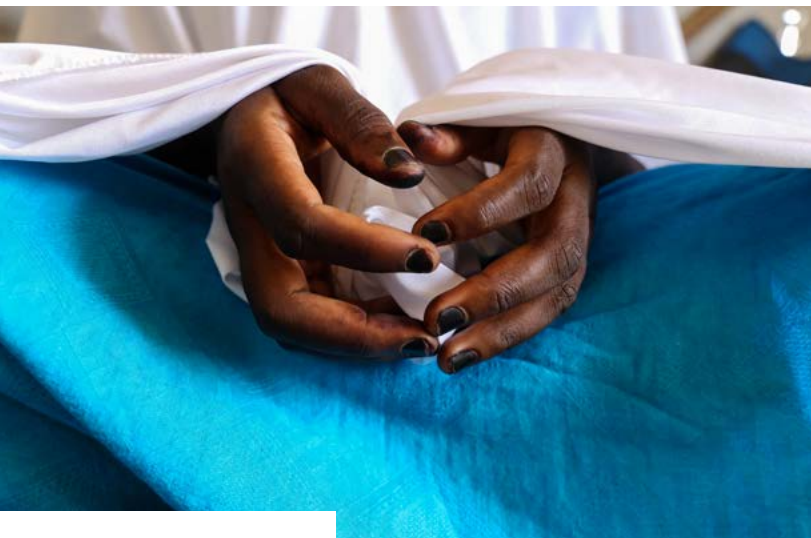
<sup>138</sup> Respondent 8, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>139</sup> UNICEF, "Silent Shame: Bringing Out the Voices of Children Caught in the Lake Chad Crisis," 10 April 2017. Available from <https://weshare.unicef.org/Package/2AMZIFLJWE2A>.



## LOGISTICAL AND SUPPLY CHAIN SUPPORT

Both male and female children have been used to facilitate the group's logistical operations; it is evident that "to sustain an insurgency for nearly eight years requires a considerable mechanism of support"<sup>140</sup> Children have been integral in this, as they are less likely to arouse suspicion from the security forces than military-age males when buying goods in the market and transporting them back to the insurgents' camps. There are accounts of boys who "are taught to drive motorbikes to move fuel, ammunition and fighters in combat zones"<sup>141</sup> Some who have been held by Boko Haram report that they are forced to prop up the group's agricultural output; a 12-year-old boy taken by the group from Gwoza recalled that he and his fellow abductees "were made to work on the farms for them and whatever we harvested was taken away from us"<sup>142</sup> Menial labour is a common demand placed upon children in the insurgency's ranks; children are often tasked with "cooking, cleaning, fetching water and collecting firewood";<sup>143</sup> as well as finding food and stealing chickens and cattle.<sup>144</sup> Girls, in particular, are often tasked with cooking and cleaning.<sup>145</sup>



### MAIDUGURI, NIGERIA

17-year old 'Aminata' was abducted by Boko Haram and forced to live with the group for two years: "I was forced to marry one of the insurgents. Every time he wanted to have sex I refused, and then he would rape me and beat me up. My 'husband' told me that if he decides or wants to, he will send me and my co-wife to town as suicide bombers."

—October 2016

© UNICEF/Fati Abubakar

they are also made aware of the insurgency's near-constant surveillance of them and their activities, as well as the punishment for transgressions. Released girls report that "frequent beatings are commonplace and the girls describe living with constant armed guards, even when going to the toilet."<sup>149</sup>

In addition to being conscripted into domestic servitude, many girls are forced into marriages with combatants. A 20-year-old woman from Bama who was abducted by Boko Haram said she was beaten severely when she refused to marry a fighter; she eventually relented, but was able to escape before the marriage.<sup>150</sup> Not all girls and women can avoid these unions: Girls are "assigned 'husbands' who rape them in a marriage without ceremony"; and they "face periods of isolation while the husbands are away – and periods of repeated rape when they return."<sup>151</sup> A 13-year-old from Pulka who was abducted by Boko Haram described being married off to a group member, who "forced me every time and I cry but he wouldn't stop," a description that is repeated by other girls who have

## MAINTAINING ORDER IN CAMPS

Some boys within the group's ranks are tasked with keeping order in the camps while other fighters are engaged in operations. This often involves preventing abductees from escaping; if they fail, they are threatened with the death themselves.<sup>146</sup> A 13-year-old boy from Marte who was trained as a fighter reported: "Sometimes, they [the fighters would] tell us to wait behind and guard the other captives, [namely, the] girls while they go for operations. They never took me for any operations. But we always clean[ed] their armoury and attended the wounded."<sup>147</sup> Similarly, reports suggest that some girls and young women are tasked with keeping order among the female abductees.<sup>148</sup>

## GIRLS AS BRIDES AND DOMESTIC SERVANTS

Prior to being parcelled out to fighters as wives or domestic servants, girls are frequently held apart from the rest of the group's members. During this period, many report being exposed to the insurgency's ideology for the first time – and

<sup>140</sup> UNICEF, "Silent Shame."

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Respondent 13, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>143</sup> UNICEF, "Silent Shame."

<sup>144</sup> Respondents 24 and 37, respectively, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>145</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences," p. 15.

<sup>146</sup> UNICEF, "Silent Shame."

<sup>147</sup> Respondent 34, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>148</sup> Matfess, field notes, Maiduguri, 2016.

<sup>149</sup> UNICEF, "Silent Shame."

<sup>150</sup> Respondent 3, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>151</sup> UNICEF, "Silent Shame," p. 9.



escaped the group.<sup>152</sup> The governor of Borno State has released statements declaring that the insurgents ritualistically rape the girls under their control in an attempt to breed a new generation of fighters. In May 2015, he stated: “These people [Boko Haram] have a certain spiritual conviction that any child they father will grow to inherit their ideology whether they live with the children or not ... The sect leaders make very conscious effort to impregnate the women, some of them, I was told even pray before mating.”<sup>153</sup> While there are numerous compelling accounts to suggest sexual violence is rampant within the group, there are some indications that the extent of this scourge is underappreciated in part because much of it occurs within “marriage”; regardless of whether the unions in question were forced.<sup>154</sup>

Some of the girls who joined Boko Haram voluntarily and some of those who were made into wives reported that they were given “slaves” to do domestic labour for them.<sup>155</sup> It is unclear to what extent this division is made according to internal class lines, ethnic identities, or religious distinctions.

## B. CHILDREN’S ROLES IN THE CJTF AND OTHER VIGILANTE GROUPS

The nature of children’s participation in the various vigilante groups varies widely. While those groups with more interactions with the Government or international community may be less likely to use children for fear of sanction, “it is also generally the case that unregistered or informal vigilante groups ... are more likely to involve children under the age of eighteen.”<sup>156</sup> While the authors cannot hope to fully characterize the way in which children are involved across these various types of self-defence groups, the section below discusses some of the evidence of their combat roles, informal local defence activities, and non-combat roles such as staffing checkpoints, screening people for ties to the insurgents, and providing intelligence.

Even in non-combat roles, children are often exposed to violence.

### COMBAT ROLES

There are a number of reports of children serving as combatants in vigilante forces. According to survey research among communities in the North East, children in the CJTF “conducted arrests of suspected Boko Haram elements while others allegedly participated in combat during the initial emergence of the CJTF and were reportedly exposed to high levels of violence, including taking part in killings, body mutilation and even parading body parts.”<sup>157</sup> Given the span of CJTF’s activity, it is important to bear in mind that many of its members who are of a legal age to participate in conflict may have begun their tenure as fighters while under age.

### INFORMAL LOCAL DEFENCE

While little formal documentation is available, the authors’ field research records numerous occasions on which children in local defence organizations, many called the *tadaa ka*, or “boys with sticks”, in the area around Maiduguri, sought to protect their communities from Boko Haram attacks.<sup>158</sup> In some cases, the *tadaa ka* consider themselves part of the CJTF, though in others they do not. These groups were often unable to do much to repel Boko Haram attacks, as they were armed with only sticks, knives, and the occasional “deer gun” (a homemade muzzle-loaded gun), while Boko Haram was armed with automatic weapons. However, there are some reported cases in which groups of *tadaa ka* saw and were able to subdue individuals they recognized were in Boko Haram.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Respondent 41, echoed by Respondent 39, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>153</sup> Ndahi Marama, “Boko Haram Rape ‘Kidnapped Girls’ to Give Birth to Future Fighters — Shettima,” *Vanguard*, 4 May 2015. Available from [www.vanguardngr.com/2015/05/boko-haram-members-rape-kidnapped-girls-to-continue-lineage-of-terrorists-shettima](http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/05/boko-haram-members-rape-kidnapped-girls-to-continue-lineage-of-terrorists-shettima).

<sup>154</sup> “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment,” Expert Level Working Meeting.

<sup>155</sup> Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram*.

<sup>156</sup> Shepler, “Analysis of the Situation of Children Affected by Armed Conflict”.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Blair, Hazlett, Sonnet, Survey of IDPs, 2016.

<sup>159</sup> Blair and Hazlett, field notes, Borno, 2016.

### NON-COMBAT ROLES: INTELLIGENCE, PATROLS, AND MORE

Key roles for children within the CJTF and other vigilante groups involve screening detainees, manning checkpoints, and conducting routine patrols in urban areas, extending security beyond what the military and police are able to. Unsurprisingly, children's primary roles in the CJTF are in intelligence gathering, "as spies and messengers"<sup>160</sup> and in "search operations, night patrols, crowd control and to man guard posts"<sup>161</sup> They also provide intelligence to the military in support of field operations, and throughout the conflict they have been especially important in providing information about the identities of suspected Boko Haram members. The latter function is "deeply troubling as it puts them at serious risk of retaliation."<sup>162</sup>

It is important to note that even in these non-combat roles, children are often exposed to (and sometimes perpetrate) violence. According to a male resident of Maiduguri in his thirties, he was beaten by CJTF members manning a checkpoint, some of whom were "maybe 7 to 10 years old," after they insisted he take another route and he refused.<sup>163</sup> The children reported him to their leader, who then abducted him from his home and interrogated and beat him for "disrespecting" CJTF members, breaking both of his hands and leaving him (a bricklayer by trade) without a source of income.<sup>164</sup> Such instances of vigilante justice and reports of human rights violations have frayed relations with some local communities and created friction with the army and police.<sup>165</sup>

## 5 Exit from Armed Groups and Life after Disengagement

Children seeking to disengage from armed groups in North East Nigeria face a number of obstacles. Though disengaging from vigilante groups is not without challenges, children who were incorporated into Boko Haram and are seeking to exit the group face a much greater challenge than their counterparts in community self-defence militias. All of the children exposed to armed groups face the difficult question of what happens after they leave the organization, as they may be subject to stigma in their communities. This section will unpack the dynamics of exit from both Boko Haram and the CJTF, as well as the issues facing children as they attempt to reintegrate into civilian lives and/or their communities.

### A. EXITING FROM BOKO HARAM

Children seek to leave Boko Haram for a variety of reasons. Naturally, those who were abducted or coercively recruited often long to exit the group. Many of these children report abusive and harsh conditions, and escape when the opportunity arises.<sup>166</sup> Even among those who either initially or eventually come to support the group, the difficulties of life with Boko Haram can motivate them to leave. While the reasons children report for leaving Boko Haram are not publicly available, particularly from those who were fighters, discussions with experts who have worked with these children point to hunger and the difficulties of life in the bush as motivations to exit.<sup>167</sup>

#### DETERRENTS TO EXIT

As might be expected, one potential deterrent to exit is that children under Boko Haram's control are regularly threatened with violence and death if they attempt to leave. According to surveys of communities in the North East, many people believe that Boko Haram "is cult like and once you are a member, whether voluntarily or forced, you cannot leave without risking your own life."<sup>168</sup> A 15-year-old girl recalled that she was often told by the insurgents,

<sup>160</sup> OSRSG CAAC, "Nigeria."

<sup>161</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences," p. 2.

<sup>162</sup> A/70/836-S/2016/360.

<sup>163</sup> Matfess, field notes, Borno, 2017.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Hilary Matfess, "Nigeria Wakes Up to Its Growing Vigilante Problem," IRIN, 9 May 2017. Available from [www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/05/09/nigeria-wakes-its-growing-vigilante-problem](http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/05/09/nigeria-wakes-its-growing-vigilante-problem).

<sup>166</sup> Such is the predominant experience recorded in the UNU-NSRP interviews, in which the participants reported that they were reluctantly or coercively recruited.

<sup>167</sup> "Prevention and Response," Expert Level Working Meeting.

<sup>168</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, "Perceptions and Experiences," p. 20.

“You are not going anywhere. You will die with us here.”<sup>169</sup> This perception is reinforced by experiences many had of seeing people brutalized or killed after failed escape attempts. One 15-year-old girl from Gwanda explained:

*They always lit a big fire around them surrounding the entire place thereby preventing anyone from escaping. They also leave behind [a] few of the Boko Haram members to watch over them while the rest go for operations. If any one of them [the remaining children, etc.] complains or ask[s] for more food, they were caned and beaten furiously. One girl tried to escape; she was dragged on her back in front of us and shot dead.<sup>170</sup>*

Among those who successfully managed to escape Boko Haram, many reported that they fled during military operations, exploiting the lack of fighters in the camp to detect their flight, or leveraged the chaos created when Boko Haram’s camps were attacked.<sup>171</sup> Others escaped while fighters were sleeping or praying, or when they were sent to fetch water or food or to perform lookout duties.<sup>172</sup> Other times, children were abandoned by Boko Haram or told to leave when they became difficult to support or were injured.<sup>173</sup> At other times, children were liberated from Boko Haram camps by the Nigerian military.<sup>174</sup>

### STIGMA AND REJECTION

Escaping from the insurgents, while certainly a risky endeavour, is not the final hurdle for these children. Given the widespread perception that children have been “brainwashed” by Boko Haram, even returnees who were abducted and/or never committed violence face significant stigma. Women and girls exposed to Boko Haram are often regarded as dangerous, a recent report found – with one community leader quoted as calling them “hyenas among dogs.”<sup>175</sup> This stigmatization is not reserved for girls alone. Both boys and girls associated with Boko Haram have been described as “evil enemies, criminals, evil, bad people, heartless, inhuman, not to be trusted, mad and senseless without rational reasoning, security threat, bad eggs, wrong doers, people fighting for religion, outlaws, saboteurs, traitors, etc.”<sup>176</sup>

In surveys done in IDP camps among individuals displaced by Boko Haram violence, the majority of those polled believed that members of Boko Haram should be killed and supported torturing, for the purpose of punishment, members of the group.<sup>177</sup> While some of these respondents expressed a willingness to accept “rehabilitated”

former members back, it is unclear what rehabilitation means in this context and for these communities.<sup>178</sup> Government efforts to raise “security consciousness,” such as a radio programme in Adamawa emphasizing the importance of community vigilance, may only exacerbate stigma against returnees.<sup>179</sup> In the face of such potent stigma and potentially violent backlash from the CJTF, which was identified as a common source of insecurity for children who had escaped from Boko Haram,<sup>180</sup> many children exiting the group “keep their experience secret because they fear the stigmatization and even violent reprisals from their community.”<sup>181</sup>

Even children who were themselves associated with Boko Haram often articulate strident rejections of other associated children. A 10-year-old girl rescued from Boko Haram by the military reported, “I am afraid of children who have joined Boko Haram, they know me and I am afraid of seeing them because I am afraid they are going to kill me. It’s a bad thing to join Boko Haram,”<sup>182</sup> while a 13-year-old boy from Kukawa stated plainly, “I am not interested in being friends with anyone who have joined

Even formerly associated children said they’d only be friends with another released child if “the military will vouch for him or her that they are now clean.”

— 18-YEAR-OLD INTERVIEW RESPONDENT, MAIDUGURI, 2017

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>170</sup> Respondent 29. Respondent 41 also mentioned the fire to prevent escape. UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>171</sup> Respondents 4, 10, 17, 19, 21, 22, 30, 32, 39, *ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> Respondents 8, 13, 14, 22, 27, 28, and 37, *ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> Respondents 23 and 25, *ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Respondent 18, *ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> International Alert and UNICEF, “Bad Blood: Perceptions of Children Born of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Women and Girls Associated with Boko Haram in Northeast,” February 2016, p. 15. Available from [www.unicef.org/nigeria/Nigeria\\_BadBlood\\_EN\\_2016.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/nigeria/Nigeria_BadBlood_EN_2016.pdf)

<sup>176</sup> UNICEF, “Silent Shame.”

<sup>177</sup> Blair, Hazlett, and Sonnet, Survey of IDPs, 2016.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Matfess, field notes, Adamawa, 2017.

<sup>180</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences.”

<sup>181</sup> UNICEF, “Silent Shame,” p. 16.

<sup>182</sup> Respondent 18, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

Boko Haram before.”<sup>183</sup> Some children formerly associated with the group stipulated that they would only consider being friends with other released children if they had been rehabilitated and if “the military will vouch for him or her that they are now clean.”<sup>184</sup> Even if they were the product of similar circumstances, many of these children are “living in fear of members of JAS finding them and killing them,” while grappling with community rejection or discrimination.<sup>185</sup>

Evidence for the ability of families and communities to accept and reintegrate children released from Boko Haram is mixed. While some children who flee Boko Haram are rejected by their families,<sup>186</sup> in many cases family reunification is possible when the parents can be found and are not themselves accused of being Boko Haram members. Consider the experience of Amina, a would-be suicide bomber who lost her legs in a botched operation and who managed to escape the group: “Following family tracing efforts, her family was found but they rejected her at first out of fear of stigma. After a process of mediation they took her back home. Today, she is still on her knees and very dependent on her family to survive.”<sup>187</sup> Certain demographics among children exposed to Boko Haram seem to face less discrimination. A Government representative reported in April 2016 that “it is easier to believe that [the younger children] enter ignorantly than the matured ones who people will actually believe they say they wanted to join; it is easy to accept the smaller ones than the bigger ones.”<sup>188</sup>

Returnees of all types, including girls and women with children, have sometimes reported that despite their fears or an initial period of suspicion and offensive treatment, communities and camps eventually accept them back.

Sources disagree regarding acceptance of women and girls, particularly those with children born in Boko Haram captivity. Some work finds that girls are more likely to face community rejection and discrimination than their male counterparts. One report suggests this may be the result of “the stigmatization associated with the sexual violence they suffered” while under Boko Haram’s control.<sup>189</sup> This discrimination is thought to be particularly acute among those who return to their communities pregnant or with infant children; for these girls, “it is triple jeopardy – suffering from the trauma of sexual violence in JAS camp, pregnant through no fault of theirs and rejection by the community.”<sup>190</sup> Yet there is also reason for hope. According to one survey, communities are more willing to accept female returnees than their male counterparts.<sup>191</sup> Returnees of all types, including girls and women with children, have sometimes reported that despite their fears or an initial period of suspicion and offensive treatment, communities and camps eventually accept them back. In one example, a young woman who escaped with two children born with her Boko Haram “husband” during two years of captivity reported that when she entered an IDP camp, “at first I was concerned about my children, then I realised that we were plenty in the IDP camp with kids from Boko Haram. I don’t get any stigmatized and my mother is helping me with the children especially with supply of relief materials.”<sup>192</sup>

### DETENTION OF CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH BOKO HARAM

A significant proportion of children associated with Boko Haram who escape or are rescued during military operations are not returned to their communities, at least initially. In the most fortunate, low-risk cases, children may be delivered directly to their families, or to a camp under a caretaker or displaced family member. On rare occasions, the military may transport children encountered in the field directly to a camp. More typically, however, children are transported first to a detention centre, where they are held and interrogated.

<sup>183</sup> Respondent 24, *ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> Respondents 26 and 27, and quote from Respondent 21, *ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 22.

<sup>186</sup> International Alert and UNICEF, “Bad Blood.”

<sup>187</sup> UNICEF, “Silent Shame,” p. 11.

<sup>188</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 27.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> Blair, Hazlett, and Sonnet, *Survey of IDPs*, 2016.

<sup>192</sup> Respondent 39, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.



As reported by both experts and returned children themselves, in the areas around Maiduguri, many children encountered during military operations are taken to Giwa barracks, while others are processed at Maimalari barracks or at other local headquarters. Reports suggest that children may be held in Giwa for only a few days, but many of those interviewed had been held for longer – up to three years. Once a formerly associated child is released from detention, the next stop is typically a “transit centre,” a facility that provides food, shelter, classes, and psychosocial and family tracing services. There, children may be collected by family members; otherwise, they are typically reintegrated into the community or brought to a camp.<sup>193</sup>

While “the exact number of under-18 detainees and their verified location is yet to be ascertained,” there is significant evidence of widespread detention of children.<sup>194</sup> One report found that “in November 2016, the UN advocated for the release of 876 children held in a military barracks in Maiduguri,” suggesting that thousands are potentially detained throughout the region.<sup>195</sup> Given the estimates that approximately 4,000 children have been encountered during the course of military operations,<sup>196</sup> it is plausible that thousands of minors are or have been detained. The conditions that these children are kept in are deplorable: In the Giwa barracks in Maiduguri, at least 240 people have died in detention, and Amnesty International reported that “children under five were detained in three overcrowded and insanitary women’s cells, alongside at least 250 women and teenage girls per cell.”<sup>197</sup> A few of the children interviewed by UNU-NSRP described their time in Giwa in neutral or even positive terms, noting they were given food and allowed to play football;<sup>198</sup> far more children, however, described long detentions in overcrowded conditions, constant interrogations, being flogged and beaten for small offenses (e.g., talking or standing), and a lack of food.<sup>199</sup> There are reports that “older boys” (perhaps vigilante members) were in charge of discipline in the barracks.<sup>200</sup> Variation in treatment may be due in part to the degree of suspicion security forces have about a child’s involvement, which the security forces and CJTF often infer based on how and where children or their parents are found.

## B. EXITING FROM VIGILANTE GROUPS AND THE CJTF

In September 2017, the CJTF formally signed an “action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children” with the United Nations.<sup>201</sup> For a variety of reasons, the authors cannot hope to know whether this had an impact. Inferential concerns aside, data are not available on the number of children involved in CJTF, and despite signing this agreement, the CJTF broadly denies use of children. Despite the absence of credible evidence for the effectiveness of this or other policy tools, several factors are thought to strongly influence exit from the vigilante groups. This section describes evidence and arguments regarding the role of community perception and social pressure in facilitating – or, alternatively, slowing – exit from these groups.

### COMMUNITY PERCEPTION

Unlike many of the children who have been incorporated into Boko Haram, of those children involved with vigilante groups and the CJTF, most have “remained in their communities and with their families.”<sup>202</sup> Thus, returning or reintegrating does not require moving “back” into the community. This, in addition to the widespread support that most vigilante groups receive, makes it easier for children once associated with the CJTF and other vigilante groups to be “reintegrated” into their communities. Survey research in the region found that, “overwhelmingly,” respondents asserted “that children associated with CJTF and vigilante groups could return.”<sup>203</sup> Indeed, many of these children are revered by their communities; in 2013, former president Goodluck Jonathan hailed them as “new national heroes.”<sup>204</sup> On the other hand, it is worth noting that since these individuals remain in the communi-

<sup>193</sup> UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>194</sup> ACAPS, “Nigeria: Protection in the Northeast,” Thematic Report, 2017. Available from [www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/170210\\_nigeria\\_northeast\\_protection\\_briefing\\_note.pdf](http://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/170210_nigeria_northeast_protection_briefing_note.pdf).

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> “Prevention and Response,” Expert Level Working Group.

<sup>197</sup> Amnesty International, “Nigeria 2016/2017,” in “Amnesty International Report 2016/2017.” Available from [www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/nigeria/report-nigeria](http://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/nigeria/report-nigeria).

<sup>198</sup> Respondents 21 and 26, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017. Such reports are corroborated by other sources. See also Dionne Searcey, “Nigeria Is Freeing Children from Boko Haram, Then Locking Them Up,” *New York Times*, 18 August 2016. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram.html).

<sup>199</sup> Respondents 11, 12, 13, 16, 32, and 34, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>200</sup> Respondent 11, *ibid*.

<sup>201</sup> UNICEF, “Civilian Joint Task Force in Northeast Nigeria Signs Action Plan to End Recruitment of Children,” press release, 15 September 2017. Available from [www.unicef.org/media/media\\_100837.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_100837.html).

<sup>202</sup> NSRP/UNICEF Nigeria, “Perceptions and Experiences,” p. 28.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> IRIN, “Updated Timeline of Boko Haram Attacks and Related Violence,” 12 December 2013. Available from [www.irinnews.org/feature/2013/12/12](http://www.irinnews.org/feature/2013/12/12).

ties where their armed group is based, disengagement may be less complete or permanent. Moreover, children associated with self-defence groups are less likely to receive programmatic support, which may undermine their long-term reintegration prospects.

### SOCIAL PRESSURE PREVENTING DISENGAGEMENT FROM ARMED GROUPS

A review of community self-defence militias in Nigeria found that, in some instances, children who joined such groups felt tremendous social pressure to remain, complicating exit. Children seeking to exit from the CJTF cite a myriad of reasons, including “the relative peace that is returning to states, going back to school,” and perceived favouritism in distribution of payments.<sup>205</sup> Another source, reflecting on Nigerian self-defence militias in general, suggested that when children associated with a group do leave, they are often motivated because they “lose faith in the cause or because of peer group pressure,” citing a number of instances in which “influence from religious groups of respected community leaders helped young people disengage from violent groups.”<sup>206</sup> In several reported instances (unrelated to the conflict in the North East, but potentially manifesting there as well), “leaders of these [community self-defence] groups themselves ... insisted that young people leave and go back to school.”<sup>207</sup> In short, the same sorts of social pressures that often incentivize children to join these groups can also facilitate disengagement.

## 6 Challenges and Opportunities for Assisting Disengaged Children

Many children considering exit from armed groups in Nigeria face uncertainty about what type of support they can expect to facilitate their transition to civilian life. Mapping all programming related to child involvement in armed groups is beyond the purpose of this chapter, and regardless would be obsolete by the time of publication. Rather, this section discusses major programming efforts in Nigeria. Many children have not received any of the services described in this part of the chapter; in Maiduguri, few of the children interviewed who had been associated with Boko Haram (or indeed those at risk of association) have received services beyond food and water.<sup>208</sup> Despite some scattered programmatic efforts to address the needs of children exiting or affected by armed groups in Nigeria, the scale of the response is dwarfed by the need.<sup>209</sup>

The main thrust of current programming is focused on either providing assistance to those who have exited or working with communities to provide that support. Far less programmatic attention is paid explicitly to reducing forced and voluntary recruitment into these groups, although it is quite plausible that given some of the pathways into these groups, general child protection (e.g., food security) and community awareness efforts could have positive, though difficult-to-measure, impacts. There have been some efforts to encourage and facilitate exit from these groups, but the specifics around these offers and programmes remain unclear and therefore of uncertain utility. The section that follows is not a complete description of all programming being undertaken in the region; it addresses a few of the main, large-scale programmes underway to illuminate the toolkit currently being employed to address challenges related to children and youth affiliated with armed groups.

While very little humanitarian programming falls strictly in these two categories, some programming seeks to reduce recruitment (or re-recruitment) and encourage exit, at least indirectly. For example, as described above, government radio programming intended to raise “security consciousness” has been attempted,<sup>210</sup> though it may also risk exacerbating stigma against returnees. In 2017, UNICEF and international donors launched a morning talk show radio programme on issues such as reintegration, child abuse, and stigma that airs multiple times a week on

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Shepler, “Analysis of the Situation of Children Affected by Armed Conflict”.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>209</sup> The 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview estimated that 2.1 million children are in need of protection services.

<sup>210</sup> Matfess, field notes, Adamawa, 2017.

**YOLA, NIGERIA**

Children raise their hands high along with their teacher during a class in an IDP camp. — March 2015

© UNICEF/Andrew Esiebo

two stations across Borno State.<sup>211</sup> Another approach to reduce recruitment has been to sensitize communities, including by training imams and assisting them in forming networks that communicate with each other about giving anti-radicalization messages in their sermons.<sup>212</sup> These types of interventions respond to public sentiment that better Islamic training would have helped protect children from falling prey to Boko Haram’s preaching, and reflect local preferences that children should be educated in both Western and Islamic schools.<sup>213</sup>

Another programming approach of this type has engaged community leaders and parents by constructing “Child Protection Committees,” “Parents Forums,” and “Mothers Forums.”<sup>214</sup> These bodies have a variety of responsibilities, including identifying child abuse, discussing the risk of child recruitment by armed groups, and reporting suspicious activities their members have observed to the relevant authorities. The authors’ research has shown that, once Boko Haram’s violent nature became well known, many communities spontaneously rejected Boko Haram preachers, with local leaders resisting their entry into the community and thus reducing recruitment.<sup>215</sup> If local organizations can help amplify these processes, they may further reduce Boko Haram’s access to recruits.

There are also initiatives to improve conditions for children outside of armed groups in order to prevent their recruitment or encourage their exit. These efforts have focused mostly on basic needs provision, the creation of child-friendly spaces, and education. Based on interviews by UNU-NSRP, however, most children who escaped Boko Haram have not received any support, and those who did largely received basic provisions (soap, food, clothes) and, on a few occasions, money and/or books.<sup>216</sup> Few of the children interviewed report receiving psychosocial support,<sup>217</sup> although a number of organizations<sup>218</sup> are focused on providing such services to children exposed to violence, sometimes with particular attention paid to addressing experiences of sexual and gender-based violence (GBV). For example, International Alert, which provides GBV counselling in 11 locations in Maiduguri and its suburbs, uses group therapy programmes to help women and girls cope with their experiences.<sup>219</sup> Given the scale of the problem, far more resources are needed, as is sensitivity to ensuring interventions are conducted in a way that does not exacerbate beneficiaries’ stigmatization by the community. Likewise the capacity to provide mental health support more broadly is lacking: Caseworkers at NGOs typically do not have a budget for psychiatric referrals. Psychiatric Hospital in Maiduguri is the only facility in Borno able to handle serious mental conditions (e.g., psychosis). There remains no general, scalable solution for addressing trauma in the displaced child and youth populations.

In addition to individually focused interventions, there are efforts to create resources and institutions to assist large numbers of children in assimilating back into civilian life. One such effort is the creation of “child-friendly spaces” in some IDP camps and host communities. These are designed to improve the moods of children, who had been confined and denied the ability to play under Boko Haram and/or in military detention.<sup>220</sup>

Returning children to school is a significant challenge, especially given that many formerly associated with armed groups have lost years of education, often during formative years. Those who are still school-aged may lack the ability to pay school fees, which in IDP camps and within host communities has been shown to be the most

<sup>211</sup> Blair and Hazlett, field notes, Borno, 2016.

<sup>212</sup> Mattfess, field notes, Borno, 2017.

<sup>213</sup> Likewise, civilians interviewed expressed a preference that children should be educated in both Western and Islamic schools. Blair, Hazlett, and Sonnet, Survey of IDPs, 2016.

<sup>214</sup> Blair and Hazlett, field notes, Borno, 2016.

<sup>215</sup> Blair, Hazlett, and Sonnet, Survey of IDPs, 2016.

<sup>216</sup> Respondents 18, 19, 22, 23, 25, 26, and 36, UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>217</sup> UNU-NSRP former CAAFAG interviews, Maiduguri, 2017.

<sup>218</sup> In addition, UNFPA provides some psychosocial services. The NEM foundation provides intensive programming to adults, and is extending this service to children. However, true psychosocial services of these types remain widely underprovided. Only a handful of clinical psychologists can be found in North East Nigeria. Organizations such as NEM amplify the reach of these clinicians by training lay counselors and triaging care in order to reach hundreds of beneficiaries per month.

<sup>219</sup> Blair and Hazlett, field notes, Borno 2016.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.





**MAIDUGURI, NIGERIA**

Internally displaced children play in a puddle caused by heavy rains in Muna Garage IDP camp.

— June 2017

© UNICEF/Fati Abubakar



Even with education and jobs training, a lack of employment opportunities will likely complicate the process of reintegration of children in Nigeria.

significant barrier to education.<sup>221</sup> For many, however, returning to school may not be an option because large numbers of schools remain closed either due to insecurity, destruction, or the repurposing of school grounds as IDP camps. Records indicate that, as of June 2017, of the 1,627 schools in Borno State, 943 remained closed.<sup>222</sup> Even with education and jobs training, a lack of employment opportunities will likely complicate the process of reintegration. For children leaving both Boko Haram and vigilante groups, education and livelihoods training may occupy them and give them a vision of a life beyond armed groups, but there are real questions as to the economic impact of such programmes and whether they can contribute to stability.

Beyond the challenges specific to certain interventions, there are a number of obstacles that make scaling up any of the aforementioned efforts difficult. First and foremost is access, as many areas of Nigeria's North East remain unsafe for staff. This situation will likely worsen rapidly when IDPs return to newly "secured" areas that are not secure enough for humanitarian staff. Even now, poor roads and insecurity – even within miles of the Maiduguri border – make many areas inaccessible to humanitarians who don't have access to helicopters or military clearance. As a result, the aid response even within local government areas (LGAs) deemed "safe" by the military varies according to geography. Due to high risk, travel on some key roads is blocked by the military or is deemed off limits by NGO security advisors. Thus, travel between home offices in Maiduguri and programme offices in rural LGAs often depends on unreliable military transport or roads that circumvent insecure zones.

## 7 Conclusion

While a lack of information and access continues to obscure a complete picture of child recruitment and use by armed groups in Nigeria, this chapter provides a description of the patterns of recruitment and participation of children based on the available evidence. This section recaps the findings from the research and examines some of their policy and programmatic implications.

Although there are no reliable estimates of the number of children associated with Boko Haram or with vigilante groups in this conflict, the available evidence is more than sufficient to reveal the horrifying scale of child recruitment and use in Nigeria. Estimates for child association with Boko Haram range from 1,800 to 10,000. In addition, a substantial number of children serve in informal self-defence organizations. Estimates are elusive, but it is reasonable to assume the number of associated children is in the thousands. Interviews with children in both types of groups suggest that the programmatic response does not match the enormity of the problem, and many do not have access to prevention programmes or reintegration support.

The drivers of recruitment into armed groups in Nigeria are numerous. In the case of Boko Haram, many children report becoming associated with the group due to violent coercion – including abduction and threats to family. Their accounts are corroborated by countless reports from civilians who recall Boko Haram abducting large numbers of children during attacks on their villages. Poverty and economic marginalization provide the context for understanding children's vulnerability to oft-cited influences including material incentives, the ideological appeal of the group, and peer or social pressure.

Non-material incentives also appear to play an important role – particularly status and the promise of marriage. Boko Haram appeals to children and youth by offering a chance to achieve status and certain milestones that are out of reach for many in economically depressed regions. These incentives pose a potential obstacle to their exit.

<sup>221</sup> International Organization for Migration, "Displacement Tracking Matrix Round XVI Report," May 2017. Available from <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/57193>.

<sup>222</sup> UNICEF, "School Operational Status and Children Enrollment," Borno State SUBEB, June 2017. Available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/nigeria-borno-state-school-operational-status-and-children-enrollment-13-june-2017>.

The role of Boko Haram's ideological appeal is complicated: Some children may be true believers in the group's religious message, but its greater ideological appeal may lie in its rejection of the Nigerian state and promises of political and economic empowerment. Simplistic interpretations of the role religious ideology plays in the conflict should be viewed with caution. Regardless, Boko Haram's instrumentalization of religion as a platform for entering communities helped the group spread and recruit sympathizers.

Regarding recruitment into self-defence groups, many children are motivated to associate with vigilante groups out of a desire to protect their families and communities. Many, however, face significant social, peer, and family pressure to join these groups and/or are mobilized alongside their families. For them and for other children, neutrality may not be a viable option, as they may need to affiliate with armed groups to protect themselves or their families, or to signal that they do not support Boko Haram. For this reason, children may join the CJTF simply to avoid being accused of affiliation with Boko Haram.

For both Boko Haram and CJTF, there are important gender differences in child recruitment and use. Unfortunately, there is less visibility on girls' trajectories into armed groups and their roles and experiences therein. It is important to improve understanding of particular vulnerabilities and needs of girls in the region. Programmatic and advocacy efforts should reflect the diversity of pathways and motivations of girls associated with Boko Haram and CJTF and self-defence groups.

What is important to the future of children in Boko Haram is how they exit these groups, and what happens after they leave. At present, there is a missed opportunity for messaging directed towards children (and others) in Boko Haram, encouraging defection and demonstrating that exit from the group is viable. All children exposed to armed groups face the difficult question of what happens after they leave their organization, particularly with regard to the community stigma they may face. Those returning from Boko Haram face uncertain but potentially violent reactions by their host communities and the state. This in turn reduces their willingness to defect from Boko Haram, if and when the opportunity arises. Furthermore, the prolonged detention and harsh treatment of children (and adults) charged with Boko Haram affiliation may lead to a backlash, fuelling support for Boko Haram's anti-state narrative.

Though attitudes towards children associated with the CJTF and other vigilante groups are often more favourable, it is important to recognize that many of these children may have been forced or coerced into their participation in the CJTF as well. Many may have been involved in or exposed to violence. While their esteem in the community and co-location may make for apparently easier reintegration, the fact that these children remain in the communities together with the leadership of their vigilante organizations can also make a full disengagement from the groups more difficult. Children associated with self-defence forces are often invisible and unlikely to get access to already scarce release and reintegration support, even though they too have been exposed to violence and may need assistance transitioning back to civilian life. Moreover, there are some concerns that the CJTF and similar self-defence forces, if not properly disengaged, will constitute a threat to human rights and long-term stability in the North East.<sup>223</sup>

Children in Boko Haram and self-defence groups play many roles and are likely to have been exposed to violence, abuse, and hardship. Many children exiting Boko Haram may also suffer from hardship and trauma during the course of their military detention. No child should return to his or her community without support services – but, sadly, a very small fraction of children who exit these groups have received psychosocial support or other essential programmes. At the same time, the communities to which they return also require sensitization programmes, which have been sparsely implemented at best. Beyond the immediate need for these programmes to make reintegration possible, they are critical in order to ensure that children who do return to their communities are not re-recruited. They can also serve to show children who have not yet exited armed groups that returning home is possible, as is a civilian life. Finally, certain subpopulations – particularly girls who were sexually abused and/or bore children while in captivity – are likely to have unique needs (e.g., chronic health issues, potential stigma, and intense discrimination from their communities) that require attention.

---

<sup>223</sup> Matfess, "Nigeria Wakes Up."

As evidenced by this chapter, communities affected by the conflict are afraid, and want assurances that those returning, particularly from Boko Haram, are no longer a threat. Many civilians thus wish to see Boko Haram returnees go through “rehabilitation,” which they view as an assurance metric that the returnees are no longer dangerous. Relatedly, there are some local “deradicalization” programmes, but the necessity (and efficacy) of deradicalization is questionable, given that many children were unwilling members of Boko Haram and show no ideological commitments to the group. Nevertheless, these programmes may help to provide the community with an assurance that returnees are not dangerous. It is worth considering the potential for other types of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes to play this role as well, enhancing the willingness of communities to accept returnees.

In short, the conflict in Nigeria makes plain that children in the region are beset on all sides, stuck between a number of bad choices. The reasons why they become associated with armed groups are varied, but grounded in the conflict ravaging North East Nigeria and the structural conditions it exacerbates. The factors that explain children’s initial association with armed groups may not be the same as those that explain why they stay. Numerous obstacles exist for children who want to avoid association, or want to exit NSAGs. Given the dynamics of the conflict, even those who exit one armed group may not be able to maintain their neutrality.





**SOUTH SUDAN**

Children at play at the Yida settlement, home to 70,000 refugees who fled violence in the Nuban Mountains of South Kordofan.

— March 2013

UN Photo/Martine Perret





# **Navigating Challenges in Child Protection and the Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Groups**

By Mark Drumbi and Gabor Rona

# 1 Introduction

Children have long been ensnared by armed forces and armed groups. Certain non-state armed groups (NSAGs), such as Sierra Leone's Revolutionary Armed Front (RUF), Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), became notorious for abduction and recruitment of children.<sup>1</sup> Over the past two decades, the cause of children within armed groups has prompted a significant humanitarian push. One core element of this push has been to paint these children primarily as victims. While critics have chided this stance for neglecting the agency of many children, and for failing to do justice to those who have been victimized by the acts of these children, this approach also permitted the development of a robust array of humanitarian protections for unlawfully recruited children.

In recent years, however, a variety of international actors, notably states, have begun to see children associated with armed groups less as victims than as threats. A number of factors propelled this shift. One is the political labelling of non-state armed groups as "terrorist", "violent extremist", or "jihadist". A recent example is Security Council Resolution 2178 on Foreign Terrorist Fighters, and its follow-up, Resolution 2396.<sup>2</sup> Children associated with such armed groups increasingly are identified as dangers. This treatment, in turn, encourages the rigidity of national security discourse and a move towards counter-terrorist framing. It is also in tension with special protections accorded children under international law, including international humanitarian law (the law of armed conflict) and international human rights law.

Terrorism poses a grave concern that features significantly in contemporary conflict. A variety of United Nations instruments and Security Council Resolutions mandate the criminalization of terrorist groups and terrorist acts, and address recruitment into armed groups. A number of United Nations treaties and strategies have emerged on the theme of counter-terrorism, including the United Nations General Assembly's Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006), which provides an overarching political framework for how to confront the terrorist threat.<sup>3</sup> While that strategy strongly emphasizes the importance of respecting and promoting human rights both in countering terrorism and in addressing the underlying conditions that give rise to it in the first place, in practice, security priorities tend to overwhelm human rights requirements in contexts politicized as "terroristic".<sup>4</sup>

To date, although children have been referenced in passing in a number of resolutions of the Security Council on the topic of counter-terrorism, and on occasion by national authorities, the special status of children is operationally underappreciated. Accordingly, an acute need emerges for clarity regarding the required content of legal protections for children associated with NSAGs, including those listed as terrorist or labelled "violent extremist" or "jihadist", in contemporary conflicts. Greater focus is needed to address how humanitarians can effectively access this increasingly securitized environment to approach, advocate, and assist children associated with and impacted by conflict.

<sup>1</sup> This is not to discount the fact that national armed forces also recruit children. State recruitment remains a focus of advocacy and lobbying efforts by many actors, including UNICEF. For example, see *Agence France Presse*, "Myanmar Releases Nearly 70 More Child Soldiers: UNICEF," 23 June 2017. Available from [www.yahoo.com/news/myanmar-releases-nearly-70-more-child-soldiers-unicef-073511739.html](http://www.yahoo.com/news/myanmar-releases-nearly-70-more-child-soldiers-unicef-073511739.html).

<sup>2</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1278, 24 September 2014, S/RES/2178 (2014). Available from [www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/SCR%202178\\_2014\\_EN.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/SCR%202178_2014_EN.pdf). UN Security Council Resolution 2396, 21 December 2017, S/RES/2396 (2017). Available from [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2396\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2396(2017)).

<sup>3</sup> The European Union also has adopted a comprehensive counter-terrorism framework.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), "Children and Counter-Terrorism" (2016), p. 77. "Research ... shows a striking dissonance in the approach taken to children engaged in terrorist related activity and the approach taken to child combatants in armed conflict. Child combatants are largely treated as victims, are not subject to prosecution under international law and are recognized as needing rehabilitation and reintegration services. Children who are involved or engaged in terrorism related activity are subject to prosecution and to lengthy custodial sentences. Yet, in some cases, the line between child combatant and child terrorist is a very thin line." See also *ibid.* at p. 66. "The UN does not appear to have engaged in the same level of activity with respect to counter- and re-radicalisation programmes and the question of how they can be most appropriately designed to address the vulnerabilities of children." Victim imagery "inures much more robustly to the benefit of children implicated in ... crimes against interests or populations *outside* the centers of global politics than those who target interests or populations *within* those centers." Instead of being seen as a "captive of purposeless violence", the child terrorist targeting Western interests or security "tends to be cast as an intentional author of purposeful violence." Mark A. Drumbl, *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 129.

In August 2017, the United Nations University (UNU) hosted a workshop to address some of the particular challenges encountered by humanitarians working to protect children in contexts related to armed conflict. These challenges, which are many in number, include

- Detention of children suspected of association with an armed group;
- Criminal prosecution of children for their alleged conduct;
- The ability to penalize membership in a group;
- What to do with information obtained from and about captured children;
- Requirements of due process;
- Clarification of states' obligations when militarized children cross borders;
- And how to best reintegrate children into civilian life.

An acute need emerges for clarity regarding the required content of legal protections for children associated with NSAGs, including those listed as terrorist or labelled “violent extremist” or “jihadist”.

The workshop began with questions about the content of the law. Specifically, do grey areas and ambiguities exist within it? The workshop discussions established that the law is actually neither all that grey nor all that ambiguous. Child rights number among the core international human rights, and these rights are of general applicability. The workshop, rather, provided a space to explore why, in practice, gaps arise in the application and enforcement of existing law. Political pressures and national security fears among powerful states were cited as possible explanations. Another factor was the prevalence of social media today, and technological change in general. One participant wondered what the perception of Sierra Leone's RUF, which operated from 1991 to 2002, would have been had the armed group been on Twitter, or had images of its crimes been circulated globally with the click of a mouse. While several transnational armed groups have attacked citizens far from their base of operations in recent years, social media may create perceptions that more localized groups present pervasive and omnipresent threats, inclining distant publics to embrace security-oriented solutions. NSAGs have an unprecedented social media reach. Combined with expanded physical reach – facilitated by transporta-

tion and communications advances – information about the activities of armed groups like Islamic State reaches into homes and lives in a much more immediate fashion than RUF brutalities did.

Another pressure is the increasing demand for criminal accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations, including terrorist acts. One of the key aspects of counter-terrorism initiatives is accountability,<sup>5</sup> namely, the allocation of responsibility, in particular criminal responsibility, to individuals alleged to have engaged in terrorist activity. When children are detained by state actors in counter-terrorism campaigns and criminally pursued for participation in terrorist acts, there are signs that not all states respect the special protections that international law accords children as criminal defendants.

In addition, although recognizing that international law itself is not too ambiguous, participants in the workshop emphasized a need for international lawyers to affirm it with greater clarity and concision for the purposes of informing advocacy efforts, including those undertaken by non-lawyers. This is one of the major goals of this chapter. Another is to underscore the centrality of the international legal obligation to consider the “best interests of the child.” In the opinion of workshop participants, the pillar of “best interests” offers considerable potential in protecting the rights of children associated with NSAGs, in navigating operational deficiencies, and in the balancing of these rights with national security goals. Reference to “best interests of the child” nonetheless remains understated in much of the practice surrounding the place of children in counter-terrorism initiatives. This norm, however,

<sup>5</sup> For example, UN Security Council Resolution 1624 states, “Recalling that all States must cooperate fully in the fight against terrorism, in accordance with their obligations under international law, in order to find, deny safe haven and bring to justice, on the basis of the principle of extradite or prosecute, any person who supports, facilitates, participates or attempts to participate in the financing, planning, preparation or commission of terrorist acts or provides safe havens, 1. Calls upon all States to adopt such measures as may be necessary and appropriate and in accordance with their obligations under international law to: (a) Prohibit by law incitement to commit a terrorist act or acts; (b) Prevent such conduct; (c) Deny safe haven to any persons with respect to whom there is credible and relevant information giving serious reasons for considering that they have been guilty of such conduct; 2. Calls upon all States to cooperate, inter alia, to strengthen the security of their international borders, including by combating fraudulent travel documents and, to the extent attainable, by enhancing terrorist screening and passenger security procedures with a view to preventing those guilty of the conduct in paragraph 1 (a) from entering their territory.” United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1624 (2005), S/RES/1624.

is both procedural and substantive, in that the “best interests of the child” are to be a primary consideration when it comes to all actions concerning children. In practice, it appears that the best interests of the child norm often cedes to security concerns. Yet settled law – *lex lata* – suggests that this principle should be treated more comprehensively. Our view is that when the best interests principle is manipulated or treated without the seriousness it presents, national decision makers are straying from their settled legal obligations.

Section 2 of this paper details the scope of application and content of the international legal frameworks relevant to children in armed conflict. Section 3 introduces specific examples of on-the-ground tensions between legal protections and punitive treatment of children in armed conflict situations. Section 4 addresses application of the “best interests of the child” principle to armed conflict and counter-terrorism. Section 5 identifies additional operational and advocacy issues that sprang up in workshop discussions, and which could benefit from future elaboration. Section 6 concludes.

**TABLE 1 — DEFINITIONS**

CHILD	“Every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” <sup>6</sup>
CHILD ASSOCIATED WITH AN ARMED FORCE OR ARMED GROUP	“Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to ... fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.” <sup>7</sup>
JUVENILE	There is no internationally recognized definition of this term, <sup>8</sup> as it refers to those children who are under the age of 18, but above the minimum age of criminal responsibility, <sup>9</sup> which varies from state to state.
ADOLESCENT	There is no legally agreed-upon definition of this term, which often refers to individuals in the physical and emotional transition from childhood to adulthood, and does not easily translate to a fixed age range. <sup>10</sup>
YOUTH	This term lacks an internationally agreed-upon legal definition, but the United Nations Security Council recently defined youth as persons aged 18 through 29. <sup>11</sup>
INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW (IHL)	The law of armed conflict, also known as the law of war.
INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICT (IAC)	War between states.
NON-INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICT (NIAC)	War between a state and non-state parties or between two or more non-state parties.
COMBATANT	A member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict, except medical and religious personnel. Combatant status, meaning the legal privilege of engaging in hostilities, only exists for members of a state’s armed forces, but the term “combatant” is also used in a non-technical, generic sense, to refer to fighters and members of armed groups.
NON-COMBATANT	Anyone who is not a combatant.
VIOLATION OF IHL	Any breach of an IHL obligation, which may or may not be classified as a war crime.
WAR CRIME	Any criminalized violation of IHL.

<sup>6</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 1. Available from [www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups, February 2007, Article 2.1. Available from [www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> The Beijing Rules, for example, state that for juvenile offenders, “age limits will depend on, and are explicitly made dependent on, each respective legal system ... This makes for a wide variety of ages coming under the definition of ‘juvenile’, ranging from 7 years to 18 years or above. Such a variety seems inevitable in view of the different national legal systems.” United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (“The Beijing Rules”), adopted by General Assembly resolution 40/33, 29 November 1985.

<sup>9</sup> The term is used primarily in states that designate a minimum age of criminal responsibility that is below 18. While many states use the term “juvenile offender”, others have abandoned that term, as have advocacy groups, in favour of “children in conflict with the law”. Global Center on Cooperative Security and International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, “Correcting the Course: Advancing Juvenile Justice Principles for Children Convicted of Violent Extremism Offenses”, September 2017, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> World Health Organization (WHO), “Adolescent Development”, accessed on 5 January 2018. Available from [www.who.int/maternal\\_child\\_adolescent/topics/adolescence/development/en](http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/adolescence/development/en).

<sup>11</sup> The Resolution recognizes that definitions of the term vary both internationally, including the range used by General Assembly Resolutions A/RES/50/81 and A/RES/56/117 (15 to 24 years old), and between states. UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015).



TABLE 1 — DEFINITIONS

GRAVE BREACHES OF THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS	Particularly serious war crimes enumerated in the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I and only applicable in IAC. <sup>12</sup> Unlike “mere” war crimes, grave breaches are subject to universal jurisdiction and obligate the state to search for violators and either prosecute or extradite for prosecution, regardless of where the war crimes were committed.
PRISONER OF WAR (POW)	A member of armed forces and a few other categories of persons deprived of liberty in IAC. <sup>13</sup> Civilians deprived of liberty in IAC are not POWs. <sup>14</sup> There are no POWs in NIAC. However, the term POW is often used non-technically to refer to any person deprived of liberty in an armed conflict.
MERCENARY	An individual fighting in war, primarily for financial gain, and not a national of any of the parties to the IAC or NIAC. <sup>15</sup> This excludes the “foreign fighters” <sup>16</sup> whose primary motivations are not financial. Mercenarism is not prohibited under the Geneva Conventions, <sup>17</sup> but mercenaries are not entitled to combatant immunity or POW status. <sup>18</sup>
TERRORISM	Terrorism is best understood as criminal acts committed against civilians. Numerous international legal instruments address specific types of terrorism (e.g., skyjacking <sup>19</sup> ) and call on states to prevent and punish them. There is, however, no single definition of terrorism in international law. <sup>20</sup>

## 2 The International Legal Framework

### A. SCOPE OF APPLICATION OF THE THREE MAIN INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

Three international legal frameworks play a major role in conflict situations: international criminal law (ICL), international human rights law (IHRL), and international humanitarian law (IHL).<sup>21</sup> This section will not focus on the content of these legal rubrics applicable to children in armed conflict, but rather on their scope of application – the preliminary matter of determining when, where, and how each framework applies.

#### INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW

ICL covers crimes against humanity (CaH), genocide, and war crimes. While war crimes exist only in armed conflict, CaH and genocide can occur within or without armed conflict. The front line of enforcement is each state’s own domestic legal system, but states are often – especially in contexts of armed conflict – unwilling or unable to enforce criminal law. This is when and why international tribunals such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), whose jurisdiction complements that of states, come into play.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Geneva Convention (II) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in the Armed Forces in the Field, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3114, 75 UNTS 31, Arts. 49, 50; Geneva Convention (III) for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of the Armed Forces at Sea, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3217, 7 UNTS 85, Arts. 50, 51; Geneva Convention (IV) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3116, 75 UNTS 135, Arts. 129, 130; Geneva Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3516, 75 UNTS 287, Arts. 146, 147; Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 16 ILM 1391 (1977), Art. 85.

<sup>13</sup> Geneva Convention III, Art. 4.

<sup>14</sup> In IAC, Geneva Convention III establishes the status and rights of POWs, while Geneva Convention IV establishes the status and rights of civilians, including those deprived of liberty. See Geneva Conventions III and IV.

<sup>15</sup> Mercenarism is defined in Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions. See Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, Art. 47.

<sup>16</sup> See UN Security Council Resolution 1278, S/RES/1278 (2014). Available from [www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/SCR%201278\\_2014\\_EN.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/2015/SCR%201278_2014_EN.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Mercenarism is prohibited under two international treaties, but very few states are party to these treaties. UN General Assembly, International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, 4 December 1989, A/RES/44/34. Available from [www.refworld.org/docid/3b00eff31f.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00eff31f.html). Organization of African Unity (OAU), OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa, 3 July 1977, CM/817 (XXIX) Annex II Rev. 1. Available from [www.refworld.org/docid/514ae5c82.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/514ae5c82.html).

<sup>18</sup> Unlike “lawful” combatants, mercenaries may be prosecuted under domestic law merely for their participation in hostilities. See United Nations General Assembly, International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, 4 December 1989, A/RES/44/34, and Organization of African Unity (OAU), OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa, 3 July 1977, CM/817 (XXIX) Annex II Rev. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft, No 12325, 1970. Available from <https://treaties.un.org/doc/db/Terrorism/Conv2-english.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism has laid out a model definition of terrorism, which “means an action or attempted action where: 1. The action: (a) Constituted the intentional taking of hostages; or (b) Is intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to one or more members of the general population or segments of it; or (c) Involved lethal or serious physical violence against one or more members of the general population or segments of it; and 2. The action is done or attempted with the intention of: (a) Provoking a state of terror in the general public or a segment of it; or (b) Compelling a Government or international organization to do or abstain from doing something; and (3) The action corresponds to: (a) The definition of a serious offence in national law, enacted for the purpose of complying with international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism or with resolutions of the Security Council relating to terrorism; or (b) All elements of a serious crime defined by national law.” Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism, Martin Scheinin: Ten Areas of Best Practices in Countering Terrorism, 22 December 2010, A/HRC/16/51, pp. 14–15.

<sup>21</sup> Law of War (LoW) and Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) are synonyms for IHL.

<sup>22</sup> Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 17 July 1998, 2187 U.N.T.S. 90, entered into force 1 July 2002, art. 17.

## INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

IHRL and IHL are discussed together, since their relationship in situations of armed conflict is complementary and complex.

IHRL, which covers civil and political as well as social, economic, and cultural rights, is said to apply at all times<sup>23</sup> (although that notion is contested, as noted below). IHL, on the other hand, applies only in and to the more limited set of circumstances that amount to armed conflict and regulates a narrower set of concerns: (1) conduct of hostilities and (2) protection of persons in the power of the enemy. Several issues are addressed in both IHRL and IHL – for example, deprivation of liberty, humane treatment, and judicial guarantees. The scope of application and the relationship between these two frameworks of international law inspire a world of controversy and confusion among many. There are four major sources of controversy about the scope of IHRL application:

- Extraterritoriality (whether and how IHRL applies to a state’s conduct outside its own territory);
- Armed conflict (whether and how IHRL applies to situations also subject to IHL);
- Non-state actors (do IHRL obligations apply to them or only to the conduct of states?); and
- Derogation (what powers do states have to derogate from or limit their IHRL obligations in alleged conditions of national emergency?).

### I EXTRATERRITORIALITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

The extraterritoriality of IHRL is debated. States have different interpretations of the scope of HRL and where it is applicable outside their territories. The United States, for example, has long denied that it has IHRL treaty obligations when it operates beyond its own borders.<sup>24</sup> European states, on the other hand, recognize that they have extraterritorial IHRL obligations where they exercise “effective control,” but it is not clear to what extent, based on control of either territory or persons. To understand arguments about these different perspectives, it’s necessary to acknowledge that a state’s international legal obligations are determined largely by treaties, and that the scope of application language of the European Convention on Human Rights differs from that of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the United States is a party.<sup>25</sup>

### APPLICATION OF IHRL IN ARMED CONFLICT, INTERNATIONAL VS. NON-INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICT, AND THE ROLE OF CUSTOMARY INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

**IHRL AND IHL** – Most of the world acknowledges that while IHL is the primary source of law in armed conflict, IHRL continues to apply where it does not conflict with applicable IHL, subject, of course, to additional considerations about IHRL’s territorial scope of application. This is often referred to as the notion of *lex specialis* and establishes a hierarchical, complementary relationship between the two legal frameworks. The United States, however, has stood more or less alone in denying that IHRL applies in and to situations to which IHL applies, namely, armed conflict.<sup>26</sup>

**IAC AND NIAC** – To understand how complementarity applies, it’s particularly important to acknowledge differences in typology and history between the two varieties of armed conflict: international armed conflict (IAC) and non-international armed conflict (NIAC). As noted in the definitions presented at the start of this chapter, IAC is war between states and NIAC is war between a state and non-state parties or between two or more non-state parties. Note that these designations do not address the question of whether the conflict crosses international borders. IAC can occur solely on the territory of one state – for example, State A attacks State B, and there are no hostilities elsewhere. On the other hand, NIAC can be transnational, for example, where State A engages in armed conflict against a NSAG on the territory of, and with the consent of, State B. IAC rules are extensive, reflecting a long-standing willingness of states to subject their

<sup>23</sup> *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, Advisory Opinion*, ICJ GL No 95, [1996] ICJ Rep 226.

<sup>24</sup> For example, see Beth Van Schaack, “United States Report to the UN Human Rights Committee: *Lex Specialis* and Extraterritoriality,” 16 October 2013. Available from [www.justsecurity.org/1761/united-states-lex-specialis-extraterritoriality](http://www.justsecurity.org/1761/united-states-lex-specialis-extraterritoriality).

<sup>25</sup> ECHR, Art. 1: “The High Contracting Parties shall secure to everyone within their jurisdiction the rights and freedoms defined in Section I of this Convention.” ICCPR, Art. 2.1: “Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant.” The ICCPR provision appears to be more restrictive, but international legal authorities have construed the ICCPR provision to also apply extraterritorially.

<sup>26</sup> Gabor Rona, “Is There a Way Out of the Non-International Armed Conflict Detention Dilemma?” *International Law Studies*, Vol. 91 (February 2015), p. 48.

interstate relations, even war, to international regulation through treaties, such as the Geneva Conventions,<sup>27</sup> first promulgated in the mid-19th century. NIAC treaty rules, on the other hand, are few and far between, and of more recent vintage. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions,<sup>28</sup> which sets forth fundamental protections for persons not (or no longer) participating in hostilities in NIAC, first appeared in the 1949 version of the document. The relatively smaller array of treaty rules applicable to NIAC reflects states' long-standing objection to international regulation of their internal affairs<sup>29</sup> – consistent with states' notions of their sovereign authority.

Thus, the role of IHRL in armed conflict may be assessed through the lens of the *lex specialis* doctrine: Essentially, since law abhors a vacuum, the more specific legal framework in any given circumstance – in this case, armed conflict – governs the more general one to fill gaps that the general one does not regulate. Because the IHL of NIAC is less extensive than that of IAC, it becomes obvious that IHRL has a greater role in NIAC than IAC. Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the intent of states to recognize a greater role for IHRL in NIAC than in IAC is the fact that the preamble to the 2d Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, which covers NIAC exclusively, notes the continued relevance of human rights law.<sup>30</sup>

**CUSTOMARY INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW** – That said, the significance of the difference in treaty coverage of IAC and NIAC is diminished by the fact that treaties are not the only source of international law. “Custom” is another source of international law reflected in state practice (what states do) and *opinio juris* (their acknowledgment that they act out of a sense of legal obligation, rather than, say, policy preference). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has published a study of customary IHL, which asserts that many IHL rules applicable to IAC apply also to NIAC.<sup>31</sup> The addition of customary IHL rules to the list of treaty-based rules further narrows the residual role of IHRL in armed conflict.

**IS THERE AN ARMED CONFLICT?** Since IHL applies only in and to armed conflict, it is necessary to know what factors determine the existence of armed conflict. Once more, we draw distinctions between IAC and NIAC. An international armed conflict is said to exist whenever State A uses armed force against State B. This is a rather low and clear threshold.

The existence of NIAC is more complex, but essentially requires the identification of two or more opposing organized armed actors (at least one of which must be a non-state group), and a frequency or severity of hostilities that exceeds that of occasional riots or sporadic acts of violence that remain subject to domestic law enforcement.<sup>32</sup> In attempts to assert international human rights law provisions applicable to children and families, practitioners will need to be able to determine whether armed conflict exists and to what circumstances IHL thus applies, as well as when it ends and IHL ceases to apply. For IAC, the criteria are clear, but for NIAC they are less so (e.g., armed groups have a minimum degree of organization and the armed confrontations must reach a minimum level of intensity). The question of who makes the designation that a NIAC is occurring is tricky. The ICRC maintains a list of all situations it qualifies as either IAC or NIAC, but does not readily publicize this information. A state's assertion that an armed conflict does or does not exist is not dispositive. Rather, facts on the ground are critical to this determination. (For IAC, is there use of armed force between states? For NIAC, are there two or more organized armed actors and either frequent or severe hostilities?)

<sup>27</sup> Geneva Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in the Armed Forces in the Field, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3114, 75 UNTS 31, Arts. 49, 50; Geneva Convention (II) for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of the Armed Forces at Sea, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3217, 7 UNTS 85, Arts. 50, 51; Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3116, 75 UNTS 135, Arts. 129, 130; Geneva Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3516, 75 UNTS 287, Arts. 146, 147; Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 16 ILM 1391 (1977), Art. 85.

<sup>28</sup> Common Article 3 is so-called because it appears in each of the four Geneva Conventions. It provides: “In the case of armed conflict not of an international character occurring in the territory of one of the High Contracting Parties, each Party to the conflict shall be bound to apply, as a minimum, the following provisions: (1) Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed ‘hors de combat’ by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria. To this end, the following acts are and shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever with respect to the above-mentioned persons: (a) violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture; (b) taking of hostages; (c) outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment; (d) the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples. (2) The wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for. An impartial humanitarian body, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, may offer its services to the Parties to the conflict. The Parties to the conflict should further endeavour to bring into force, by means of special agreements, all or part of the other provisions of the present Convention. The application of the preceding provisions shall not affect the legal status of the Parties to the conflict.”

<sup>29</sup> States are also occasionally reluctant to recognize a state of armed conflict, not because they are reluctant to apply IHL rules, but rather because they fear that doing so would lend some legitimacy to NSAGs.

<sup>30</sup> Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), 16 ILM 1442 (1977). “Recalling furthermore that international instruments relating to human rights offer a basic protection to the human person...”

<sup>31</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, Volume I: Rules, 2005. Available from [www.refworld.org/docid/5305e3de4.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/5305e3de4.html).

<sup>32</sup> For definition and criteria establishing IAC, see ICTY, *The Prosecutor v. Dusko Tadic*, Decision on the Defence Motion for Interlocutory Appeal on Jurisdiction, IT-94-1-A, 2 October 1995, para. 70. For definition and criteria establishing NIAC, see ICTY, *The Prosecutor v. Dusko Tadic*, Judgment, IT-94-1-T, 7 May 1997, paras. 561–568.

### I NON-STATE ACTORS

As concerns the application of IHRL to non-state actors, the traditional view is that since only states are parties to IHRL treaties, only states have IHRL obligations. A more recent perspective, paralleling the rising influence of non-state actors, including armed groups and corporations, holds to the contrary.<sup>33</sup> What is beyond doubt, however, is that states are obliged not only to respect, but also to protect and fulfil, IHRL. This means they must take measures, including the passage of domestic legislation, to prevent violations, hold violators accountable, and provide remedy to victims of violations committed by all persons and entities within their jurisdiction, whether state actors or non-state actors, whether in peacetime or in armed conflict. Note that this controversy does not apply to IHL, since IHL addresses “parties to armed conflict”, which includes states, non-state armed groups, and individuals.

### I DEROGATION

Another factor that limits the application of human rights law in armed conflict is the possibility of derogation. Human rights law treaties have provisions enabling states to suspend their obligations to respect certain enumerated rights, in cases of national emergency. This derogation power is extremely limited, but states often assert a power to withhold human rights protections in armed conflict situations, regardless of whether the situation meets the strict requirements for derogation established in the relevant human rights treaty.

## B. CONTENT OF INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW AND INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW APPLICABLE TO CHILDREN

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is among the most widely ratified human rights instruments. It is a human rights law instrument, not a humanitarian law instrument. At present, 196 states are parties to the CRC and, as such, are required to uphold its provisions. The only state that is not a party is the United States – it has signed, but not ratified, the Convention.<sup>34</sup> Under international treaty law, a state that has signed but not ratified a treaty is under an obligation to refrain from acts that would defeat the object and purpose of the treaty until that state makes clear its intention not to become a party to that treaty.<sup>35</sup> The CRC provides a set of non-derogable rights for children, defined as persons under the age of 18.<sup>36</sup>

While there should be no doubt that the CRC applies in armed conflict,<sup>37</sup> some states deny the application of human rights law where IHL applies, and some deny the application of human rights law to their extraterritorial operations. Thus, states may deny the application of the CRC in armed conflict, or abroad, or both, especially in situations where applicable IHL rules address matters differently than does the CRC.<sup>38</sup> CRC Article 3(1) provides that “in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” While this principle ought to apply in the case of any counter-terrorism initiative, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) has found that these best interests “do not appear to be implemented in relation to children engaged in terrorist related activity, nor in relation to measures imposed on their family members.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Clapham, “Human Rights Obligations of Non-State Actors in Conflict Situations”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 88, No. 863 (September 2006).

<sup>34</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Convention on the Rights of the Child, Status of Ratification Interactive Dashboard. Available from <http://indicators.ohchr.org>. The “best interests of the child” principle pervades domestic U.S. family law, though it remains underachieved in U.S. immigration law and criminal law and procedure. On immigration law, see Bridgette A. Carr, “Incorporating a ‘Best Interests of the Child’ Approach into Immigration Law and Procedure”, University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository, 2009. Available from <http://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1532&context=articles>. That said, “notwithstanding the fact that the United States remains the only country in the world not to have ratified the CRC, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service’s Asylum Officer training manual expressly acknowledges the link between the CRC and the ‘being persecuted’ standard, providing a list of the ‘fundamental rights of children listed in the CRC that may rise to the level of persecution if violated’.” Jason M. Pobjoy, “The Child in International Refugee Law,” chapter in Jason M. Pomjoy, ed., *The Child in International Refugee Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On criminal law cases involving detention at Guantánamo and prosecution of child soldiers by U.S. Military Commission, see Human Rights Watch, “The War on Teen Terror: The Bush Administration’s Treatment of Juvenile Prisoners Shipped to Guantánamo Bay Defies Logic as Well as International Law”, 24 June 2008. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2008/06/24/war-teen-terror](http://www.hrw.org/news/2008/06/24/war-teen-terror).

<sup>35</sup> Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, 1155 U.N.T.S. 331, 8 I.L.M. 679, entered into force 27 January 1980, article 18(a).

<sup>36</sup> CRC Article 1 (defining as a child “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier”).

<sup>37</sup> The CRC applies in emergency situations, including conflict, equally as in times of peace. See *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory* Overview of the Case, International Court of Justice, Advisory opinion, 2004 I.C.J. Rep. 136 para. 106 (9 July).

<sup>38</sup> On the interplay between CRC and rules of IHL in armed conflict, see David Weissbrodt, Joseph C. Hansen, and Nathaniel H. Nesbit, “The Role of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in Interpreting and Developing International Humanitarian Law”, *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 115 (2011).

<sup>39</sup> UNICRI, “Children and Counter-Terrorism”, p. 77.



The workshop opened two conceptual frames: (1) responsibility for the recruitment of children into armed forces or armed groups and (2) the responsibility of the children themselves for their conduct while associated with armed forces or armed groups.

### RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN

It is a war crime to conscript, enlist, or use children under the age of 15 to participate actively in hostilities in either armed forces or armed groups and regardless of whether or not the armed conflict is international or non-international in nature. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the Statute for the Special Court for Sierra Leone both identify this crime. In terms of culpability, the legal framework does not make distinctions according to the path by which the child entered the armed group. In other words, when it comes to the culpability of the adult recruiter, “voluntary” enlistment and compelled abduction into an armed group are treated identically. The “consent” of the minor is no defence for the adult who is accused. It has been argued that the path to membership in the armed group matters for the purpose of post-conflict reintegrative programming, but this is a question separate from individual penal responsibility for the initial recruitment.<sup>40</sup> Adult recruiters have been prosecuted and convicted for this crime at the Special Court for Sierra Leone.<sup>41</sup> The very first case judged by the International Criminal Court, involving Congolese militia leader Thomas Lubanga, led to the imposition of a 14-year sentence for this war crime.<sup>42</sup>

It is a war crime to conscript, enlist, or use children under the age of 15 to participate actively in hostilities in either armed forces or armed groups.

It should be noted that important international treaties set the age of lawful recruitment as higher than 15. That said, there is a difference between, on the one hand, establishing individual penal responsibility for unlawful recruitment, and, on the other, merely declaring recruitment to be prohibited, with no assignation of penal responsibility though permitting determinations of state responsibility. And, for the moment, the international war crime of illegal recruitment as a customary crime remains at the age of 15. Instead, perhaps, the responsibility for criminalization may fall to national courts and jurisdictions to punish recruiters of children older than 15 as an ordinary national crime. For example, the Optional Protocol to the CRC on Armed Conflict, which has been ratified by 167 states, sets 18 as the minimum age for lawful recruitment into non-state armed groups and requires states to criminalize such recruitment.<sup>43</sup> The Optional Protocol does not mandate the same for armed forces (i.e., official state armies). In the latter case, persons under the age of 18 may enrol into armed forces so long as certain consent

criteria are maintained (e.g., children under 18 are prohibited from taking direct part in hostilities) and so long as the state in question files a declaration to that effect. While a clear majority of states have set 18 as the minimum age of lawful recruitment into armed forces, many states stipulate lower ages (16 or 17), including the United States, Canada, India, France, Germany, China, and the United Kingdom. Overall, a concrete declaratory push has arisen to establish 18 as the minimum age of recruitment.

International criminal law also establishes individual penal responsibility for other conduct that may disproportionately affect children associated with armed groups. Sexual violence, sexual slavery, rape, and forced marriage are examples. The latter crime was prosecuted by the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Forced marriage also remains a widespread practice in the case of Islamic State, including as a method of recruitment. Attacks against buildings dedicated to education and hospitals are specifically condemned by international criminal law;<sup>44</sup> moreover, all the general prohibitions inter alia against killings, persecution, and torture apply to all persons, including, obviously, children.

<sup>40</sup> Children enter militarized groups through one of three paths: abduction/conscription (including through brutal means), enlistment, and birth. Enlistment means that children come forward, whether on their own initiative or through coercion, and are then enrolled by commanders into the group. Enlistment therefore can blur with forced conscription but in other instances may reflect the exercise of some agency. The situation varies considerably depending on the specific armed group in question, but overall enlistment is likely the most common path to recruitment into armed forces. See Drumbl, *Reimagining Child Soldiers*, pp. 14–16, 61–101. While the path to recruitment should not bear upon the criminal liability of the adult recruiter, the path to recruitment may matter for the kind of post-conflict programming that can best serve reintegrative purposes for the child.

<sup>41</sup> The Special Court for Sierra Leone was the first international tribunal to try and convict persons for the use of child soldiers (AFRC trial) and also issued convictions in the RUF and Charles Taylor trials.

<sup>42</sup> “Public Redacted Judgment on the Appeal of Mr Thomas Lubanga Dyilo against His Conviction”, International Criminal Court, The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, Appeal Judgment, 1 December 2014. Available from [www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/record.aspx?docNo=ICC-01/04-01/06-3121-Red](http://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/record.aspx?docNo=ICC-01/04-01/06-3121-Red). The Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court developed a comprehensive policy on children in 2016. See ICC, The Office to the Prosecutor, “Policy on Children”, November 2016. Available from [www.icc-cpi.int/iccdocs/otp/20161115\\_OTP\\_ICC\\_Policy-on-Children\\_Eng.PDF](http://www.icc-cpi.int/iccdocs/otp/20161115_OTP_ICC_Policy-on-Children_Eng.PDF).

<sup>43</sup> 167 states have ratified the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. See OHCHR, “Status of Ratification Interactive Dashboard”. Available from <http://indicators.ohchr.org>.

<sup>44</sup> Rome Statute, Articles 8(2)(b)(ix), 8(2)(e)(iv).



#### MOGADISHU, SOMALIA

A child formerly associated with Al-Shabaab is handed over to UNICEF after being captured by AMISOM forces.

UN Photo/Tobin Jones

It is crucial to underscore that the Convention on the Rights of the Child applies on its face in the context of “terrorist” crimes as much as it does to any other sort of crime.

### THE PENAL RESPONSIBILITY OF CHILDREN

The CRC does not preclude all children from being criminally prosecuted. It is not abolitionist in this sense. The CRC precludes the death penalty for children, as well as life imprisonment without the chance of release (Article 37).<sup>45</sup> The CRC requires each state to set a minimum age of criminal responsibility below which a child cannot be found to have the capacity to engage in criminal conduct. State practice varies widely: The age in national jurisdictions ranges from 7 in some states to 18 in others. The “average” minimum age of criminal responsibility among states is 13. The CRC Committee has recommended that this age not be less than 12 years.<sup>46</sup> The term “juvenile,” then, attaches to the cohort of children above the minimum age of criminal responsibility and below the age of 18 in countries (the vast majority) that designate a minimum age of criminal responsibility below 18.<sup>47</sup> Another group that has received limited attention is that of “post-adolescents” or youth (the 18- to 24-year-old band).

For juveniles who come into conflict with the law, the CRC states that judicial proceedings should only be undertaken as a last resort.<sup>48</sup> States are to establish a juvenile justice system. CRC Article 40 sets out due process protections. These map generally onto the minimum requirements provided by Articles 9 and 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and are buttressed by a variety of “soft law” instruments and also the work of the CRC Committee in General Comment No. 10 (from 2007).<sup>49</sup> In all instances, children who come into conflict with the penal law are to be treated in a manner consistent with their sense of dignity and worth, with a focus on reintegration and rehabilitation, including in sentencing. It is a general principle of law in national legal systems that youth serves as a mitigating factor in sentencing, and youth has figured as such in the jurisprudence of the international criminal tribunals as well. In addition, Article 40(1) of the CRC stipulates: “States Parties recognize the right of every child alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the penal law to be treated in a manner consistent with the child’s sense of dignity and worth which reinforces the child’s respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of others and which takes into account the child’s age and the desirability of promoting the child’s reintegration and the child assuming a constructive role in society.”

CRC Article 39 provides: “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.”<sup>50</sup>

It is crucial to underscore that the CRC applies on its face in the context of “terrorist” crimes as much as it does to any other sort of crime. Hence these provisions *prima facie* would apply to crimes contemplated in counter-terrorism initiatives. UNICRI, however, has found that “while some juvenile justice provisions are applied to terrorism charges, children charged with terrorist offenses do not, in the whole, benefit from the full protection that juvenile justice has to offer.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> The CRC Committee has recognized corporal punishment as cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment.

<sup>46</sup> CRC General Comment No. 10 (2007).

<sup>47</sup> While many states use the term “juvenile offender,” others have abandoned it, as have advocacy groups, in favour of “children in conflict with the law.” Global Center on Cooperative Security and International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, “Correcting the Course,” p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> CRC Art. 40(3)(b).

<sup>49</sup> See also United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (Beijing Rules, a non-binding document); United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (Havana Rules, a non-binding document); United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (Riyadh Guidelines, a non-binding document); Guidelines for Action on Children in the Criminal Justice System (Vienna Guidelines, a non-binding document).

<sup>50</sup> See also CRC 38(4). “In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.

<sup>51</sup> UNICRI, “Children and Counter-Terrorism,” p. 77.

The “best interests of the child” is to remain a primary consideration in criminal cases. This means the child should be tried in a juvenile justice institution, the child’s privacy is to be respected, the child should be able to participate effectively in the proceedings, and sentences should be rehabilitative rather than punitive. Deprivation of liberty is only to be used as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.<sup>52</sup> What is more, children must be kept separately from adults when deprived of liberty and have the right to maintain contact with their families, save in exceptional circumstances.<sup>53</sup> Insofar as the best interests of the child is a principle of general applicability, then, it would equally inform administrative detention practices.<sup>54</sup>

Formal law does not preclude children from being criminally prosecuted before international courts and tribunals in the case of allegations that they have committed international crimes (i.e., war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide).<sup>55</sup> As a matter of practice, however, international courts and tribunals do not prosecute children. The Special Court for Sierra Leone had jurisdiction over juveniles (older than 15), but its first chief prosecutor disclaimed any intent to prosecute a minor.<sup>56</sup> Article 26 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court sets the jurisdiction of the court as covering only persons aged 18 or older. This provision is jurisdictional in nature, not jurisprudential in content, and entered the ICC’s constitutive treaty (the Rome Statute) because negotiating delegates did not wish to squabble over what an appropriate minimum age of criminal responsibility actually would be.<sup>57</sup> What is more, it was felt that minors in any event would not be among the actors most primarily responsible for the commission of massive international crimes. That said, an advocacy push has arisen to preclude criminal responsibility of minors for international crimes before international institutions.<sup>58</sup> But that is not yet settled formal law.

TABLE 2 — FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF IHL

MILITARY NECESSITY	Limits attacks to those necessary to accomplish the legitimate military purpose to weaken the military capacity of an opposing party to the conflict.
DISTINCTION	Between combatants, <sup>59</sup> who, as members of armed groups/armed forces may be targeted, and civilians, who may not be targeted. The combatant/civilian distinction applies in NIAC as well as IAC. Combatants are targetable at all times, unless hors de combat (i.e., they don’t have to be engaging in hostilities or posing a threat to be targeted). Civilians, on the other hand, may not be targeted unless, and only while, they directly participate in hostilities. <sup>60</sup>
PROHIBITION OF INDISCRIMINATE ATTACKS	Attacks in which it cannot be determined that the victims will be civilians or combatants (e.g., cluster munitions and anti-personnel land mines).
PROPORTIONALITY	Death and harm to civilian property is not prohibited so long as it is not disproportionate to the anticipated military advantage gained by the attack.
PRECAUTIONS	In the conduct of military operations, constant care must be taken to spare the civilian population, civilians, and civilian objects. All feasible precautions must be taken to avoid, and in any event to minimize, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, and damage to civilian objects.
HUMANITY/PROHIBITION OF UNNECESSARY SUFFERING	Even if an attack is permitted, it is prohibited to use means and methods that cause suffering in excess of what is required to accomplish the permissible military goal of diminishing the enemy’s military capabilities (e.g., chemical and biological weapons)

TABLE NOTE

Much of the content of IHL deals with how war is conducted, particularly the targeting of adversaries in conflict. While somewhat beyond the scope of this particular volume, how children associated with armed groups should be engaged when encountered on the battlefield is a pressing and underaddressed issue (taken up briefly later in the chapter).

<sup>52</sup> CRC art. 37(b).

<sup>53</sup> CRC art. 37(c).

<sup>54</sup> “The negative effects of detention on juvenile recidivism are acute and well-documented.” Global Center on Cooperative Security and International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, “Correcting the Course.”

<sup>55</sup> Noëlle Quénivet, “Does and Should International Law Prohibit the Prosecution of Children for War Crimes?,” *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2017).

<sup>56</sup> Special Court for Sierra Leone, Public Affairs Office, “Special Court Prosecutor Says He Will Not Prosecute Children,” Press Release, 2 November 2002. Available from [www.rcsl.org/Documents/Press/OTP/prosecutor-110202.pdf](http://www.rcsl.org/Documents/Press/OTP/prosecutor-110202.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Drumbl, *Reimagining Child Soldiers*, p. 119.

<sup>58</sup> Paris Principle 8.6: “Children should not be prosecuted by an international court or tribunal.” See also discussion at Drumbl, pp. 126–127. The Paris Principles, a non-binding instrument, posits that children associated with armed forces or armed groups who are accused of crimes under international law should be considered primarily as victims and not as perpetrators.

<sup>59</sup> Here, the term “combatant” is not used in its technical sense of a member of the armed forces of a State, but rather in its more generic sense of a fighter, whether for a state or a non-state armed group. See “Table 1 – Definitions,” page 212 of this chapter. Members of a state’s armed forces enjoy “combat immunity,” meaning that when engaged in hostilities, they are exempt from prosecution for hostile acts that comply with the principles and rules of IHL. Non-state actors do not have combat immunity and are still subject to punishment under domestic law for hostile acts, even if such acts may comply with the principles and rules of IHL. Two things to note: First, IHL does not prohibit non-state actors from participation in hostilities. Second, combatant and civilian alike, whether in IAC or NIAC, are subject to criminal accountability for violating provisions of IHL designated as war crimes.

<sup>60</sup> This creates a perceived imbalance. Consider the “farmer by day and fighter by night” in an armed conflict between a state and a non-state armed group. Under IHL, he or she may target the state’s armed forces at any time (though doing so may trigger prosecution under domestic criminal law). However, if the farmer is not a member of the non-state armed group, he or she is a civilian who may be targeted only while directly participating in hostilities. To resolve this perceived imbalance, the ICRC has proposed the notion of “continuous combat function,” or CCF. Under this deservedly controversial notion, a person who has a CCF would be targetable as a combatant, even though he/she may not be a “member” of the armed forces. CCF may be a particularly problematic notion in relation to targetability of children alleged to be participating in hostilities.

# 3 Today's Reality for Children in Armed Conflict and Counter-Terrorism: Protect or Punish?

International law regarding children associated with armed groups has not changed much in the last decade. Nevertheless, the same period has seen a punitive shift in how children associated with armed groups are viewed and treated, complicating child protection efforts. In prior conflicts, such as in Sierra Leone, children associated with armed groups were treated primarily as victims. In today's conflict contexts, however, where an increasing number of armed groups are listed as terrorist groups or characterized as violent extremists or jihadists, associated children are often treated as security threats. Even outside conflict contexts – for example, in the case of children suspected of traveling to join Islamic State or those that have returned from Syria – there is a shift in the handling of children who are thought to have been involved with a certain subset of armed groups.

## A. CONTEMPORARY REALITIES

**Association with groups determined to be “terrorist” or “violent extremist” is increasingly criminalized, and children caught up in these determinations face detention, prosecution, and, sometimes, abuse.** Some states are prosecuting juveniles under adult terrorism legislation, and some are “lowering the age of criminal responsibility, allowing courts to prosecute children as young as 15”<sup>61</sup> In Iraq, authorities are holding “more than 1,400 foreign women and their children who surrendered with ISIS fighters in late August 2017” on questionable legal bases;<sup>62</sup> in Kurdistan, boys are being detained and tortured on suspicion of having joined ISIS;<sup>63</sup> and in Syria, boys leaving Raqqa are being arrested and “detained, abused and stigmatized for perceived affiliations.”<sup>64</sup> The Nigerian government is currently thought to be detaining thousands of children (as well as adults) who it fears are associated with Boko Haram. Many of the detained have been encountered during military operations, but others – including large numbers of children – appear to have been arrested arbitrarily as they fled from Boko Haram.<sup>65</sup> These detainees, without charges or access to family and lawyers, are kept in deplorable conditions,<sup>66</sup> and appear to be held in violation of Nigerian and international law.<sup>67</sup> Outside of conflict contexts, states are also amending criminal laws and administrative procedures to bolster existing counter-terrorism powers. In France, as part of an effort to strengthen the state's counter-terrorism posture, the maximum period of pretrial detention was increased to three years for children aged 16 and older.<sup>68</sup> Terrorism offences have become so broad that loose affiliation, preparatory or ancillary acts, and material support are increasingly covered, which makes children much more likely to be caught in the net, given that children do not generally play the roles of ordering, commanding, or planning terrorist activities.

**Some states are using a child's (or adult's) suspected or demonstrated association with armed groups as grounds for barring their re-entry into the country and/or stripping their citizenship.** Some states have implemented administrative measures to discourage people from returning from conflict zones, and have gone so far as to refuse to let children back in their countries after suspected involvement with an armed group.<sup>69</sup> For example, the UK Home Secretary announced that the government has the power to revoke British citizenship if doing so is in the

<sup>61</sup> Liesbeth van der Heide and Eva Entenmann, “Juvenile Violent Extremist Offenders: Peer Pressure or Seasoned Soldiers?”, ICCT, 12 September 2016. Available from <https://icct.nl/publication/juvenile-violent-extremist-offenders-peer-pressure-or-seasoned-soldiers>.

<sup>62</sup> Bill Van Esveld, “Iraq/KRG: 1,400 Women, Children from ISIS Areas Detained”, Human Rights Watch, 20 September 2017. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/20/iraq/krg-1400-women-children-isis-areas-detained](http://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/20/iraq/krg-1400-women-children-isis-areas-detained). Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Hundreds Detained in Degrading Conditions”, 13 March 2017. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/13/iraq-hundreds-detained-degrading-conditions](http://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/13/iraq-hundreds-detained-degrading-conditions).

<sup>63</sup> Belkis Wille, “Why Children Are Stuck in Prison in Erbil without Trial”, Human Rights Watch, 27 March 2017. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/27/why-children-are-stuck-prison-erbil-without-trial](http://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/27/why-children-are-stuck-prison-erbil-without-trial). Letta Tayler, “Victimized First by ISIS, Then by the Liberators”, Human Rights Watch, 3 February 2017. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/03/victimized-first-isis-then-liberators](http://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/03/victimized-first-isis-then-liberators).

<sup>64</sup> UN News Centre, “The Time to Act Is Now: End Children's Suffering in Iraq and across the Middle East – UNICEF”, 22 July 2017. Available from [www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57236#WdKazUyZn-cA](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57236#WdKazUyZn-cA).

<sup>65</sup> Amnesty International, “Nigeria 2016/2017”.

<sup>66</sup> Crowding, disease, dehydration, and starvation were rampant. One estimate found 240 people had died in detention at the Giva barracks in Maiduguri (including at least 29 children between newborn and five years of age) in the last year alone. *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Dionne Searcey, “Nigeria Is Freeing Children from Boko Haram, Then Locking Them Up,” *New York Times*, 18 August 2016. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram.html).

<sup>68</sup> Amnesty International, “Europe: Dangerously Disproportionate – The Ever-Expanding National Security State in Europe,” January 2017, p. 15. Available from [www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur01/5342/2017/en](http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur01/5342/2017/en).

<sup>69</sup> For more detailed reports and related examples, see Amnesty International, “Europe: Dangerously Disproportionate”, p. 15; and Human Rights Watch, “Foreign Terrorist Fighter’ Laws: Human Rights Rollbacks Under UN Security Council Resolution 2178”, December 2016. Available from [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/news\\_attachments/fff\\_essay\\_03feb2017\\_final\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/news_attachments/fff_essay_03feb2017_final_pdf.pdf).





**BOR, SOUTH SUDAN**  
A child peers out of the fence surrounding the Protection of Civilians site.  
—January 2016

UN Photo/  
JC McIlwaine

public’s interest, and dual nationals in Austria can lose their Austrian citizenship “for voluntary participation in an armed group engaged in terrorist activities abroad.”<sup>70</sup> Some of these efforts are being undertaken explicitly to include children: For example, the Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) Act of 2015 provides grounds on which dual citizens, whether by birth or naturalization, may lose their citizenship: for service in armed forces of an enemy country or a declared terrorist organization; for conviction of terrorist offences; and for “renunciation by conduct,” which includes engaging in terrorist activities, providing or receiving training, recruitment, or financing of terrorism.<sup>71</sup> The law was written to include children 15 to 17 years old. While some states appear to be responding to the perceived threat these children pose, others are being adopted as a capitulation to civic pressure. For example, in Tunisia in December 2016, President Béji Caïd Essebsi “floated the idea of a pardon for returning fighters, saying there was no more room in the prisons. But after opposition protesters flooded the news media and television chat shows, he ruled out the idea, promising there would be no pardon and no amnesty.”<sup>72</sup> As a result, dozens of children, the offspring of those who have gone to join Islamic State, have been stuck in limbo in Libyan prisons – some orphans as young as two years old – because the government is under pressure not to allow them to return.<sup>73</sup>

The shift in treatment of children associated with armed groups is representative of the increasingly securitized environment in which humanitarians must operate. Navigating this environment presents a series of challenges for effective child protection programming. Since 9/11, the changing nature of armed conflict has restricted the “capacity of humanitarian organizations to safely and effectively provide material relief to populations suffering the ravages of war,” due to “an increase in the targeting of civilian populations, deliberate attacks on humanitarian workers, the co-optation of humanitarian response within counter-insurgency operations, the push for coherence within integrated United Nations missions, and the ever-increasing overlap with longer-term development programming.”<sup>74</sup> In addition, the proliferation of counter-terrorism regulations, counter-terrorism donor agreement clauses, and terrorist-listing mechanisms has further confused and complicated the humanitarian response.<sup>75</sup> Development and humanitarian work has also been impacted by securitized funding strategies and the reorientation of development funds to include programmes to prevent and counter violent extremism, further challenging the neutrality of aid.<sup>76</sup> The perception of humanitarian organizations as “neutral” also seems to be diminished, in part, by the coverage of humanitarian operations based less on need than on political influences “in favor of areas under control of Western-supported conflict parties.”<sup>77</sup>

In some contexts, children who have been released from armed groups, and either served sentences or were determined not to represent a threat to society, have not been treated as such, even within the state that made the determinations. As conflicts have become increasing internationalized, and the potential for children (and adults) becoming involved in armed groups beyond the borders of their country of origin/residence rises, this issue may become more pronounced. In the DRC, for example, formerly associated children receive release certificates (attestations de sortie) stating they have been through the DDR process and

<sup>70</sup> Tanya Mehra, “Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics and Policy Responses”, ICCT, December 2016, p. 19. Available from <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ICCT-Mehra-FTF-Dec2016-2.pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) Act 2015, No. 166. Available from [www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2015A00166](http://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2015A00166).

<sup>72</sup> Carlotta Gall, “Tunisia Fears the Return of Thousands of Young Jihadists”, *New York Times*, 25 February 2017. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2017/02/25/world/europe/isis-tunisia.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/25/world/europe/isis-tunisia.html).

<sup>73</sup> “A 2-year-old Orphan of Jihad Is Trapped in a Libyan Prison”, Associated Press, 21 April 2017. Available from <http://abcnews.go.com/amp/international/wireStory/babies-caliphate-languish-limbo-prison-46929807>.

<sup>74</sup> Cynthia Brassard-Boudreau and Don Hubert, “Shrinking Humanitarian Space? Trends and Prospects on Security and Access”, *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 24 November 2010. Available from <https://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/863>.

<sup>75</sup> “Counterterrorism and Humanitarian Engagement Project: An Analysis of Contemporary Counterterrorism-Related Clauses in Humanitarian Grant and Partnership Agreement Contracts”, Research and Policy Paper, Project on Law and Security – Harvard Law School and the Brookings Institution, May 2014. Available from [http://blogs.harvard.edu/cheproject/files/2013/10/CHE\\_Project\\_-\\_Counterterrorism-related\\_Humanitarian\\_Grant\\_Clauses\\_May\\_2014.pdf](http://blogs.harvard.edu/cheproject/files/2013/10/CHE_Project_-_Counterterrorism-related_Humanitarian_Grant_Clauses_May_2014.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Kate McGrane, “Fighting Violent Extremism – Humanitarians Beware”, IRIN, 3 August 2017. Available from [www.irinnews.org/opinion/2017/08/03/fighting-violent-extremism-humanitarians-beware](http://www.irinnews.org/opinion/2017/08/03/fighting-violent-extremism-humanitarians-beware).

<sup>77</sup> Abby Stoddard, Shoab Jilani, John Caccavale, Peyton Cooke, David Guillemois, and Vassily Klimentov, “Out of Reach: How Insecurity Prevents Humanitarian Aid from Accessing the Neediest”, *International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2017), p. 1.

that are intended to serve as proof that they are demobilized.<sup>78</sup> There are accounts, however, of armed forces of the Republic of Congo (FARDC) soldiers rejecting children's attestations de sortie as invalid because they were signed by FARDC officers from a different region.<sup>79</sup> There are also reports that children associated with armed forces and armed groups from DRC who have encountered the armed forces of the FARDC were rearrested even when they possessed these certificates.<sup>80</sup> Although it isn't clear these instances were driven by concerns around terrorism or violent extremism, they do highlight the significant challenges around the recognition of demobilized children that can be expected in places like Syria. Given the scale of the Syrian conflict and the variety of governments and armed actors involved, some of which are listed terrorist groups, there is the potential for the issues observed in DRC to be replicated on a much larger scale.

## B. WHAT HAPPENED TO CAUSE THIS SHIFT?

There are a number of possible reasons for the recent shift in treatment of associated children. We offer a few hypotheses below:

### LEGAL CONFLICT?

There is a question as to whether domestic laws (e.g., terrorism laws that are age blind) have been written or amended in recent years in a manner that conflicts with international treaties/norms and Security Council resolutions that provide distinctive protection for children.<sup>81</sup> For example, Human Rights Watch found that at least 47 countries have passed foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) laws since 2013, "the largest wave of counterterrorism measures since the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001,"<sup>82</sup> inspired in part by SCR 2178. Measures include travel bans, revocations of citizenship, expansions of police and intelligence powers, preventive detention and control orders, lengthy pre-charge and pretrial detentions, special courts, and death penalties.<sup>83</sup> There also may be conflicts within and between different international legal regimes. Some have questioned whether international human rights law and Security Council directives, such as SCR 2178<sup>84</sup> on foreign terrorist fighters, which ostensibly constitute international law, are in – or are interpreted by states as being in – conflict about how to address terrorist threats. For example, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) raised the question whether SCR 2178's encouragement for states to curtail the movement of foreign fighters, which appears to have influenced travel bans, withdrawal of passports, and denial or revocation of citizenship, conflicts with the right to freedom of movement enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.<sup>85</sup>

It is unclear whether children associated with these groups necessitate a different response than standard child protection approaches.

### CHANGE IN NATURE OF THE NSAGS AND THE THREAT CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH THEM POSE?

As noted throughout this volume, much attention has been paid to the nature of some contemporary armed groups and, relatedly, the assumptions that jihadist, terrorist, or violent extremist groups pose peculiar challenges that require unique and/or heavy-handed responses. As other chapters in this volume argue, it is unclear whether children associated with these groups necessitate a different response than standard child protection approaches. What is clear is that the nature of armed conflict and the number, organization, and goals of armed groups fighting today have undergone a shift from those that were active 20 to 30 years ago.<sup>86</sup> One notable shift is the physical and virtual reach of today's

<sup>78</sup> Cadre Operationnel DDR and the Cadre Operationnel DDR Enfants.

<sup>79</sup> Amnesty International, "Democratic Republic of Congo: Children at War, Creating Hope for the Future," October 2006. Available from <http://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/drc-children-war-creating-hope-future>.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> In Nigeria, juvenile courts do not have jurisdiction over terrorism cases, meaning that children suspected of terrorism are tried by the Federal High Court, so "child terror suspects must await the administration of their cases through this court." Uyo Salifu and Clifford Osagie, "Nigeria's Child Terror Suspects: No Easy Answers," Institute for Security Studies, 13 June 2016. Available from <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/nigerias-child-terror-suspects-no-easy-answers>.

<sup>82</sup> Letta Tayler, "Overreach – How New Global Counterterrorism Measures Jeopardize Rights," World Report 2017, Human Rights Watch, p. 28. Available from [www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/wr2017-web.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/wr2017-web.pdf).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> S/RES/2178 (2014).

<sup>85</sup> Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism, 19 December 2014, A/HRC/28/28, Para 50.

<sup>86</sup> Sebastian von Einsiedel, "Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict," Occasional Paper, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, March 2017.

armed groups. With advances in social media and other communications technologies, as well as transportation, armed groups have a more personal and visceral reach across greater distances than before, whether due to social media propaganda or attacks in countries far from their bases of operation. This raises the question of whether they pose a different threat to public safety than armed groups of 20 years ago or if the public is just more aware of these Internet-savvy groups.

### CHANGE IN THE STANCE OF STATES?

Certainly there has been a prioritization of national security and counter-terrorism in recent years, raising the question of whether these emphases are trumping other “primary considerations” such as the rights of the child, which once carried more weight.<sup>87</sup> Is this shift driven by public fear? There are some indications that the growing concerns with national security and the proliferation of counter-terrorism laws and measures are being fed by a “rise in xenophobia and Islamophobia in Western countries, stoked in part by political figures capitalizing on both Islamist extremist attacks and a global refugee crisis that has displaced millions.”<sup>88</sup> There is a related question as to whether this apparent shift in the consideration of the rights of the child is due to a concerted effort, a lack of enforcement and visibility, or a lack of capacity.

### CHANGE IN INTERNATIONAL ATMOSPHERE?

The focus on accountability in armed conflict has led to an emphasis on prosecutions that counterintuitively may have come to undermine some of the protections for children, who have traditionally been seen as victims in these cases. This push – especially in conflicts where listed terrorist groups are active – has been reinforced by the international counter-terrorism regime, which obligates states to take steps to prevent and respond to terrorism. For example, in response to the transnational movement of foreign fighters, Security Council Resolution 2178 encouraged Member States to cooperate in “preventing the radicalization to terrorism and recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters, including children, preventing foreign terrorist fighters from crossing their borders, disrupting and preventing financial support to foreign terrorist fighters, and developing and implementing prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning foreign terrorist fighters.”<sup>89</sup> Some suggest that this resolution creates conflicting priorities – the criminalization of child association with listed groups vs. a response focused on rehabilitation and reintegration. Likewise, the focus individual states place on counter-terrorism reverberates up and through the international system, including, for example, the impact of U.S. counter-terrorism laws on humanitarian initiatives.<sup>90</sup>

### THE TURN TO CRIMINAL LAW IN COMBATING IMPUNITY

More broadly, some workshop participants posited that the current punitive approach to children associated with armed groups listed as terrorist or those characterized as violent extremist or jihadist could be partially an unintended byproduct of the push towards accountability and the emergent “duty to prosecute” human rights violations. For decades, human rights activists have advocated for criminal prosecutions in the case of acts of systemic human rights abuses, including within the categories of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Although some observers had warned of these foreseeable effects of “law and order” discourse, prosecution and punishment were constructed as essential to achieve justice, ease transition, and end impunity.<sup>91</sup> As a result, the courtroom and jailhouse emerged in the international legal imagination as indispensable in combating impunity. That said, some workshop participants suggested that this very same push might infuse counter-terrorism initiatives in which a firm effort has emerged to criminalize terrorist acts, including in some instances membership in terrorist groups and material support thereof, and to construct these as crimes of transnational and even international concern. Although oriented towards adult offenders, these crimes could be (and have been) applied to children who are enmeshed in armed groups. The rhetoric around terrorism, and advancement of zero tolerance policies, may further contribute to this criminalization push that, unlike the case with international criminal law in international tribunals, constricts due process entitlements for defendants.

<sup>87</sup> There does appear to be, however, growing recognition that child rights need to be respected regardless of the context. For example, on 21 September 2016, the Members of the Global Counterterrorism Forum adopted the Neuchâtel Memorandum on Good Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context, to serve as a guide for developing and enacting “policies regarding the specific circumstances surrounding children who are in the criminal justice system charged with committing acts of terrorism or violent extremism.” Global Counterterrorism Forum, “Neuchâtel Memorandum on Juvenile Justice.” Available from <http://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Toolkit-documents/English-Neuch%C3%A2tel-Memorandum-on-Juvenile-Justice.pdf>.

<sup>88</sup> Tayler, “Overreach,” p. 28.

<sup>89</sup> S/RES/2178 (2014), p. 4. The legally binding part of this resolution does not explicitly refer to children.

<sup>90</sup> Sandi Halimuddin, “U.S. Counterterrorism Laws Block International Humanitarian Aid,” World Policy Blog, 19 December 2013. Available from [www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2013/12/19/us-counterterrorism-laws-block-international-humanitarian-aid](http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2013/12/19/us-counterterrorism-laws-block-international-humanitarian-aid).

<sup>91</sup> Karen Engle, “Anti-Impunity and the Turn to Criminal Law in Human Rights,” *Cornell Law Review*, Vol. 100, No. 1069 (2015).





#### HAMADAN, IRAQ

Bullet casings lie on the desert floor near a mass grave.  
—August 2016

Diego Ibarra Sánchez

### c. WHY THIS MATTERS

The shift towards characterizing children associated with armed groups as security threats and responding to them with heavy-handed and/or punitive approaches is problematic not only for legal and moral reasons, but also for practical ones: First, given the mass of people, including children, associated with armed groups in conflicts in places like Syria/Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria, – as detailed in chapters 4, 5, and 6, respectively – it is unrealistic that already weak states will have the capacity and resources to apply an entirely punitive or national security approach to this issue, while protecting human rights and maintaining criminal justice standards of treatment. For example, by some estimates eight million people were recently living under Islamic State rule in Syria and Iraq<sup>92</sup> – including millions of children; even if states only seek to prosecute a small portion of this population, that caseload likely would overwhelm their capacity.

Second, a largely punitive or national security approach to dealing with associated children (or adults, for that matter) may also prove counterproductive. To the extent that imprisonment reinforces perceptions of the “enemy” and feelings of injustice, it may serve to strengthen, rather than diminish, the worldview of armed groups. Specifically, harsh treatment in prison may generate grievances that fuel further conflict. Furthermore, incarcerating associated children with violent, criminal, or ideological individuals may actually help foster future NSAG engagement or other violent or criminal offending. For example, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Islamic State, was held for at least 10 months at the American Camp Bucca in Iraq, which several have credited as central in his transformation from “street thug”<sup>93</sup> to terrorist leader.<sup>94</sup> Given their young age, children will – in the absence of the most extreme treatment – eventually be released; if their incarceration and treatment make recidivism and other problematic behaviours more likely, this could, obviously, prove counterproductive.

<sup>92</sup> UN News Centre, “In ISIL-Controlled Territory, 8 Million Civilians Living in ‘State of Fear’ – UN Expert”, 31 July 2015. Available from [www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=51542#WgDDRhNSyIM](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=51542#WgDDRhNSyIM)

<sup>93</sup> Tim Arango and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Actions in Iraq Fuelled Rise of a Rebel: Baghdadi of ISIS Pushes an Islamist Crusade,” *New York Times*, 10 August 2014. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/world/middleeast/us-actions-in-iraq-fueled-rise-of-a-rebel.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/world/middleeast/us-actions-in-iraq-fueled-rise-of-a-rebel.html).

<sup>94</sup> William McCants, “The Believer: How an Introvert with a Passion for Religion and Soccer Became Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, Leader of the Islamic State”, Brookings Institution, 1 September 2015. Available from <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2015/thebeliever.html>.



# 4 Applying the “Best Interests of the Child” Principle in Contemporary Armed Conflicts

A largely punitive or national security approach to dealing with associated children may prove counterproductive.

Humanitarians and advocates for the rights of children have long been guided by the legal principle that “in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”<sup>95</sup> As outlined above, contemporary armed conflicts pose a challenge to the application of the “best interests” principle. Yet there should be no doubt that human rights law’s “best interests of the child” standard applies in armed conflict, for two reasons. First, under well-accepted notions about the relationship between IHRL and IHL, IHRL

applies in and to armed conflict in a complementary relationship with IHL.<sup>96</sup> The *lex specialis* principle supports the application of IHRL rules that do not conflict with otherwise applicable IHL. Second, not only does the “best interests” principle not conflict with any rule of IHL, but the notion of special protections for children is explicitly reflected in IHL treaty and customary rules for both IAC and NIAC.<sup>97</sup> For this reason, previously discussed objections of a small minority of states to either or both the extraterritorial application of IHRL and the application of IHRL in armed conflict may be easily dismissed as irrelevant, if not false. For example, special protections for children in armed conflict are most clearly established in connection with recruitment and use of child soldiers.<sup>98</sup> These protections are in no way diminished by the allegation, or fact, that such recruitment and use is in the service of activities designated as “terrorism.” Questions remain, however, about how the principle is to be implemented in

situations that arise in contemporary armed conflict, particularly around targeting by/of child soldiers, grounds and procedures for deprivation of liberty of children, treatment of children whose liberty has been deprived, criminal responsibility, and due process. Additionally, how the principle applies to the conduct of non-state actors is unclear.

## A. TARGETING

There is a great deal of law and literature on preventing children from becoming soldiers, on protecting them as victims of armed conflict, and on transitioning them out of armed conflict. Much less has been said about whether or not, and under what circumstances, child fighters may be targeted during armed conflict. It must be noted that Article 77 of Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, applicable to IAC, proclaims a duty to respect and protect children in armed conflicts. That *prima facie* should raise a doubt as to whether a child is targetable. Although the doubt may be dissipated in light of available facts, overcoming the presumption of civilian status might require more than would be the case for an adult. In addition, even if a child is deemed targetable, the allowable means and methods must reflect the protected status of children in international law.<sup>99</sup> Although beyond the scope of this volume, the shocking extent of the child-fighter phenomenon today requires states, non-state armed groups, human rights advocates, and those providing humanitarian protection and assistance in armed conflict to address the issue.

<sup>95</sup> CRC, Art. 3.

<sup>96</sup> Cases at the International Court of Justice: *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, Advisory Opinion, I.C.J. Reports 1996, p. 226, International Court of Justice (ICJ), 8 July 1996; *Advisory Opinion Concerning Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, International Court of Justice (ICJ), 9 July 2004. At the Inter-American Commission: *Salas v. the United States*, Case 10,573, Inter-Am. C.H.R., Report No. 31/93, OEA/Ser.L/V/85, Doc. 9 rev. (1994), at para. 6.

<sup>97</sup> See “Children Protected under International Humanitarian Law,” ICRC, 29 October 2010. Available from [www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/protected-persons/children/overview-protected-children.htm](http://www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/protected-persons/children/overview-protected-children.htm). In relation to IAC, see also Additional Protocol I, Article 77 (“Children shall be the object of special respect.”) See also various provisions of the 4th Geneva Convention with explicit reference to children: Article 14 (safety zones may protect in particular children under 15); Article 17 (evacuation of civilians from besieged areas); Article 23 (free passage of relief consignments intended for the weakest categories of the population); Article 24 (entirely devoted to children, particularly children under 15 who are orphaned or who are separated from their families as a result of the war, and to the identification of children under 12); Article 38 (preferential treatment for children under 15); Article 50 (children in occupied territories and the institutions devoted to their care); Article 51 (prohibits compelling children under 18 years of age to work); and Article 68 (prohibits pronouncing the death penalty on persons under 18 years of age). The IHL-based principle of special protection for children also applies to NIAC. See Additional Protocol II, Article 4(3) (“Children should be provided with the care and aid they require.”) Special protections for children are also reflected in customary IHL applicable to both IAC and NIAC. See ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 135–137.

<sup>98</sup> For example, see GC IV, Art. 50; AP I, Art. 77(2); AP II, Art. 4(3)(c); CRC Art. 38(3)/OPAC; ILO Convention 182; African Union Charter on Rights and Welfare of Child; Rome Statute, both IAC and NIAC (Article 8(2)(b)(xxvii) and (e)(viii)); Statute of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, Article 4.

<sup>99</sup> See Rene Prevost, “Targeting Child Soldiers,” *EJIL: Talk!* 12 January 2016. Available from [www.ejiltalk.org/targeting-child-soldiers](http://www.ejiltalk.org/targeting-child-soldiers). With regard to the debate within IHL ranks about whether or not, as a general matter, capture rather than killing, when possible, is an obligation, most IHL experts and states that have opined on the subject reject the notion of a generalized duty to capture. However, provisions establishing a special duty to respect and protect children may tip the balance in favor of a duty to capture, where feasible. Ryan Goodman, “The Power to Kill or Capture Enemy Combatants,” *EJIL*, Vol. 24 (8 February 2013).

## B. GROUNDS AND PROCEDURES FOR DEPRIVATION OF LIBERTY

According to international law, detention powers differ significantly from IAC to NIAC, and even within IAC depending on the individual in question (e.g., combatant or civilian). Because detention powers over combatants and civilians in IAC differ, it is essential for parties to armed conflict, and advocates for children, to understand how IHL distinguishes the two. In IAC, combatants may be detained as PoWs for the duration of the conflict, based solely on their status as combatants.<sup>100</sup> Unlike civilians (see below), combatants may be detained without any determination that they pose a security risk. Anyone who meets the criteria is entitled to PoW status and treatment regardless of age or whether her/his recruitment or participation in hostilities is lawful (e.g., child members of state armed forces or associated militias).<sup>101</sup> In case of doubt about an individual's combatant status, a "competent tribunal" must be established to make the determination.<sup>102</sup>

The shocking extent of the child-fighter phenomenon today requires states, non-state armed groups, human rights advocates, and those providing humanitarian protection and assistance in armed conflict to address the issue.

In IAC, civilians, including children, may only be deprived of liberty if, and only so long as, "the security of the Detaining Power makes it absolutely necessary."<sup>103</sup> The term "civilian," however, is not defined in IHL. This is no accident. The drafters of the Geneva Conventions deliberately assigned civilian status by default – anyone who does not meet the criteria for combatant status<sup>104</sup> – to ensure no gaps in protection. Detained civilians are not PoWs. Not only must a determination of security risk be made, but states must ensure that no less restrictive means are available to ameliorate the risk posed by the civilian in question. Also, decisions to detain civilians must be subject to appeal and reviewed at least twice a year.<sup>105</sup>

In NIAC, there is no such thing as PoW status. IHL treaties do not contain provisions establishing grounds and procedures for deprivation of liberty, as they do for IAC. It is presumed that domestic law will apply to armed conflicts that are

internal (and even if they are transnational, but not wars between states). Therefore, IHRL principles and rules for the protection of children deprived of liberty certainly apply in armed conflict, but will have a greater role in NIAC, where IHL does not specify grounds and procedures for detention, than in IAC.<sup>106</sup>

Given that IHL treaty law does not establish grounds and procedures for detention in NIAC (as it clearly does in IAC), the question of whether or not parties to NIAC have detention power is complex. There is no doubt that a state may deprive persons of liberty under domestic law, whether through criminal proceedings or under "administrative detention" laws that permit deprivation of liberty without proof of criminal activity. Neither IHL nor IHRL prohibits administrative or security detention, although the Human Rights Committee (the treaty body that monitors compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) has issued General Comments noting that such detention "presents severe risks of arbitrary deprivation of liberty."<sup>107</sup> Applicable IHRL merely requires that grounds and procedures be set out in law and that persons deprived of liberty be entitled to challenge their deprivation before a court.<sup>108</sup> This rule will have limited applicability to IAC, where the Geneva Conventions explicitly cover the matter. Whether and how this rule applies to NIAC is hotly contested and complex, especially as concerns transnational NIAC. For example, does State A, fighting against a non-state armed group on the territory of and with the consent of State B, have the power to detain? Where? Pursuant/subject to whose law?

<sup>100</sup> Geneva Convention (GC) III addresses the status and protections of combatants (PoWs), and Geneva Convention (GC) IV addresses that of civilians.

<sup>101</sup> See GC III, Art. 4, for detailed provisions on who is entitled to PoW status and treatment.

<sup>102</sup> GC III, Article 5.

<sup>103</sup> GC IV, Art. 42.

<sup>104</sup> GC IV, Art. 4.

<sup>105</sup> GC IV, Arts. 78 and 43.

<sup>106</sup> Relevant IHRL provisions include these: "The arrest, detention, or imprisonment of a child ... shall be used only as a measure of last resort" (CRC Article 37(b)). "A variety of ... alternatives to institutional care shall be available to ensure that children are dealt with in a manner appropriate to their well-being and proportionate both to their circumstances and the offence" (CRC Article 40(4)).

<sup>107</sup> CCPR/C/GC/35, para. 15.

<sup>108</sup> ICCPR, Art. 9(4).

This is especially tricky for European states subject to the detention-related provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>109</sup> While it may not be productive for humanitarian actors to engage detaining authorities on these nuanced legal issues, the state of legal uncertainty may be leveraged to support policies and practices for deprivation of liberty that respect notions of special protection for children, in the best interests of the child.

### C. TREATMENT OF CHILDREN DEPRIVED OF LIBERTY

Humane treatment is a general obligation in both IAC and NIAC. Whether in IAC or NIAC, the special obligations that parties to armed conflict have to children remain applicable to the treatment of children deprived of liberty, whether as civilians or combatants. In IAC, these obligations are found in the 3rd and 4th Geneva Conventions and in the 1st Additional Protocol.<sup>110</sup> In NIAC, humane treatment of children is the focus of Article 4(3) of the 2nd Additional Protocol.<sup>111</sup> Again, customary law applicable to both IAC and NIAC should also be applied, and IHRL principles and rules are especially important in NIAC, where IHL rules are sparse.

### D. TRIALS/DUE PROCESS

Whether in IAC or NIAC, the decision to subject a child to criminal accountability is subject to both IHRL notions of “best interests”<sup>112</sup> and the special protections for children noted in relevant provisions of IHL. The only war crimes for which there appear to be a prima facie obligation to prosecute are “grave breaches” in IAC (e.g., torture).<sup>113</sup> However, the special IHRL and IHL protections accorded children may militate against such a requirement. Furthermore, the International Criminal Court does not possess jurisdiction to try war crimes committed by children, even grave breaches.<sup>114</sup>

If children are subjected to criminal accountability measures, they benefit from generally applicable judicial guarantees. In IAC, these are contained in various provisions of the 3rd and 4th Geneva Conventions<sup>115</sup> and, in most detail, in Article 75 of the 1st Additional Protocol.<sup>116</sup>

In NIAC, Common Article 3 prohibits “the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.”<sup>117</sup> This formulation is as vague as it is anachronistic, and there is no consensus on precisely which judicial guarantees are required in NIAC. However, while nothing short of renegotiation would alter the unfortunate reference to “civilized peoples,” much can be done within existing law to support the notion that human rights law describes what “judicial guarantees (are) recognized as indispensable.” Perhaps most important in this regard is that the relevance of human rights law is made explicit in the 2nd Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions – the Protocol applicable to NIAC.<sup>118</sup> And where may one find a list of judicial guarantees “recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples” in IHRL? Most notably, in ICCPR, Article 14, which is similar in content to the list of judicial guarantees in Article 75 of the 1st Additional Protocol applicable to IAC, with one significant difference relevant to children: ICCPR, Article 14(4), provides: “In the case of juvenile persons, the procedure shall be such as will take account of their age and the desirability of promoting their rehabilitation.”

<sup>109</sup> Rona, “Is There a Way Out?”

<sup>110</sup> AP I, Art. 77(3).

<sup>111</sup> AP II, Art. 4(3): “Children shall be provided with the care and aid they require, and in particular: a) they shall receive an education, including religious and moral education, in keeping with the wishes of their parents, or in the absence of parents, of those responsible for their care; b) all appropriate steps shall be taken to facilitate the reunion of families temporarily separated; c) children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities; d) the special protection provided by this Article to children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall remain applicable to them if they take a direct part in hostilities despite the provisions of sub-paragraph c) and are captured; e) measures shall be taken, if necessary, and whenever possible with the consent of their parents or persons who by law or custom are primarily responsible for their care, to remove children temporarily from the area in which hostilities are taking place to a safer area within the country and ensure that they are accompanied by persons responsible for their safety and well-being.

<sup>112</sup> “States Parties shall seek to promote the establishment of laws, procedures, authorities and institutions specifically applicable to children alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the penal law” CRC Article 40(3).

<sup>113</sup> Geneva Convention [I] for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in the Armed Forces in the Field, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3114, 75 UNTS 31, Arts. 49, 50; Geneva Convention [II] for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of the Armed Forces at Sea, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3217, 7 UNTS 85, Arts. 50, 51; Geneva Convention [III] Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3116, 75 UNTS 135, Arts. 129, 130; Geneva Convention [IV] Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, 12 August 1949, 6 UST 3516, 75 UNTS 287, Arts. 146, 147; Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 16 ILM 1391 (1977), Art. 85.

<sup>114</sup> Rome Statute, Art. 26.

<sup>115</sup> GC III, Arts. 99–108; GC IV, Arts. 64–76, 117–126.

<sup>116</sup> While not all states are party to the 1st Additional Protocol, the customary status of Art. 75 is widely recognized – including by the United States.

<sup>117</sup> “Conflicts Not of an International Character,” Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Geneva, 12 August 1949, Article 3.

<sup>118</sup> Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-international Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), 16 ILM 1442 (1977). “Recalling furthermore that international instruments relating to human rights offer a basic protection to the human person...”

# 5 Additional Issues for Possible Future Elaboration

In workshop discussions about how to operate in contemporary conflict contexts where there is a discrepancy between how the law stipulates associated children should be treated and how they are actually treated, there was consensus that the “best interests of the child” principle could be more effectively implemented. It was felt that a variety of mechanisms (advocacy, naming and shaming, promoting clarity as to what this principle means for conditions of detention and criminal prosecutions) could lead towards a healthy balance between human rights and national security. Workshop participants also identified and developed consensus around an array of barriers to implementation of the relevant legal protections. In this part of the chapter we provide a typology for some of these concerns. We do so to inform contemporary advocacy efforts, and flag them as areas for future work.

## TERMINOLOGY MATTERS

The latitude to deploy the term “terrorist” or “violent extremist” as a qualifier to “child” is among the rhetorical reasons why the application of law in contexts of non-state actor armed groups may have regressed. Reclaiming the language of children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG) is important, though it might be unclear as how best to capture that category of child from an advocacy and communications standpoint. Acronyms such as CAAFAG might simply resonate poorly outside of specialist circles. Might there be value in returning to the disfavoured language of “child soldier”, in particular if the purpose is to ensure general applicability of the rules to all children similarly situated? Relatedly, it remains unclear whether excessive use of “victim” language to rebut security drifts is necessarily helpful, in particular when the children may have committed acts of atrocity and community members may be fearful or understandably wish to pursue justice. Likewise, for states that face significant security challenges from armed groups, the singular characterization of associated children as victims may seem incongruous with their realities and concerns.

Indeed, it is important to recognize the agency, capacity, and resilience of children and not to excessively rely on victimization discourse. What is more, children associated with non-state armed groups who commit violent acts hurt others through those acts, both adults and children, and the persons hurt by the acts of children also have justice needs. These victims may be angry and fearful, and may suffer greatly. Moreover, many children demonstrate considerable agency in joining armed groups. They may exercise initiative and enterprise. It is crucial not to infantilize such children – particularly adolescents – as doing so might hinder release and reintegration attempts.<sup>119</sup>

## FAVOUR THE DEFENDANT

Criminal law relies on some key interpretive principles. One is the presumption against retroactive application – that is, a person cannot be prosecuted and punished for conduct that was not legally determined to constitute a criminal offense at the time the conduct was undertaken. Another principle is clarity – that is, that the details of a criminal offense must be clearly defined and that ambiguities are to be resolved in favour of the accused. The push towards criminal law as a mechanism to fight impunity has nevertheless led to instances where, at the international level, activist, purposive, and elastic interpretations of crimes have been equated with serving the interests of justice. Accordingly, to the extent to which terrorism is constructed as an international crime, similar broad interpretations are deployed as part of the anti-impunity and national security push. The fact that there exists no comprehensive definition of terrorism or terrorist in IHL, IHL, or ICL compounds the problem. Inspired by anti-terrorism resolutions of the United Nations Security Council,<sup>120</sup> states have at times pretextually enacted measures that criminalize membership in, association with, and support for groups that merely oppose the government, whether or not they

<sup>119</sup> For discussion of the pernicious effects of stereotype in the case of female foreign fighters, see Ester E. J. Strømme, “Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Da’esh – from Recruitment to Sentencing”, GPS Policy Brief, PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security, January 2017. Available from <https://www.prio.org/utility/DownloadFile.ashx?id=1219&type=publicationfile>.

<sup>120</sup> Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, “Resolutions: Security Council”. Available from [www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/resources/res-sc.html](http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/resources/res-sc.html).



engage in conduct that is the hallmark of terrorism: violence against civilians.<sup>121</sup> Even where groups do engage in such violence, imposition of measures prohibiting association and support has been anything but surgical, thus criminalizing both children and, potentially, those who would provide them with humanitarian assistance and protection.<sup>122</sup> Sanctions imposed by the Security Council and by states against named terrorist organizations also impede funding for humanitarian operations, while humanitarian donors and providers chafe under increasingly onerous “due diligence” obligations to assure that their operations do not provide material support to terrorism.<sup>123</sup> Counter-terrorism measures may also impede the engagement with armed groups that is necessary to educate them on international legal norms and the benefits of compliance/consequences of non-compliance, as well as to negotiate a cessation of hostilities, all to the detriment of children associated with or affected by the activities of such groups. While the desire to isolate and punish terrorists is understandable, such approaches are in tension with international legal protections accorded children and create a disincentive to children who may wish to leave armed groups.

While the desire to isolate and punish terrorists is understandable, such approaches are in tension with international legal protections accorded children and create a disincentive to children who may wish to leave armed groups.

#### DUE PROCESS

Workshop participants felt that a pivotal advocacy point was to ensure a level of child-specific due process protections for children in the penal process and also in administrative detention (which participants felt might be deployed by states to side-step criminal trials).<sup>124</sup> ICCPR Article 9(4) applies to situations in which there is “deprivation of liberty.” Emphasis on the best interests of the child and the specific protections enshrined in the CRC and other instruments could provide a very clear frame to these advocacy efforts. It may be useful to adopt an additional line of argumentation with member states on this front. There is the real potential for heavy-handed and punitive approaches to be counterproductive. Armed groups may recruit children who had been incarcerated; individuals may come to adopt an armed group’s worldview and justification for violence because of their own prison experiences.

#### INFORMATION VS. EVIDENCE

Another byproduct of the increasing securitization of the humanitarian space and push towards criminal accountability is concern about how

information obtained in the course of humanitarian work might become deployed after the fact. If humanitarian workers fear that the information they have obtained could be used in proceedings against children, or used in proceedings against adult recruiters in a way that publicizes the source of the information, then a need arises to balance needs of privilege, confidentiality, anonymity, and immunity. In some cases, humanitarians have expressed concern that the information they have access to could be used extrajudicially. On the other hand, if the information were not used as evidence in criminal proceedings, but instead more generally (and anonymously) in alternate forms of justice and accountability, then there might be less risk of harm to both the provider and the recipient of the information. It was underscored that an important goal is to ensure the sharing of information and the marketplace of ideas. Relatedly, one participant eloquently referenced the “right to be forgotten,” meaning, in the case of children, that any digitization or record of information provided by the child as associated with an armed

<sup>121</sup> “A recent challenge for IHL has been the tendency of States to label as terrorist all acts of warfare against them committed by armed groups, especially in non-international armed conflicts. This has created confusion in differentiating between lawful acts of war, including such acts committed by domestic insurgents against military targets, and acts of terrorism.” Annyssa Bellal and Stuart Casey-Maslen, “Rules of Engagement: Protecting Civilians through Dialogue with Armed Non-State Actors,” Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, October 2011, p. 16. Available from [www.geneva-academy.ch/poolatools-files/docman-files/Research%20documents/Rules-of-Engagement-FN.pdf](http://www.geneva-academy.ch/poolatools-files/docman-files/Research%20documents/Rules-of-Engagement-FN.pdf). See also Human Rights Watch, “In the Name of Security: Counterterrorism Laws Worldwide since September 11,” 29 June 2012. Available from [www.hrw.org/report/2012/06/29/name-security/counterterrorism-laws-worldwide-september-11](http://www.hrw.org/report/2012/06/29/name-security/counterterrorism-laws-worldwide-september-11).

<sup>122</sup> See, for example, Supreme Court of the United States, *Holder, Attorney General, et al. v. Humanitarian Law Project et al.*, decision of 21 June 2010.

<sup>123</sup> Counterterrorism and Humanitarian Engagement Project, “An Analysis of Contemporary Counterterrorism-Related Clauses in Humanitarian Grant and Partnership Agreement Contracts,” Research and Policy Paper, May 2014. Available from [http://blogs.harvard.edu/cheproject/files/2013/10/CHE\\_Project\\_-\\_Counterterrorism-related\\_Humanitarian\\_Grant\\_Clauses\\_May\\_2014.pdf](http://blogs.harvard.edu/cheproject/files/2013/10/CHE_Project_-_Counterterrorism-related_Humanitarian_Grant_Clauses_May_2014.pdf). The NRC/OCHA report also covers due diligence requirements and other impacts of counter-terrorism laws on NGOs. See Kate Mackintosh and Patrick Duplat, “Study of the Impact of Donor Counter-Terrorism Measures on Principled Humanitarian Action,” United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs/Norwegian Refugee Council, July 2013. Available from [http://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/CounterTerrorism\\_Study\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](http://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/CounterTerrorism_Study_Full_Report.pdf).

<sup>124</sup> United Nations human rights monitors in Yemen have frequently observed children as young as 10 who were armed and uniformed and who manned checkpoints. Houthi/Saleh forces have been found to be responsible for widespread arbitrary or unlawful detentions. See OHCHR, “Yemen: An ‘Entirely Man-Made Catastrophe’ – UN Human Rights Report Urges International Investigation,” 5 September 2017. Available from [www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22025&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22025&LangID=E).



#### MACEDONIA

Refugee and migrant children reach their hands out of a train window at the Gevgelija transit center on the border with Greece. —February 2016

© UNICEF/  
Tomislav Georgiev

group, or that identifies that child as having been so associated, should have a sunset period after which the data would be expunged – notably, if that is what the child (perhaps an adult by then) would wish. This would map onto the 2014 addition by the United Nations General Assembly to the right to privacy as part of an updated element of international counter-terrorism practice.<sup>125</sup> The International Criminal Court has recently turned to social media evidence in its own proceedings, specifically, in an August 2017 arrest warrant against an alleged commander accused of murders in Benghazi, Libya (e.g., videos recording acts of violence had been posted to social media – the identity of the poster is unknown – and were used as highly persuasive evidence). It is the practice of some armed groups – for example, Islamic State – to post violent acts on social media, and children may be the perpetrators. Such videos may be gruesome and inflammatory, but the children may not be allowed to determine

whether they are recorded or posted. It is crucial, in cases where such evidence is subsequently deployed to detain or prosecute children, to ensure the due process protection of such children and realize that, regardless of the agency they deploy, children rarely are the masterminds or organizers of international crimes.

### CONNECTION TO TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Transitional justice and alternate accountability models refer to a range of processes and mechanisms deployed in a society's attempts to come to terms with legacies of large-scale past abuses. These include a wide array of judicial and non-judicial mechanisms (e.g., conditional amnesties).<sup>126</sup> Very little discussion or deployment of restorative forms of transitional justice modalities, including community-based mechanisms, has arisen in the context of crimes determined to be committed by “child terrorists.” On this note, children associated with armed groups – including those listed as terrorist or labelled as violent extremist or jihadist – are victims, to be sure, but may occupy multiple roles, including those of witnesses, perpetrators of violence, and objects of fear within the community. One pervasive theme of the workshop was the need to better connect transitional justice initiatives with DDR programming (notably, the reintegration aspect) and education (notably, with the goal of helping to guarantee non-recurrence).<sup>127</sup> The push for criminal accountability could perhaps be stayed somewhat by developing robust programmes of community-based reintegration, truth commissions, ritualistic commemorations, reparations, and other forms of social repair that address the violence committed by the children and also against the children within the frame of rehabilitation, which is a key element of the international law regarding the rights of the child.<sup>128</sup> Such methods would be in line with the CRC's reticence towards criminal trials and its promotion of the best interests of the child, and may be more effective (although community-based justice initiatives have well-documented limits, including the preservation of gerontocratic and male-dominated social structures).<sup>129</sup>

### CHILDREN WHO CROSS STATE LINES

As conflicts have become increasingly transnational, the issue of associated children who cross state lines has become salient, particularly in conflicts like Syria. These children may have moved from one jurisdiction into another for the purposes of joining the armed group. As part of their activities within armed groups, they might end up in another state. There are also examples of children unwittingly brought across state lines by their parents, who desire to fight or live under an armed group. When children wish to exit the armed group, they may fear persecution were they to return to their home jurisdiction. Finally, they may be extradited to a state where they may be prosecuted for

<sup>125</sup> A/RES/68/276. This right was understood to mean as set out in Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

<sup>126</sup> UN Security Council, “The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies,” Report of the Secretary-General, 23 August 2004, para. 8 (S/2004/616).

<sup>127</sup> The centrality of guarantees of non-recurrence was highlighted in the creation in 2011 of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence, a position to promote transitional justice issues within the Human Rights Council.

<sup>128</sup> For extensive discussion of evidence-based approaches to rehabilitating juvenile violent extremist offenders, see Global Center on Cooperative Security and International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, “Correcting the Course.”

<sup>129</sup> For a thoughtful and critical discussion in the context of Al-Shabaab, see Janine Ubink and Anna Rea, “Community Justice or Ethnojustice? Engaging with Customary Mechanisms to Reintegrate Ex-Combatants in Somalia,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (July 2017).

violent acts they have allegedly committed, should that state exercise jurisdiction based on nationality, territoriality, universality, or passive personality.<sup>130</sup>

Workshop participants elaborated on many of these scenarios, and suggested advocacy strategies. One was to provide children caught in war zones with a Nansen passport.<sup>131</sup> Another strand of conversation turned to Article 1(F) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which excludes the application of the convention to persons who might have committed war crimes or crimes against humanity. Children have been caught by this provision. It is important that national decision makers and judges invoke the conceptual pillar of the best interests of the child when called upon to make assessments that involve children who have allegedly been involved in the commission of such crimes. In such instances, among the goals would be to read the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Refugee Convention interpretively together as mutually compatible. When working in contexts where there is the potential for children to become stateless and denationalized (as when they are under threat of having their citizenship revoked), particular advocacy strategies may be necessary. For example, workshop participants offered input regarding the Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) Act 2015, which provides grounds upon which dual citizens may lose their citizenship for supporting or acting on behalf of an enemy country or a declared terrorist organization.<sup>132</sup> In addition to certain due process concerns, the legislation applies to persons aged 14 years and older. The basic consensus of the workshop was that when exercising this power for persons 18 years old or younger, the best interests of the child are to be a primary consideration.<sup>133</sup>

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Children are entitled to special protection under the rules of IHL, and humanitarian advocates must insist on this protection and purposively adapt it to girls. What is more, it is crucial to involve girls equally with boys in DDR programming. Absent specific efforts to include them in DDR programming, most girls associated with armed groups in African conflicts are not easily disengaged.<sup>134</sup> In some instances, the interests of girls associated with non-state armed groups may be better served by flexible adaptive policy and legal responses. While never reducing the core of human rights protections, these methods may be supple enough to recognize that as time passes, needs change. This is true for both boys and girls, but a current example highlights some of the special challenges girls and women face.

In Iraq, thousands of girls and women have been married under Islamic State and issued IS marriage contracts,<sup>135</sup> and many have had children, who received IS birth certificates,<sup>136</sup> but these documents are not recognized as valid by the Iraqi and Kurdish governments. Whereas Islamic State permits girls as young as nine years old to be married,<sup>137</sup> the minimum age for marriage in Iraq is 18 (or 15 with parental consent) and 18 in Kurdistan (or 16 with parental consent). Iraq's system for birth registration generally requires that both parents issue a request on their child's behalf. If one or both parents are dead, unreachable, or foreign—all scenarios that are particularly likely if the father is an Islamic State fighter—it is very difficult to register a child.<sup>138</sup> For girls and women who have had children as a result of such a marriage, lack of documentation may throw their children's status into question in certain state jurisdictions. Moreover, lack of birth documentation impedes children's access to health care and education and, if nationality cannot be established, renders them vulnerable to statelessness. It may be difficult to find a single policy that works for everyone: While providing an equivalent Iraqi or KRG version of an IS marriage certificate may recognize a forced marriage, not doing so may set the individual in opposition to cultural norms, impede access to basic services, and preclude reparations or other remedial actions for victims. Ultimately, a flexible approach

<sup>130</sup> Passive personality is a form of jurisdiction wherein the courts of a state assert jurisdiction over a criminal act on the basis of the nationality of the victims.

<sup>131</sup> Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen originated the idea of the Nansen passport in 1922. This is a travel document for stateless people that allows them to travel safely across borders. Initially, beneficiaries of the Nansen passport were Russian refugees displaced by war and famine who lacked proof of identity or nationality. The Nansen passport redressed this informational gap. Because of his work, Nansen was awarded the 1922 Nobel Peace Prize.

<sup>132</sup> Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) Act 2015, No. 166.

<sup>133</sup> "Navigating the Legal Challenges and Grey Areas Around Child Protection and the Reintegration of Children Associated with Non-State Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict," Expert Workshop, Tarrytown, NY, 14-15 August 2017. At the workshop, the case of an Australian foreign fighter who posted a picture of his seven-year-old son holding the severed head of a Syrian soldier was examined. (Jacqueline Williams, "ISIS Fighter's Australian Citizenship Is Revoked Under Antiterror Laws," *New York Times*, 13 February 2017. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/world/australia/citizenship-isis-khaled-sharouf.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/world/australia/citizenship-isis-khaled-sharouf.html).) The much-discussed case of this individual and his family posed an interesting case study. He was deprived of his citizenship, but in the meantime both he and his wife reportedly died, leaving their children (and subsequently a grandchild) stranded somewhere in Syria. ABC News, "Islamic State Fighter Khaled Sharrouf's Wife, Tara Nettleton, Dies in Syria," 11 February 2016. Available from [www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-11/islamic-state-fighter-khaled-sharrouf-wife-tara-dies/7158340](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-11/islamic-state-fighter-khaled-sharrouf-wife-tara-dies/7158340).

<sup>134</sup> Chris Coulter, Mariam Persson, and Mats Utas, "Young Female Fighters in African Wars: Conflict and Its Consequences," Nordic Africa Institute, 2008. Available from <http://nai.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:241304/FULLTEXT01>.

<sup>135</sup> Photograph of a marriage contract issued by Islamic State in Mosul. Available from [www.aymennajwad.org/awad/pics/large/894.jpg](http://www.aymennajwad.org/awad/pics/large/894.jpg) (archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi).

<sup>136</sup> Photograph of a birth certificate issued by the Islamic State in Ninewa Province. Available from [www.aymennajwad.org/awad/pics/large/893.jpg](http://www.aymennajwad.org/awad/pics/large/893.jpg) (archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi).

<sup>137</sup> An official Islamic State treatise states that girls as young as nine can legally marry. Charlie Winter, "Women in the Islamic State," Quilliam Foundation, February 2015. Available from <https://therinifoundation.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf>.

<sup>138</sup> Nadim Houry, "Children of the Caliphate: What to Do About Kids Born Under ISIS," *Foreign Affairs*, 23 November 2016. Available from [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/levant/2016-11-22/children-caliphate](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/levant/2016-11-22/children-caliphate).

A potential way forward would be for child rights advocates to support and promote such efforts in order to encourage states to codify a child rights approach in security practices.

could allow girls to decide which response serves them best, and reserve the right to change their minds at a later date.

#### STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

There are a few notable examples of states that have created policies and procedures to address the perceived tension between human rights protections and national and operational security. For example, a new doctrine – described as the first of its kind – adopted by the Canadian Armed Forces in 2017 reflects a balance between security concerns and human and child rights concerns in the specific context of underage fighters.<sup>139</sup> The doctrine addresses many of the specific issues described in the section above, including targeting, detention, and treatment during detention. On the one hand, this document accords armed forces personnel the right to use force to protect themselves

from the threat of serious injury or death. It recognizes that children may pose as grave a threat as adults. On the other hand, this doctrine states that Canadian troops should “seek to de-escalate confrontations with child soldiers”. If forced to engage child soldiers, the doctrine states that armed forces personnel “seek to engage adults within the group first”, under the assumption that if the adult leader is eliminated or removed, then the armed group might dissolve. The doctrine adds that, if captured, underage fighters should be confined separately from adult detainees and that consideration should be given to grouping the children themselves according to their ages. Child detainees must then be turned over to non-governmental organizations as soon as possible for purposes of counselling, rehabilitation, and family reunification. There has been a recent push to expand these efforts – notably the November 2017 Vancouver Principles – and encourage other member states to commit to training and planning for how their forces can best prevent and respond to child recruitment and use by armed groups.<sup>140</sup> A potential way forward would be for child rights advocates to support and promote such efforts in order to encourage other states to codify a child rights approach in security practices. It is important to recognize, however, that such policies and guidelines are more likely to be effective if they are coupled with training for security personnel to ensure application.

## 6 Conclusion

A vast body of law applies to the relationships between children and armed groups. This legal framework applies to armed groups designated as “terrorist” or characterized as “violent extremist” or “jihadist”. Hence, one finding is that the generation of “more” or “new” law is not really needed or necessarily effective. We have the legal tools; the concerns are that they are not being applied as required nor consistently with the best interests of the child.

The question at hand is not so much the content of the law but its applicability, to wit, questions of enforcement. Enforcement of the rights of the child is hampered in counter-terrorism frameworks because of lack of national and international capacities, as well as political will. Words matter, and the word “terrorist” has been used by states to justify an erosion of law in the name of national security. “Terrorist” groups have become politically and rhetorically constructed as more pernicious than “mere” armed groups or criminal syndicates.

How, then, to mitigate the drift towards securitization so as to ensure respect for core elements of the child rights framework? One approach would be to emphasize the *lex lata* requirement of considering the best interests of children as an element of all counter-terrorism initiatives. This overarching advocacy strategy, which reflects the content of settled law, could be coupled with the more practical efforts this chapter outlines for further refinement.

<sup>139</sup> The Canadian Armed Forces Joint Doctrine Note 2017-01 – Child Soldiers, discussed in Stephen J. Thorne, “Doctrine on Child Soldiers Is First of Its Kind”, *Legion: Canada's Military History Magazine*, 15 March 2017. Available from <https://legionmagazine.com/en/2017/03/doctrine-on-child-soldiers-is-first-of-its-kind>. With thanks to Joseph Rikhof for the information.

<sup>140</sup> See “The Vancouver Principles”. Available from [http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_developpement-enjeux\\_developpement/human\\_rights-droits\\_homme/principles-vancouver-principes.aspx?lang=eng](http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/principles-vancouver-principes.aspx?lang=eng).





**KATANGA  
PROVINCE, DRC**  
Children salute  
UN peacekeepers  
(MONUSCO).  
— January 2016

UN Photo/Abel  
Kavanagh

The CRC Committee might do well to accord greater attention to the intersection of children and counter-terrorism initiatives, particularly to encourage greater compliance with settled law. This, in turn, could begin with a wide study of state practice when it comes to the intersection of children and counter-terrorism. Deployment of methods such as naming and shaming by a variety of actors could help strengthen compliance.

The emphasis on counter-terrorism at the international level has not been matched with similar levels of attention to the role of humanitarian action and human rights principles in addressing these conflicts. As early as 2010, the Secretary General acknowledged the untoward effects of counter-terrorism measures and implored states to “consider the potential humanitarian consequences of their legal and policy initiatives and to avoid introducing measures that have the effect of inhibiting humanitarian actors in their efforts to engage armed groups for ... humanitarian purposes.”<sup>141</sup> Pressures on governments, whether self-imposed or otherwise, to appear “tough on terrorism” have since proved more powerful than any realization that support for, and protection of, humanitarian action is essential to promotion of human rights, peace, and security. This raises the question of whether a more concerted communications campaign to highlight the centrality of a human rights approach to preventing and responding to armed conflict could help counteract the rhetoric and focus on counter-terrorism.

There may be several strategies for addressing the securitization of the humanitarian sphere that has accompanied the growing focus on counter-terrorism. Humanitarian actors and advocates would do well to become familiar with strategies to protect “humanitarian space” through engagement with organizations such as the Charity and Security Network<sup>142</sup> and Harvard Law School’s Counterterrorism and Humanitarian Engagement Project.<sup>143</sup>

These suggestions and the potential issues for further elaboration explored in this chapter may serve as indications for how the child protection community might navigate the current operating environment they find themselves in. As highlighted by the authors here, in contemporary conflicts, effectively preventing child recruitment and use by armed groups, and facilitating the release and successful reintegration of associated children, will likely require multidimensional efforts that include advocacy, and programmatic and policy responses. These themes are reiterated in the concluding chapter, in which O’Neil and Van Broeckhoven tie together the findings across chapters and chart a course for the way forward, building on some of the emerging ideas outlined herein.

<sup>141</sup> UN Security Council, Report of the UN Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 11 November 2010, S/2010/579.

<sup>142</sup> See [www.charityandsecurity.org](http://www.charityandsecurity.org).

<sup>143</sup> See <https://pljac.law.harvard.edu/counterterrorism-and-humanitarian-engagement-project>.





**GAO, MALI**

A child plays in the waters of the Niger river. During the Jihadist occupation, in order to stop women from bathing in the river, everybody was forbidden from doing so. When security improved, communities resumed some of their normal activities.

— December 2014

UN Photo/Marco Dormino



# The Road to a Better Future

By Siobhan O'Neil and  
Kato Van Broeckhoven

WITH RESEARCH ASSISTANCE BY KABBA WILLIAMS



# 1 Introduction

Former child soldiers “may seem resilient not because it is in their nature but by necessity. Either they find a way to live or [they] die.” This was the observation of Kabba Williams, who was abducted as a seven-year-old to fight in Sierra Leone’s civil war. He is all too familiar with the challenges of reintegrating into civilian life after being engaged with an armed group.

In the summer of 2017, Williams interviewed eight other former child soldiers (five men and three women) who had been associated with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and Civil Defence Forces (CDF) during the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002).<sup>1</sup> While a sample of convenience, these valuable interviews echo some of the findings of the research in this volume. As mentioned in chapter 3 there is very little long-term follow-up with formerly associated children or, for that matter, adult ex-combatants. As a result, much needs to be learned about their prospects for long-term reintegration. Furthermore, because these interviews were conducted by a former child soldier rather than academics or staff members of international organizations (IOs) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), they likely elicited more candid responses.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, these interviews serve as beacons, providing “indications that might set us on the right road to inquiry.”<sup>3</sup>

More than 15 years after many of these former child soldiers had exited an armed group, and despite their war experiences, trauma, and lost years of education and job opportunities, most of them seem to be fairly resilient. Despite a lack of resources, opportunities, and, sometimes, family and community support, they all have livelihoods. Yet “no one was happy where he/she was now.”<sup>4</sup> In some cases, interviewees were not in the jobs they wanted, or not at the level they desired. A number of them worked in fields that utilized skills they learned or experiences they had as part of an armed group (e.g., cooking), but for some women, for example those engaged in sex work, those jobs were neither rewarding nor safe. Family and community acceptance as well as positive post-involvement narratives were correlated with better reintegration progress. Those who were associated with CDF were more likely to return to (or to have never left) their families/communities<sup>5</sup> and were largely treated as heroes, easing their reintegration into civilian life.

It is interesting to see, with the benefit of hindsight, how these individuals perceived their needs, which challenges they encountered after leaving an armed group, and how those have changed – or remained the same – over time. For some, loss of family or insufficient reintegration assistance and/or psychosocial support were the greatest challenges they faced upon exit, and appear to have had long-term repercussions. When they left the armed group, most had the primary goal of returning to school. Today, many seek to take the next step in their professional lives – including advancing to a higher level in their profession or starting their own business – but a lack of sponsorship or patronage, money for additional training and studies, or funding to launch their business venture prevents them from achieving these ambitions.<sup>6</sup>

Reflecting on the experiences and challenges of these former child soldiers offers a glimpse of the long road that lies ahead for children currently involved with armed groups in today’s armed conflicts. This concluding chapter will identify cross-cutting themes, key findings, and insights from the case studies, literature reviews, and analysis of legal challenges outlined in this volume. Although designing programmatic guidance is a separate component of this project,<sup>7</sup> this chapter will also endeavour to tease out some of the programmatic and policy implications of the research findings.

<sup>1</sup> Kabba Williams, “The Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers Fifteen Years after the Civil War in Sierra Leone,” interviews commissioned by United Nations University, summer 2017.

<sup>2</sup> That is not to rule out the possibility that having an interviewer with a similar background, and/or who was associated with a different faction during the war than the interviewee, may also introduce some bias into the survey.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, “The Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers.”

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> There could be an endogenous effect here, too, if children associated with armed forces and certain armed groups (e.g., RUF) were more likely to lose family in the war.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Shepler, *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), pp. 37–41.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to filling key knowledge gaps about child recruitment and use for “extreme violence” and factors that impede child release from NSAGs, this project aims to produce programmatic guidance for preventing the recruitment and use of children by, and effectively disengaging children from, groups involved in such violence. The guidance, which will be drafted as part of a consultative process with input from a wide range of practitioners and policymakers, is expected in March 2018.





ISTANBUL, TURKEY

Untitled.

— Winter 2016

By 100cameras student photographer, Maryam, age 10.

## 2 Key Insights

### A. MULTIDIMENSIONAL CAUSALITY

As in previous conflicts, children become involved with non-state armed groups for multiple, interrelated reasons. Across conflicts, there is no evidence of a singular motivation or cause for child association with armed groups. While certain factors are especially prominent in particular contexts, the cocktail of motivational factors is likely peculiar to the individual. The case studies in this volume note some of the most prominent structural-, social-, and individual-level factors evidenced in the Syria and Iraq, Mali and Nigeria conflicts. Many of these are similar to each other, and to those of prior conflicts that were not characterized as violent extremist. While chapter 2 and the case studies in chapters 4, 5, and 6 have sought to distil the evidence around factors that influence child re-recruitment and use by, and exit from, armed groups, much remains to be learned about how these factors interact, if there are common tipping points, and whether targeting some factors and processes over others can have greater protective impact.

### B. THE NARRATIVE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM VS. LOCAL REALITIES

One of the key takeaways from this research is that despite the prevalent use of the terms “violent extremist”, “radicalized”, and “terrorist” in international circles to describe key armed groups operating in the contemporary conflicts detailed in this volume, the narratives these terms imply often fail to map onto local realities. As the Mali case study demonstrates, while from the outside the conflict is often seen as a clash of jihadists and the state for control of the country, the crisis is far more complex, with myriad actors, most of whom are motivated by local conflicts, grievances, and aspirations. It is telling that in Mali, there are no equivalent terms in the local languages for “radicalization” or “extremism”, and locals rarely cite these concepts as explanations for child or youth involvement with NSAGs; the terms are only used when engaging with outside, largely Western officials.<sup>8</sup> Thus the focus on 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>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence’” Expert-Level Working Meeting, Bamako, 13-14 March 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Based on interviews with 63 previously involved youths, including 19 in jail. Lori-Anne Thérault-Bénoni and William Assanvo, “Mali’s Young ‘Jihadists’: Fuelled by Faith or Circumstance?,” Policy Brief 89, Institute for Security Studies, 26 August 2016, p. 6. Available from <https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/malis-young-jihadists-fuelled-by-faith-or-circumstance>. Louisa Waugh and Mana Farooqi, “They Treat Us All Like Jihadis: Looking Beyond Violent Extremism to Building Peace in Mali,” International Alert, Policy Brief, December 2016, p. 6. Available from [www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Mali\\_TheyTreatUsAllLikeJihadis\\_EN\\_2016.pdf](http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Mali_TheyTreatUsAllLikeJihadis_EN_2016.pdf).

## IDEOLOGY

Much attention has been paid to the role of ideology, particularly religious ideology, in motivating involvement in many of the armed groups that dominate the conflicts covered in this volume. The case studies suggest that ideology plays a far less important role than assumed by outsiders. This is not to say that ideology is immaterial. There are, however, three key considerations when assessing the role of ideology: First, isolating the role of ideology is difficult because it is often entangled with other important factors (e.g., community, identity, grievances). Are people motivated to engage in conflict by scripture or by grievances that map onto their ethnoreligious community? The Nigeria case study highlights this issue, as Boko Haram has intertwined its religious ideology with a rejection of the Nigerian state. Given that many Nigerians in the northeast view the group's ideological positions as illegitimate and unrepresentative of Islam, it may be that the latter component of the group's platform is the greater driver of association with Boko Haram for people in the region. Second, when ideology appears to be part of a child's motivation for associating with an armed group, it is likely one of several influential factors. As chapter 2 suggests, in the few studies where children identify ideology as a motivating factor, they also list factors such as financial incentives and protecting or promoting their community. Third, as demonstrated in the Syria and Iraq study, "in many cases, ideology [including religious ideology] is a post hoc rationalization for joining rather than the proximate cause,"<sup>10</sup> suggesting it is more likely to become important in the indoctrination stage, and/or post-involvement, as a means of justifying violence than serve as a motivator for people to join armed groups.

Radicalization as a concept remains underdeveloped and empirically undersupported.

## RADICALIZATION

In concert with the attention on ideology, particularly religious ideology, the concept of radicalization has influenced recent policy and programmatic discussions on dealing with armed conflict and political violence more broadly. Radicalization as a concept remains underdeveloped and empirically undersupported. There is no consensus on what the term means (e.g., a set of beliefs, cognitive shifts, behavioural shifts, shifts in social norms, or some combination thereof). Many of the claims around radicalization are problematic. For example, as pointed out in chapter 2, the idea that radicalization is a linear process and a precursor to political violence is contradicted by evidence, namely the many who appear to have engaged in heinous acts of political violence without ever appearing to undergo such a shift. This is not to suggest

that some of the concepts that are often grouped under the umbrella of "radicalization" are not important.<sup>11</sup> Where they are based on scientific evidence, some of these component elements may be important for diagnosing the problem and designing solutions. For example, there is a significant body of work on the social norms of violence – including those promoted within violent groups, which may help explain why children and adults come to support or engage with violent groups or conduct violent acts. By focusing on empirically supported and conceptually developed aspects of human behaviour, it is possible to address the issues of child recruitment and post-involvement reintegration without relying on new, untested concepts, particularly ones that have the potential to do harm. Such an approach runs counter to the tendency to exceptionalize certain subsets of armed groups, namely jihadist groups, but also those listed as terrorist or dubbed violent extremist, and provides a broad enough approach that it can be applied and tailored to a wide array of organizations such as organized crime syndicates, street gangs, and terrorist or rebel groups.

## c. TERMINOLOGY MATTERS

As previously discussed in this volume, the terminology increasingly applied to children (and adults) in contemporary conflicts has limited analytical purchase and significant implications, as these terms can be highly politicized, pejorative, and stigmatizing. The terms "terrorist", "violent extremist", "radical", and "radicalized" are often used with this purpose in mind, to indicate society's disapproval and to highlight that an individual or group operates outside the norms of society. Some have argued that this labelling has the potential to exacerbate the problem by signalling that there is no room for advocating for a particular cause or redressing a particular grievance within

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 4, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Littman, "Children and Extreme Violence: Insights from Social Science on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups"; State of Research Brief, United Nations University (UNU), 2017, pp. 6–7. Available from [http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6290/unu\\_briefs\\_SocialScience.pdf](http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6290/unu_briefs_SocialScience.pdf).

the bounds and norms of society.<sup>12</sup> This is further complicated by the fact that some armed groups self-identify as jihadist, promoting the image that they are the champion and defender of a religious mantle. While there is an argument for not arbitrating these self-avowed characterizations, in certain instances – as the Nigeria case study in chapter 6 highlights – armed group leaders appear to utilize religious ideology for tactical and strategic purposes. In such cases, to use the “jihadist” designation may elevate the credibility of the armed group’s claim beyond what is due.

In the various workshops and convenings held as part of this research initiative, participants often acknowledged that these terms were problematic for many of the reasons described above, but felt they lacked alternative terms or shorthand for the larger ideas that they wanted to address succinctly. As categories of analysis – the building blocks for research – these terms can present challenges, as they are subjective and may lead to unhelpful disaggregation and subsamples, which could, in turn, lead to biased research. As categories of practice – the sub-units for informing and demarcating policy and resources – they may also have limited utility. Basing policy off a simplistic, dichotomous characterization of armed actors – separating regular armed groups and those that are seen as Salafi-Jihadists – flattens and equates widely disparate groups that differ along key characteristics that may be more important than those highlighted by a violent extremist or jihadist demarcation (e.g., territorial control, state sponsor, extra-state goals).

#### D. THE FALLACY OF NEUTRALITY

Those on the outside looking in to conflict theatres often assume that neutrality for children, their families, and even whole communities is possible. All three case studies in this volume provide persuasive evidence to the contrary. For example, as chapter 4 highlights, when territorial armed groups hold physical and economic coercive power over large swaths of the population, as in Syria, there is often no other option for children than joining. When the state assumes that all adolescent boys and young men in a given territory are affiliated with rebel groups, as was the case in Aleppo, neutrality has no benefit. When remaining unaffiliated raises suspicions about whether an individual has truly disengaged from a rebel group, as is the case with children formerly associated with Boko Haram, the benefits of joining a self-defence group far outweigh those of remaining neutral. This pressure on individuals to switch sides in order to signal that they no longer represent a threat, as highlighted by the Nigerian case in chapter 6, has serious implications for release and reintegration programming, which may be able to provide similar signalling and assurances while helping prevent recidivism.

#### E. COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION VS. INDIVIDUAL RECRUITMENT

The Malian crisis, particularly in the context of wholesale community mobilization into self-defence groups or alignment with outside armed groups, reinforces the difficulty of maintaining neutrality in many conflicts. It is important to distinguish this type of community mobilization from individual recruitment. While individual recruitment takes place against the same backdrop, and is influenced by similar factors, community mobilization presents particular programming challenges. Community mobilization into armed groups is not a new phenomenon, but combatting it remains an enduring challenge. Despite the numbers thought to be involved, community mobilization can be less visible and harder to address. When entire communities in Mali mount their own self-defence group or align with outside groups, or when communities in Nigeria create their own self-defence forces, children are mobilized alongside adults. In these situations, it is improbable that a child could remain unaffiliated. Likewise, children are unlikely to disengage from such an armed group until their community stands down or disengages. The Nigerian study found that, in some instances, children associated with community self-defence militias felt tremendous social pressure to remain in the group. In the Niger Delta conflict, there are reports of “leaders of these [community self-defence] groups themselves ... [who] insisted that young people leave and go back to school,”<sup>13</sup> raising the possibility that the same sorts of social pressure that often incentivize associating with armed groups in the first place could also facilitate disengagement. While most children who join self-defence groups never leave their communities and do not face the same stigmatization after association (many, in fact, are viewed as heroes),

<sup>12</sup> Labelling a group as “terrorist” serves to delegitimize it, but in doing so, prospects for peaceful resolution of conflict are reduced. Harmonie Toros, “Legitimacy and Complexity in Terrorist Conflicts,” *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2008). Indeed, “part of the reason terrorists operate outside the moral norms of society is that they feel alienated from that society and so consciously reject it.” Jeremy Ginges, “Deterring the Terrorist: A Psychological Evaluation of Different Strategies for Deterring Terrorists,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 1997), p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> Search for Common Ground, “Analysis of the Situation of Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the Niger Delta and Northern Region of Nigeria,” July 2012. Available from [www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/NGR\\_EV\\_Jul12\\_AnalysisOfTheSituation.pdf](http://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/NGR_EV_Jul12_AnalysisOfTheSituation.pdf).

## Children and youth become associated with armed groups for largely pro-social reasons.

they are also far less likely to receive programmatic assistance to help them deal with physical and mental injuries accrued during their association or to facilitate their return to civilian life.<sup>14</sup>

Even in the Syrian and Iraqi contexts, where recruitment into armed groups is more individual by comparison, the question of which children become associated with parties to conflict, and which armed groups (or armed forces) they associate with, appears heavily influenced by familial, community, and peer networks. These are not new dynamics (e.g., the Philippines<sup>15</sup>), but they raise questions about whether existing interventions effectively respond (or are well tailored) to contemporary situations of community mobilization. For

more individual recruitment cases, whether it is in the best interest of the child to reunite them after release with family members who remain affiliated also deserves attention. While any assessment should be made on a case-by-case basis, emerging evidence from another context (e.g., street gang interventions) suggests that family-based interventions may work even when family members themselves are also associated with the group.<sup>16</sup> If and how this finding may apply to armed group contexts remains to be tested.

### F. THE FLUIDITY OF ASSOCIATION AND MEMBERSHIP

The dynamics of community mobilization complicate a formal conceptualization of membership in armed groups. When children are mobilized into conflict as part of their communities, their involvement spans not only a wide range of roles, but also a continuum of formality, engagement, and agency. In recognition, this volume has largely used the terminology of “association with,” instead of “membership in,” armed groups. Yet, for certain armed groups – particularly those deemed terrorist, violent extremist, or jihadist – the language of membership is often used. This is likely due in part to laws that specifically criminalize membership in proscribed terrorist groups (in addition to violent acts) as well as assumptions that individuals are unlikely to be casually associated with such fanatical organizations. This may indeed be the case with small, clandestine terrorist groups that operate entirely underground, scenarios that are less conducive to casual association. In conflict contexts, particularly those where terrorist groups operate in the open and/or control large swaths of territory, association is much more fluid. As in numerous cases, children did not wittingly join a NSAG, but rather were forced to perform military roles after they entered into what they thought was a labour agreement.<sup>17</sup> In their field research, the authors featured in this volume came across reports of children who didn’t even know which group they were actually associated with. In community mobilization scenarios, the degree and type of engagement varies enormously across the community, especially over time as the community and the armed group’s position in the conflict shift.

### G. DIFFERENCES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE CONFLICT THEATRES

While the case studies highlight differences within each conflict, it should also be noted that there are important differences in the factors that influence child recruitment and use inside conflict theatres as compared to areas adjacent to and far away from the fighting (e.g., social media). The case study of the Syria and Iraq conflicts in chapter 4 draws this distinction, especially with regard to ideological and financial incentives. While Syrian children living under IS often expressed a need to support themselves and their families as a reason for joining, children and youth who travel from outside appear less motivated by financial incentives. Indeed, many of those travelling from outside Syria actually lose money by joining an armed group, as they have to pay to be smuggled into the country.

#### SOCIAL MEDIA

One particular difference is the influence of social media. The Syria and Iraq conflicts suggest that while social media can play a role in recruitment inside conflict zones, its influence outside the conflict is outsized by compar-

<sup>14</sup> Shepler, *Childhood Deployed*, pp. 105, 137. Williams, “The Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers.”

<sup>15</sup> For a description of the dynamics in the Philippines, see the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, “Tackling the Issue of Children Associated with Armed groups in Mindanao, the Philippines”, accessed 12 December 2017. Available from <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/children-with-armed-groups-philippines>.

<sup>16</sup> In Los Angeles and Honduras, there are secondary prevention programmes to identify high-risk youth before they engage in violence, and provide them with family-based counselling with the purpose of diverting participation in violence. These programmes employ multigenerational and structural family systems models and target a number of risk factors, including family gang influence (i.e., having two or more gang-involved family members or reporting familial pressure to join a gang). Practitioners report an average drop of 52 per cent across nine risk factors measured in Honduras, including a 43 per cent drop in the variable measuring family gang influence. This decline is similar to the average 48 per cent drop in overall risk that was reported in the Los Angeles program. These results suggest that pairing accurate risk assessment tools with intensive family programming can have a favourable impact on at-risk youth and their families across multiple contexts. Karen Hennigan and Guillermo Cespedes, “Violence Reduction: Dynamics of Family-Based Secondary Violence Prevention Programs”, working paper, 1 August 2017, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> In the DRC, for example, children were hired to transport goods to a Nyatura rebel position. Others were lured into a group with the promise of work. S/2015/19, pp. 27–28.



ison. Media coverage and social media are the dominant channels through which children and youth further afield are exposed to the conflict and often how they come to engage with its parties and victims. Social media can be a gateway to connect with armed groups, a virtual replication or reinforcement of direct personal connections to armed actors. As more and more children and young people become digitally savvy and live some aspects of their lives online, there may be opportunities for virtual interventions. For those interventions to be successful, however, more understanding is needed about how online behaviour mirrors and influences offline decisions, and vice versa.<sup>18</sup>

## H. RISKS, NEEDS, AND RESILIENCE

Given the interest in prevention, it is important to think about how predictive modelling could help identify vulnerable children, address their risks and needs, and bolster the protective systems around them. Chapter 2 raised the idea that risk accumulation models – like those employed in developmental psychology research and criminological work – could have utility for prevention-oriented programming aimed at children. The same factors that put children at risk of association with armed groups might also put them at risk for other adverse outcomes – trafficking, forced migration, and exploitative labour. As the case studies in this volume demonstrate, certain structural factors form the backdrop against which child recruitment and use occur across contexts (e.g., insecurity and economic devastation), but these alone do not explain child association. If general risk accumulation models are based on the understanding that accumulating risks can lead to all manner of adverse outcomes, such models might be broadly helpful in targeting prevention resources without some of the stigma or ethical concerns that could come with predictive models focused on terrorism or violent extremism.

There is great interest in understanding protective factors and processes that could help safeguard children from armed group recruitment and community mobilization. Unfortunately, as chapter 2 notes, very little empirical work specifically focuses on armed group recruitment and use of children. However, a few key findings from the broader work on resilience are likely applicable to armed conflict contexts: First, research suggests resilience is not the result of individual traits alone, but rather is derived from an ecology of individual factors, relationships, support systems, and the broader cultural context.<sup>19</sup> Second, it is important to distinguish between some individual traits associated with resilience that may be more innate and therefore hard to programme around, as compared to other traits, practices, and coping mechanisms that can be learned. Third, while “the specific processes that influence risk and resilience are likely to be shaped by culture and context”<sup>20</sup> and thus may differ from conflict to conflict, there is evidence from a wide array of contexts that suggests that family and community support are associated with improved mental health outcomes. More context-specific research on the protective factors and processes that help children avoid association with armed groups is central to designing effective positive prevention programming.

## I. THE APPEAL OF ARMED GROUPS

In the context of the conflicts featured in this volume’s case study chapters, the appeal of armed groups comes into focus. Children and young people report that part of the appeal of joining an armed group is the promise of having basic needs such as security and food covered, as well as gaining access to opportunities for advancement and financial incentives. Armed groups can also offer a channel for addressing grievances (personal, community, or national). Research detailed in chapter 2 suggests that non-material, altruistic incentives also are key for understanding why armed groups can be attractive to children and young people, particularly in conflict zones. There is evidence across conflict contexts that suggests that children and youth become associated with armed groups for largely prosocial reasons – to defend and promote the interests of their families and communities, to be part of something larger than themselves, and/or to bring meaning to their lives. Two appealing aspects of armed groups that have implications for both prevention and release and reintegration programming deserve a bit more attention – identity and status.

<sup>18</sup> Amanda E. Rogers, “Children and Extreme Violence: Viewing Non-State Armed Groups from a Brand Marketing Lens – A Case Study of Islamic State”, State of Research Brief, UNU, 2017, pp. 9–10. Available from [http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6292/unu\\_briefs\\_Branding\\_WEB.pdf](http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6292/unu_briefs_Branding_WEB.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Theresa Stichick Betancourt and Kashif Tanveer Khan, “The Mental Health of Children Affected by Armed Conflict: Protective Processes and Pathways to Resilience”, *International Review of Psychiatry*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008).

<sup>20</sup> Theresa S. Betancourt, Robert T. Brennan, Julia Rubin-Smith, Garrett M. Fitzmaurice, and Stephen E. Gilman, “Sierra Leone’s Former Child Soldiers: A Longitudinal Study of Risk, Protective Factors, and Mental Health”, *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, Vol. 49, No. 6 (2010), p. 613.

## IDENTITY

Children, particularly adolescents, struggle with their identity and issues of belonging. Armed groups provide a ready-made identity, community, and sense of significance, as well as some semblance of order amid chaos. For many children and youth, the potential to be part of a meaningful group may have been one of their motivations for associating with a NSAG, despite how the situation may look to outsiders. Even if children didn't willingly join the group, once inside it processes may lead to identification with the group, complicating exit. Research in Mali also suggests that in strictly hierarchical societies, armed groups can provide a way for young people to express themselves beyond the confines of what society would typically allow someone of their age or status. Even if children and youth recognize that there are problems with the identity offered by an armed group, remaining identified with the NSAG may appear to be their least bad option unless they are presented with attractive alternatives.

## STATUS

In addition to satisfying a need for belonging, armed groups present children and youth with opportunities to enhance their status. Groups can do this in a number of ways, including by allowing children to transcend the social immobility inherent in a patriarchal society or clan system, creating alternate paths to culturally established developmental milestones (e.g., marriage), or providing them with positions and symbols of power (e.g., weapons). The potential loss of status can be a disincentive for exiting a group, and can complicate reintegration into civilian life. Children and youth "who disengage [from armed groups] often struggle with feelings of worthlessness and disempowerment, particularly if they are unable to find social and vocational fulfilment among civilians"<sup>21</sup> that rivals what they enjoyed in the group. Failing to address status may undermine programmatic activities, as research suggests that when powerful people feel a threat to their ego they tend to become aggressive.<sup>22</sup> Boosting individuals' self-worth, however, can mitigate aggressive behaviour and contribute to a sense of agency.<sup>23</sup> Given the evidence available about why young people may be motivated to join armed groups, and what they are likely to lose in leaving them, it is important that prevention efforts and post-involvement interventions take into account the importance of identity, desire for significance, and status.

## PEER (INCLUDING VIRTUAL) NETWORKS

While peer networks can draw children into NSAGs, they may also have the potential to help children exit, and possibly prevent them from joining in the first place. If children have meaningful peer networks that are galvanized against NSAG recruitment, they may serve as a protective system that helps dissuade curious or impulsive adolescents from joining. For example, messages to encourage exit are likely to be more persuasive if they come from these influential peers than from adults, NGOs, or other institutions. Virtual peer networks could be especially valuable in this regard. As the Syria and Iraq case study found, some of the children and youth formerly associated with IS had maintained their diverse friend networks online during their time with the group. Those networks were potentially useful for trying to extricate friends still associated with the group – a virtual underground railroad out. Rather than break down the bonds and networks developed in armed groups, which had been a focus of traditional DDR interventions, there is the possibility that they could occasionally be repurposed to facilitate reintegration. For example, a group of eight former Al-Shabaab members reunited after demobilizing and started a business that now hires other ex-combatants.<sup>24</sup>

## J. OLD PROBLEMS, CONTINUED CHALLENGES

### DEFINING CHILDHOOD

In all three case studies in this volume, researchers encountered definitional challenges to what constitutes adulthood and, more specifically, who is considered a "child."<sup>25</sup> International standards continue to run up against socio-cultural constructs of childhood, which can contribute to the problem of child recruitment and use, and undermine programmatic responses to it. The issue of demarcating childhood is also complicated by the self-perception

<sup>21</sup> Chapter 4, p. 140.

<sup>22</sup> This is particularly the case when individuals feel a lack of competence. Nathanael J. Fast and Serena Chen, "When the Boss Feels Inadequate: Power, Incompetence, and Aggression," *Psychological Science*, Vol. 20, No. 11 (2009).

<sup>23</sup> This in turn can reduce an individual's desire for power. Joris Lammers, Janka I. Stoker, Floor Rink, and Adam D. Galinsky, "To Have Control Over or to Be Free from Others? The Desire for Power Reflects a Need for Autonomy," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2016).

<sup>24</sup> Abdiqafar Farah, The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), correspondence, November 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Lindsay Stark, Neil Boothby, and Alastair Ager, "Children and Fighting Forces: 10 Years on from Cape Town," *Disasters*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2009), pp. 524–525.

of children. One of the attractions of armed groups, particularly for boys, is that in many contexts they allow children to transcend the label of child or boy and become men in the eyes of their communities. After NSAG involvement, few children self-identify as children. These self-perceptions, combined with cultural constructs of childhood, raise a host of challenges for practitioners who need to protect the best interests of children without infantilizing beneficiaries across advocacy efforts, programmes, and communication strategies. As chapter 7 outlines, one practical example of this arises in the need to balance the narratives about children involved in armed groups. The portrayal of children involved in conflict tends towards the extremes: victim, perpetrator, occasionally hero for those with self-defence forces, and, increasingly, terrorist. There are legal and advocacy advantages to promoting the children-as-victims narrative, but such characterizations may be offensive to victims of the armed groups to which the children belong, as well as the communities receiving them, and may even undermine children's reintegration. Is it possible to create a more nuanced narrative that could help children associated with armed groups to deal with the stigma and shame that they often feel<sup>26</sup> and would assist in their transition to civilian life<sup>27</sup> and economic and social reintegration?<sup>28</sup>

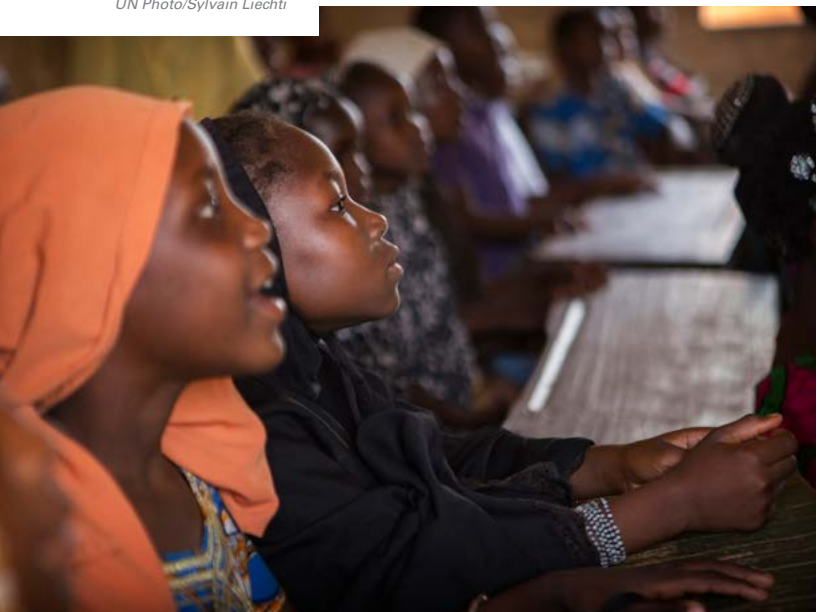
## YOUTH

This volume started with the recognition that while it was oriented towards children associated with armed groups, many of its findings would be as relevant to youth in similar situations. As chapter 7 lays out, international law provides special legal protections for those under 18, but the needs of a 17-year-old and a 19-year-old are likely to be very similar. This suggests that there is utility in applying some substantive aspects of children's programming to interventions aimed at youth. Additionally, youth who entered armed groups as children, especially during their formative years, but exited as adults may be particularly vulnerable after release. 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. Provisional research findings suggest this cohort represents a significant portion (24 per cent to 30 per cent) of demobilized adult populations,<sup>29</sup> but unlike those mobilized and demobilized as adults, these youth have weaker education profiles, fewer economic opportunities, and less social capital, and may not reintegrate as well into family and community.<sup>30</sup>

### MOPTI, MALI

Young girls at a  
UNICEF project site.  
— March 2017

UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti



## INVISIBLE POPULATIONS, PARTICULARLY GIRLS

In addition to reaching children who are mobilized by their communities, and as such, rarely leave them and may not be as visible to practitioners, there are questions about how to help children who self-reintegrate. Traditionally, girls have been much harder to identify and reach programmatically, as many self-reintegrate to avoid the stigma that comes with armed group association. From the outset, this project sought to examine the gender dimension of child involvement in armed groups in contemporary conflicts. In each case study, efforts were made to engage girls and female stakeholders, including through female-only focus groups, and by using female fixers and interpreters to find and engage key female stakeholders. Each research team asked questions about the specific factors that impacted why and how girls became involved with, were used by, and left armed groups. Despite these efforts, girls involved with armed groups remain an elusive population. The research comes up short in providing the desired level of clarity on how gender impacts child recruitment and use in

<sup>26</sup> Blame and stigma placed on former child soldiers may complicate their capacity for psychological coping and reintegration. I. Derluyn, E. Broekaert, G. Schuyten, and E. De Temmerman, "Post-Traumatic Stress in Former Ugandan Child Soldiers," *Lancet*, Vol. 363, Issue 9412 (2004), p. 863.

<sup>27</sup> Shepler, *Childhood Deployed*, p. 145.

<sup>28</sup> The authors found a difference between CDF and RUF ex-combatants' social and economic reintegration. Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Demobilization and Reintegration," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2007), p. 549.

<sup>29</sup> Based on the World Bank's Transitional Demobilization and Reintegration Program (TDRP) data (30.8 per cent), and a Rwanda case study (24 per cent). Richard Bowd and Randolph Rhea, "The Missing Generation: Addressing Child Mobilised-Adult Demobilised Combatants in DDR Programming," presentation to the Interagency Working Group (IAWG) DDR Workshop Research Side-Event, Stockholm, 20 October 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.





**BASHIQA FRONTLINE, IRAQ**

Girls associated with the armed Peshmerga units of the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK) training. Many look like children and even carry cuddly toys. When asked if they are minors, their leader says embarrassed, "This generation is like that, their faces do not show their true age."

— October 2016

Lea Mandana







current conflicts. The case studies included herein certainly provide some indications as to how various structural, social, and individual factors influence female engagement and use, particularly around roles inside armed groups, sexual violence, and challenges upon exit. Yet much more attention is needed to better understand the experiences and needs of girls and women in these contexts and to address this enduring knowledge gap.

### SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

There is limited but compelling evidence about sexual violence against, and the forced marriages of, women and girls in armed group contexts in Nigeria, Mali, Syria, and Iraq. In Nigeria, anecdotes involving women who did not realize their husbands were associated with Boko Haram or girls who were abducted and forced to marry Boko Haram fighters are plentiful. In Syria and Iraq, there are stories of young girls and women who lived in IS-controlled territory and were forced or pressured to marry IS fighters. In these contexts, girls and women appear to be used by armed groups as part of the recruitment appeal to boys and men. For groups with state-like ambitions, marrying off girls and women also helps ensure a future generation of supporters and bolsters their nation-building projects. In Mali, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb appears to have made a concerted effort to marry its fighters to girls and women in northern villages to establish relationships with local communities, in order to gain a foothold in a region where the group has few tangible connections. Across these cases, there are concerns that even if the fighting ends, girls may not be quickly released by armed groups. Unlike children who have played logistical and fighting roles and who have less value as a conflict subsidies, girls who play domestic roles or serve as wives retain their value in the eyes of group commanders.

Sexual violence and abuse against women and girls is evidently widespread in many of today's conflict contexts. In Nigeria, it appears that many of the girls and women married to Boko Haram fighters have been raped by their "husbands." Many bear children during their time with armed groups. As chapter 6 observes, their offspring are often seen as having "bad blood,"<sup>31</sup> and they and their mothers may be stigmatized. Women and girls may also suffer chronic health problems as a result of sexual abuse. In many cases, girls and women may seek to avoid the limited services available to them upon exit, choosing rather to self-reintegrate for fear of further contributing to their stigmatization. This is not to suggest that boys and men do not face sexual exploitation and abuse in contemporary armed conflict. As chapter 2 highlighted, there are some indications that sexual violence rates against men and boys are significantly underreported and may not be that different from those against girls and women in some conflicts. More work is needed in this area, particularly surveys that ask the same questions about sexual exploitation and abuse of both male and female populations.

## K. DISENGAGEMENT AND DESISTANCE

In many ways, the dominant conceptualization of how children exit armed groups may be out of date. Perhaps this is a holdover from when and how entire armed groups were demobilized as part of a peace process, but the expectation is largely that exiting is a discrete event. In reality, exiting an armed group is likely a process or, more accurately, a series of interrelated processes. As mentioned in chapters 2 and 3, models from criminology are potentially informative for thinking about how children exit from armed groups. Desistance is the process of ending offending, in this case of political violence. Disengagement is the process of separating from the group, both physically and psychologically. In many cases, neither process is smooth and linear, but is full of fits and starts. Where children are mobilized into or towards armed groups alongside their community, this conceptualization makes sense. In cases where conflict dynamics make neutrality impossible, an individual's exit from one group may not be permanent, or he/she may subsequently become associated with another. As the Syria and Iraq case study highlights, the continued psychological, social, economic, and security stressors many children and youth experience upon leaving, as well as barriers to reintegration, can push them back towards NSAGs.<sup>32</sup> Even in cases where children can maintain physical separation from their former group, the process of disengaging from the group's identity may take much longer. The phenomena of recidivism, side-switching, and elongated transitions away from armed groups have important implications for programme design and implementation, impact assessment, and policy.

<sup>31</sup> International Alert and UNICEF, "Bad Blood: Perceptions of Children Born of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Women and Girls Associated with Boko Haram in Northeast", February 2016. Available from [www.unicef.org/nigeria/Nigeria\\_BadBlood\\_EN\\_2016.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/nigeria/Nigeria_BadBlood_EN_2016.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Chapter 4, p. 140.



#### KIDAL, MALI

A peacekeeper searches for pieces of mortar shell amid the wreckage at the damaged MINUSMA camp, which was attacked the night before, resulting in the deaths of three peacekeepers.

— June 2017

UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

## L REINTEGRATE INTO WHAT?

One of the tenets of the Paris Principles is that children associated with armed groups should be released “at all times, even in the midst of conflict and for the duration of the conflict.”<sup>33</sup> Once released, the assumption is that most children will be reunited with their families and reintegrated into their communities. In each of the three conflicts examined in detail in this volume, large swaths of territory are completely unstable – the economy does not function, and there are no services or rule of law. In parts of Syria, for example, the unemployment rate is staggering, there are no functioning schools or services, and violence is prevalent. This raises questions about expectations for release and reintegration programmes, which, like prevention programmes, are relatively limited in scope, duration, and funding. Even if programmes successfully address children’s needs and risk factors, and work to enhance their resilience to future challenges, will they be able to withstand the structural conditions and pressures that characterize active conflicts?

# 3 Programming in Contemporary Contexts

Some of the findings highlighted above echo observations and lessons learned from past conflicts. This raises the question, are standard prevention and release and reintegration approaches fit for purpose in contemporary conflict contexts? Or do particular aspects of the armed groups involved in today’s conflicts (particularly those who self-identify or are characterized/listed as jihadist, violent extremist, or terrorist) or the broader dynamics of the conflicts themselves require a new or adjusted approach to prevention and release and reintegration programming for children?

It is perhaps helpful to consider this question in light of the current programmatic response in contemporary conflicts, like those in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria. As detailed in chapters 4, 5, and 6, these are highly complex conflicts that present a range of programming challenges including, but not limited to, state failure and retreat, and the proliferation and fragmentation of armed groups, many of which hold territory; are characterized as terrorist, jihadist, or violent extremist; and/or have transnational reach. These highly insecure contexts limit humanitarian access, inspire heavy-handed security responses, and make it difficult, if not impossible, to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable populations. In addition, contemporary conflict contexts can challenge an integrated response and cloud visibility on the breadth, design, coverage, implementation, and impact of existing programmes for children.

<sup>33</sup> UNICEF, *The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, February 2007, p. 5, para 1.5. Available from [www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf).

In all three cases, the international response to the plight of children has been a mix of emergency services, efforts to address basic needs (e.g., protection, hygiene, sanitation, food, shelter), psychosocial services (including those that address sexual or gender-based violence), and education and job-training initiatives. Child protection actors also engage in advocacy efforts with the governments involved on issues like the detention of children allegedly associated with armed groups. There are certainly many other child protection efforts undertaken by local and/or national actors that are not addressed here. What follows focuses mostly on recovery and large-scale IO and NGO prevention and release and reintegration efforts.

In Syria, the IO and NGO response is primarily focused on providing impacted populations in hard-to-reach areas with emergency supplies and services – including drop-in centres for health and psychosocial services. In addition, there is a focus on the reconstruction of schools and creation of child-friendly spaces. In countries impacted by the conflict, namely Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, programmes are largely geared towards mitigating the impact of violence, building resilience, and addressing gender-based violence. There are also efforts to improve access to formal and alternative education, vocational training, and psychosocial services. Specialized child protection services for refugee children include family tracing and reunification.

Even if well-tailored to a particular child's situation, it is unclear if a programmatic intervention can be effective in the face of daunting conflict dynamics and the pressures they bring to bear on children.

In Mali, the focus has been on using local child protection committees to sensitize communities to child's rights issues. There have been efforts to provide psychosocial services and child-friendly spaces to at-risk populations. Some vulnerable populations of children, including those who return from armed groups, have received reintegration programming, including schooling or vocational training.

In Nigeria, psychosocial support is offered to children exposed to violence, including targeted services to address sexual and gender-based violence. Programming efforts also include family tracing and reunification. Additionally, there is a focus on awareness-raising activities, such as local child protection committees, parents forums, and radio broadcasting efforts, as well as the training of local leaders and imams to spread "anti-radicalization messages."<sup>34</sup>

With the limited information available, it is impossible to evaluate the impact of the programmatic response. However, some evidence suggests that not all aspects of child recruitment and use are being addressed. In Nigeria, for example, where most children appear to become involved with Boko Haram under duress, few programmes focus attention on reducing forced and voluntary recruitment. Of the programmes that do exist, there are signs that they are not scaled to meet the needs or do not reach the right populations,

a lack of access resulting either from insecurity or state restrictions. Few children exiting armed groups or fleeing them "received services beyond food and water."<sup>35</sup> In Mali, in the face of constant attacks, existing efforts have "only been able to provide limited and patchy emergency services to alleviate poverty, resulting in limited impact."<sup>36</sup>

While there is insufficient information to judge the efficacy of any of the efforts, given what is known about the multi-causality of child association with armed groups it is possible that these types of prevention-oriented programmes (e.g., safe spaces, education) could conceivably have a preventive impact for individual children. As evidence highlighted in this volume suggests, proximity and interaction with armed groups and unmet basic needs (e.g., food, shelter) are thought to influence child trajectories into armed groups, and thus it is possible that such interventions may help prevent an individual child from reaching a risk tipping point. It would be unrealistic, however, to expect that such interventions would stop every case of child recruitment. This is because it is hard to provide programming that addresses the particular risk, need, and protective-factor profile of every child. Even if well-tailored to a particular child's situation, it is unclear if a programmatic intervention can be effective in the

<sup>34</sup> Chapter 6, p. 203.

<sup>35</sup> Chapter 6, p. 202.

<sup>36</sup> Chapter 5, p. 174.



face of daunting conflict dynamics and the pressures they bring to bear on children. What then needs to change or be adapted to address child recruitment and use by armed groups in places like Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria?

## A. ENDURING CHALLENGES AND NEW DYNAMICS

The conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria highlight both the enduring challenges to effective child protection efforts in armed conflict and some new dynamics, including the scale of the problem, the difficulty of operating in active conflict contexts, and challenges implementing and adequately funding programmatic designs. How can child protection actors navigate environments where certain types of armed groups – particularly jihadist groups – are present, and, perhaps more importantly, the likely securitized response to their presence. How do you adapt programmes to these conditions?

First and foremost, the research presented in this volume suggests that the scale of the problem of child association with NSAGs is vastly underappreciated and far beyond the scope of the current programmatic response. Continued invisibility (either due to community mobilization, gender-specific challenges, or auto-reintegration) and access challenges undermine robust estimates. Children's mobilization through their communities – as detailed in the Mali and Nigeria case studies – appears significantly more prevalent than what is implied by the verified cases of child recruitment and the numbers of children known to have exited armed groups. In Mali, for example, only 114 children are formally known to have exited armed groups from 2015 to 2016,<sup>37</sup> and 442 incidents of child recruitment (78 of which were verified) were reported in 2016;<sup>38</sup> these figures pale in comparison to what one might expect given the wide scale of community mobilization and accounts of individual child recruitment throughout northern Mali, an area that had a population of 1.3 million before the latest crisis broke out.<sup>39</sup>

Second, child protection actors are operating in complex, active conflicts where there is a proliferation of parties to conflict, with blurred boundaries and shifting alliances. Severe instability, difficulty accessing populations in need, and structural factors (e.g., destruction of the economy, state retreat) present significant challenges. Combined with the increasing internationalization of conflict and the growing nexus between criminal and political violence,<sup>40</sup> this makes for very difficult dynamics to navigate. There are, however, practical ways that interventions can be adapted to address some of the dynamics of current contexts. For example, much of the focus of psychosocial interventions for children has been on PTSD, but there are indications that for children who are reintegrated in ongoing conflict contexts, some symptoms of PTSD (e.g., avoidance and hypervigilance) can actually be helpful for adapting to instability. Psychological interventions during ongoing conflict might therefore be more effective if they focus on managing symptoms, rather than on reducing symptoms.<sup>41</sup>

Third, many of the research findings and their policy and programmatic implications highlighted in this volume are not necessarily new to child protection practitioners. For example, practitioners have long been aware of the importance of identity and status in understanding child and youth association with armed groups, and the related challenges children face when exiting such groups. Neither is the need for programmatic interventions to be long-term and community-embedded a revelation. The operational environment in which child protection practitioners operate, however, has become more difficult, forcing them to grapple with new challenges, particularly with regard to the detention of children alleged to have been associated with certain armed groups.

Some of the issues raised during the course of this research reaffirm the importance of addressing both substantive issues (e.g., identity) and ensuring that flexible approaches that engage children and are embedded in communities are implemented. For example, chapter 7 noted that women married and children born under IS rule face both practical (e.g., access to basic services) and social challenges (e.g., stigma) because their marriage

<sup>37</sup> Correspondence with MINUSMA official, 21 November 2017.

<sup>38</sup> A/72/361–S/2017/821.

<sup>39</sup> Sahel and West Africa Club, "Northern Mali at a Glance", accessed 12 December 2017. Available from [www.oecd.org/swac/northernmaliataglance.htm](http://www.oecd.org/swac/northernmaliataglance.htm).

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Sasha Jespersen, "Conflict Obscuring Criminality: The Crime-Conflict Nexus in Nigeria", UNU Centre for Policy Research, Crime-Conflict Nexus Series: No 4, May 2017. Available from <https://unu.edu/media/cpr-unu.edu/attachment/2455/Conflict-Obscuring-Criminality-The-Crime-Conflict-Nexus-in-Nigeria.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> B. H. Ellis, A. B. Miller, S. Abdi, C. Barrett, E. A. Blood, and T. S. Betancourt, "Multi-Tier Mental Health Program for Refugee Youth", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (2013); Stevan E. Hobfoll, Anthony D. Mancini, Brian J. Hall, Daphna Canetti, and George A. Bonanno, "The Limits of Resilience: Distress Following Chronic Political Violence among Palestinians", *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 72, No. 8 (2011); K. E. Miller and A. Rasmussen, "War Exposure, Daily Stressors, and Mental Health in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: Bridging the Divide between Trauma-Focused and Psychosocial Frameworks", *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (2010), quoted in Littman, "Insights from Social Science", p. 9.

contracts and birth certificates are not recognized by the Iraqi state.<sup>42</sup> Given the array of sensitive issues involved (e.g., forced marriage), how can policy and programmatic responses nevertheless be crafted to respond to the different needs of participants and across time? Another insight well known to practitioners is the importance of engaging children and youth in the design and implementation of the programmatic response. There is evidence that child-focused assessment approaches (e.g., the Child Led Indicators approach used in Nepal<sup>43</sup>) can lead to better assessment of individual needs and tailoring of the programmatic response. There is evidence from other contexts that child-designed and -led interventions can be extremely effective.<sup>44</sup> Most important, engaging children in programme implementation directly targets their feelings of insignificance and ineffectiveness by providing them with an opportunity to become active participants in resilience building and recovery.

Even though these insights are relatively well known, they are not necessarily prioritized in programme design or implementation. For example, while child-protection practitioners have long recognized the importance of addressing issues such as identity and/or tailoring responses to the individual, these elements are not always incorporated into chronically underfunded programming. While this volume has largely focused on the question of whether the international community's approach to prevention and release and reintegration programming for children is fit for purpose, the question should be asked whether such programmes are funded for purpose. Typically, child protection programmes endure significant funding fluctuations, and in many cases, programmes remain significantly underfunded over their life spans,<sup>45</sup> which makes it difficult in practice to provide programmes that operate as ideally designed. When there are funding constraints, activities and programmatic components that are seen as less essential are likely to be dropped in order to meet the basic needs of children – such as food, shelter, and medical services. Likewise, when states bar or the security situation prevents access, it may be difficult to fully implement optimal programmes or to reach populations in need altogether. Although taking into account identity and status when designing programmes, or the extra effort it takes to engage children as partners, may seem dispensable in comparison to providing basic services, these are likely vital to the success of interventions.

## B. THE NATURE OF TODAY'S CONFLICTS AND THE GROUPS FIGHTING THEM

In addition to these challenges, the research in this volume suggests that treating terrorism, violent extremism, and jihadism as exceptional is potentially problematic, both in efforts to diagnose the problems at hand and to design effective solutions. That is not to say there are not aspects or dimensions to the groups operating in today's conflicts, such as Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, that do not present particular challenges. Viewing them as exceptional, solely based on the ideology they promote, however, oversimplifies their relationships with ideology and overshadows the totality of the dynamics that render them challenging to address programmatically (e.g., territorial control, fractionalization, integration with organized crime).

It could be argued that standard prevention and release and reintegration approaches – if flexible, holistic, and centred on the individual child – could be as effective in addressing child recruitment and use in contemporary contexts, and particularly with relation to these types of groups, as in older conflict contexts. Given the limitations due to access and resource scarcity that reduce the likelihood that ideal designs are implemented in practice, should other scalable intervention approaches be considered to augment or adapt to existing prevention and release and reintegration approaches? Specifically, what are the advantages and disadvantages to coordinating or co-opting the emerging practices of preventing violent extremism (PVE) and countering violent extremism (CVE)?

<sup>42</sup> The Kurdish Regional Government does not recognize them either. Iraq's system for birth registration generally requires that both parents issue a request on their child's behalf. If one or both parents are dead, unreachable, or foreign—all scenarios that are particularly likely if the father is an Islamic State fighter—it is very difficult to register a child. Nadim Houry, "Children of the Caliphate: What to Do About Kids Born Under ISIS," *Foreign Affairs*, 23 November 2016. Available from [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/levant/2016-11-22/children-caliphate](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/levant/2016-11-22/children-caliphate). Betsy Fisher, "Why Non-Marital Children in the MENA Region Face a Risk of Statelessness," *Harvard Human Rights Journal Online*, Vol. 29 (February 2015), p. 4. Available from [http://harvardhrj.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Fisher\\_HRJ\\_01-05-15.pdf](http://harvardhrj.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Fisher_HRJ_01-05-15.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> Child Led Indicators (CLI) are context-specific indicators of positive and negative psychosocial well-being developed through a child participatory process. Alongside traditional PTSD metrics, CLI helped practitioners recast children from mere beneficiaries of an intervention to "rights holder[s]"; and worked to "identify their strengths and encourage them to solve their own problems through their own initiatives." Rohit Karki, Brandon A. Kohrt, and Mark J. D. Jordans, "Child Led Indicators: Pilot Testing a Child Participation Tool for Psychosocial Support Programmes for Former Child Soldiers in Nepal," *Intervention*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2009), p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> In one study in the United States, adult facilitators used semi-structured scripts and activity guides to help children develop their own student conflict-prevention programming specific to their schools, which resulted in significant declines in conflict. Those schools that had child-led interventions saw more than a 30 per cent reduction in conflict in just one year. Elizabeth Levy Paluck, Hana Shepard, and Peter M. Aronow, "Changing Climates of Conflict: A Social Network Experiment in 56 Schools," *PNAS*, Vol. 113, No. 3 (2016).

<sup>45</sup> For example, in Nigeria, the UNICEF funding gap specifically for child protection was 82 per cent in January 2017, and 60 per cent in October 2017. The significance of these gaps and the fluctuations month to month over the course of a programme are not unusual. UNICEF Nigeria, "Humanitarian Situation Report No. 2," 1-15 January 2017. And UNICEF Nigeria, "Humanitarian Situation Report No. 18, 1-15 October 2017.

### c. PVE/CVE

As discussed in chapter 3, when it comes to PVE and CVE, there are reasons both to embrace these approaches and to proceed with caution. First, the positive: The introduction of PVE and CVE has helped to shift discussions about how to handle terrorism away from largely reactive and kinetic approaches to preventive strategies and the recognition of the causes of conflict. As noted in chapter 7, there are signs that many children deemed at risk to become associated with armed groups or those who have tried to exit them are being subject to heavy-handed and overly punitive responses, seemingly out of line with international law and protections for children. Beyond the failure to take into account the best interests of children, these responses also have the potential to exacerbate the problem (e.g., making neutrality impossible, contributing to grievances, disincentivizing exit from armed groups). A focus on prevention, an attempt to address root causes and grievances, and an effort to design less heavy-handed responses are welcome developments.

From a prevention standpoint, it is unclear if the limited PVE programmes currently being launched are matched by the significant political will and resource mobilization needed to rectify many of the enduring economic, social, and political structural problems and grievances that help generate the problem in the first place. That said, PVE activities often have other immediate, positive impacts. In addition to potentially lifting people out of poverty and opening up opportunities for them, they could possibly redress grievances or keep individual children from amassing substantial risks for recruitment. Even though it would be hard to measure, they could potentially help to reduce the allure of armed groups. From a response standpoint, CVE efforts, to the degree that they focus more on rehabilitation than security responses and/or emphasize the importance of due process and respect for human rights in punitive frameworks, may also have some positive impact. Fieldwork in Nigeria, discussed in chapter 6, raises another potential benefit of CVE programmes. Even when their impact on beneficiaries was questionable, local deradicalization interventions may serve as a signalling metric for communities that the individuals returning home no longer pose a security risk, thus easing reintegration. In light of the terminology used by interviewees in Nigeria who highlighted the need for such vetting, however, it is not clear that such signalling is contingent on programmes being labelled as deradicalization (as compared to rehabilitation or another more neutral term).

Given the complexity of the problem and the dearth of robust evidence available, there are concerns about the potential efficacy of programming purporting to prevent or counter violent extremism.

Given the complexity of the problem and the dearth of robust evidence available, as well as some of the questionable assumptions behind and branding<sup>46</sup> of proposed solutions, there are concerns about the potential efficacy of programming purporting to prevent or counter violent extremism. For example, existing PVE programmes that largely focus on addressing the ideologies behind violent extremism do not respond to the multi-causal dynamics of association. At a minimum, this may render them ineffective; worse yet, the ways they are targeted and branded may actually be counter-productive if they cause resentment, stigmatize, and further alienate the very communities they are meant to engage.<sup>47</sup> Similar problems exist for post-involvement CVE interventions, particularly deradicalization.

The premise of deradicalization programmes appears to be that children have internalized radical ideologies, and that interventions are needed to help them abandon these ideas around violence. However, as pointed out in chapter 3, there is no consensus among experts on what constitutes radicalization, if there is a need for “deradicalization”, and, if so, what this approach should entail, nor is there evidence that existing deradicalization efforts are necessary and/or effective. In addition, such interventions likely carry stigma and could make

<sup>46</sup> While donor and funding constraints understandably impact how grants are pitched, it is unclear why such interventions would be publically labelled as PVE. Given the lack of evidence about their impact, there seems little reason at this stage to privately tout their capacity to respond to violent extremism, either.

<sup>47</sup> Emilio C. Viano, “Investigating and Preventing Terrorism in Multicultural Urban Settings: Is a Balanced Approach Possible?” in Marco Lombardi, Eman Ragab, Vivienne Chin, Yvon Dandurand, Valerio de Divitiis, and Alessandro Burato, eds., *Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism among Youth to Prevent Terrorism* (Amsterdam: IOS Press and NATO Emerging Security Challenges Division, 2015), pp. 1–10.



ISTANBUL, TURKEY  
"This Is Meaningful"  
— Winter 2016

By 100cameras student  
photographer, Mahmud, age 12



THIS IS  
MY  
WORLD



reintegration more difficult, increasing the potential for recidivism. In contexts where some of the empirically based concepts that often get lumped under radicalization (e.g., social norms) appear to play a significant role in the recruitment of children, it is possible to devise broader interventions to address them, while avoiding some of the pitfalls outlined above. As described earlier in this chapter and in chapter 2, after children have been exposed to a group's ideology, norms, dehumanization, and other aspects of group processes, these components of their experience may require programmatic attention in order to support their disengagement and desistance. Particular efforts to address these components are likely to be more effective, however, when based on a rigorous assessment of need, embedded into holistic and child-centred programmes, and not branded in such a way as to make reintegration into civilian life more difficult.

#### D. NATURE OF THE STATE RESPONSE

Today's increasingly securitized environment has influenced child association with and potential exit from armed groups, and has further complicated already complex operational environments for practitioners. As highlighted in chapter 7, many children encountered in these contexts are detained without charge under the assumption that they are all associated with dangerous armed groups, or charged with membership in them with little evidence, and imprisoned, rather than released for reintegration. This type of response reduces the possibility of neutrality and likely deters children from exiting armed groups (at least for long). The securitization of the humanitarian space<sup>48</sup> also impacts the international community's capacity to reduce child recruitment and facilitate the exit of children from armed groups. For example, while some international organizations continue to engage armed groups – citing their mandates and immunities – there is clearly some hesitation among others. This constraint may impact the potential exit of children from armed groups, as evidenced by the case study of Syria; even though all NSAGs fighting there have recruited children, there are significant differences in their policies and practices, and engagement with the international community (e.g., United Nations action plans<sup>49</sup>) often seems correlated with better stances towards children.<sup>50</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

Despite the characterization of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria and some of the groups fighting in them as exceptional, they exhibit a number of similarities with previous conflicts. Most notably, children appear to become involved with all manner of armed groups for a multitude of reasons. There is no single cause for association. Despite some of the motives (particularly ideological ones) imputed by outsiders, many of the factors that primarily contribute to child involvement with armed groups are rooted in local dynamics – longtime grievances, conflicts between local communities, and community structures and expectations. In conflict theatres, children become associated with armed groups under a continuum of coercion; and for many, remaining neutral and unaffiliated is practically impossible.

Given the overlap with previous conflicts, there is a lot to learn from other contexts where armed groups have recruited and used children. The exceptionalization of contemporary NSAGs along a single, simplified parameter has analytical, policy, and programmatic implications. Such an approach is likely to lead to a misdiagnosis of the problem at hand, oversimplifying the threat these groups pose and thus flattening the differences among them. That is not to say there is nothing new – in content or degree – about groups like Islamic State, Boko Haram, or Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. Rather, this volume has suggested that to understand those differences, and enact effective policy and programmatic responses to these groups, a more holistic, multidimensional, and nuanced approach to assessment and response is necessary.

<sup>48</sup> For example, see Cynthia Brassard-Bourdeau and Don Hubert, "Shrinking Humanitarian Space? Trends and Prospects on Security and Access", *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*. 24 November 2010. Available from <https://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/863>.

<sup>49</sup> Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict "Action Plans with Armed Forces and Armed Groups," accessed 12 December 2017. Available from <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/our-work/action-plans>.

<sup>50</sup> Better understanding of this relationship is necessary, especially because it could be compounded by other factors (e.g., a group's goals, outbidding with competitor groups).

As previously mentioned, even before the “jihadi” focus, the knowledge base around children associated with armed groups was relatively thin. Despite decades of work in this area by humanitarian organizations, and great institutional knowledge, there are still few rigorous scientific studies on the subject, making it difficult to say with confidence which factors influence how and why children (or youth and adults, for that matter) become associated with NSAGs and what they need to help them transition to and remain in civilian lives after conflict. Rather than advocate for additional outside research, this volume concludes that what is really needed is more robust and extensive situational, individual, and programmatic assessment built into the programming process, the raw data from which should be made available in real time for research, cross-learning, and programmatic tailoring. This is particularly true in contemporary contexts where there are concerns that “jihadist” groups require a different response.

Practitioners and policymakers, however, do not have the luxury of waiting for the results of such assessments before they act. The child recruitment and use by armed groups in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria today requires immediate action. This volume has urged caution about turning wholesale to PVE and CVE programmes in the short term. The authors have highlighted a number of concerns about these burgeoning fields of practice and the potential of current versions of such programmes to be ineffective or, worse, counterproductive. Chief among those concerns is the potential for such programmes to stigmatize the very populations they are meant to help and exacerbate existing grievances that motivate participation in conflict and/or contribute to the recruiting narrative of armed groups. That is not to say that some of the factors that PVE and CVE programmes distinctly attempt to address – namely, ideology – are not worthy of attention as part of standard child protection structures. If they operated in practice as they were ideally designed, holistic programmes that respond to the needs and challenges of individual children might be able to address the special challenges associated with Salafi-Jihadist contexts. As this concluding chapter has highlighted, however, when underfunded or in the face of access, security, or other challenges, standard child protection programmes may not be able to provide this level of personalized attention.

From a prevention programming perspective, there should be more caution in incorporating ideological components into existing programmes. As noted throughout this volume, evidence suggests that ideology may not play a major motivational role for many children, and for those for whom it is a factor, it is one among many that influence an individual’s trajectory into or towards an armed group. Given how intertwined religion is with other key factors – identity, community, role models – it can be difficult to accurately assess the role that religion plays in conflict. It is therefore unclear if a narrowly cast intervention that seeks to use scripture or religious figures to debunk the ideology a terrorist group extols will have a significant deterrent effect. Such a response may have counterproductive impacts as well if it further stigmatizes or angers populations who already feel unfairly cast as security threats, or exacerbates grievances because it ignores what locals see as the problem at hand.

When considering the role of new programming elements for reintegration efforts in conflict contexts or for individuals affiliated with a subset of armed groups, it is important to first be clear about what the goal of reintegration should be. A narrow perspective might focus on the absence of NSAG affiliation and violent activity in the short term. A more comprehensive view encompasses successful reintegration into family and community and/or being a productive member of society in the long run. To achieve either with limited desistance and disengagement goals or a more positive reintegration outcome, the question remains what additional programmatic activities or elements should be included in “jihadist” contexts?

As in any other conflict context, children previously associated with an armed group(s) will need an array of support services to ease their exit and facilitate their transition back into civilian life. In some contexts, children who have been involved with a certain subset of terrorist or violent extremist groups may need additional activities or services to assist with their desistance and disengagement. Existing CVE interventions are diverse in their focus and/or unclear in the theory of change, but many aim to change beliefs or undermine ideologies seen as conducive to violence. Ideology may become more important to children (and adults) in the indoctrination process or after involvement in violence conducted on behalf of the armed group. In comparison to prevention programmes, post-involvement programming may need to focus more on ideology, as it may take on more importance after individuals have been indoctrinated and committed or experienced violence. That said, top-down belief change is hard to accomplish. Kind treatment from those deemed the “enemy” by the group, rather than religious scripture

lessons, may actually be more powerful in undermining a terrorist group's ideology. For some children, once outside the group, its beliefs and worldview may no longer make sense, and they may need little intervention in this area. For others, the conflict or post-conflict dynamics encountered upon exit may only serve to reinforce the group's worldview and message. Still others may have internalized these ideologies – in part to justify aversive behaviour they have engaged in (e.g., violence) – and have a hard time abandoning them. What type of interventions are likely to shift beliefs that justify, obligate, or necessitate violence? And can they also deal with non-ideological violence (e.g., emotive or instrumental assessments)?

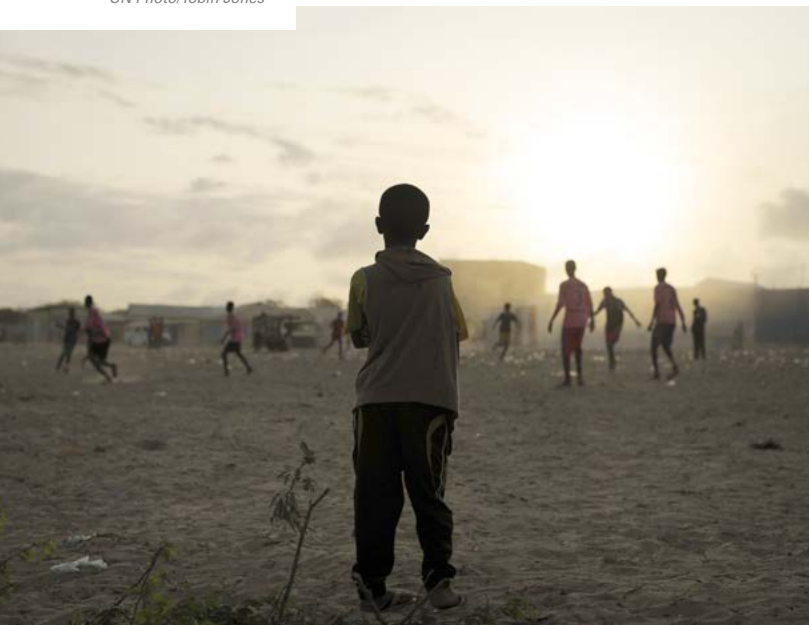
## LOOKING TO THE HORIZON

At this point it is hard to endorse particular approaches or programmes, given how little assessment is done and/or available on interventions, and due to the lack of robust empirical work on these processes for contemporary contexts. Nevertheless, based on the research findings in this volume, some general principles should guide programme-by-programme decisions about whether to adjust their activities and approaches. (During the next stage of this project, these principles will guide the development of a technical note that will serve as a reference for policymakers, donors, and practitioners working on the prevention and response to child recruitment by armed groups.<sup>51</sup>)

### MOGADISHU, SOMALIA

A young child looks on as older boys play football next to an IDP camp. —August 2013

UN Photo/Tabin Jones



**First**, given that ideology does not appear to play as significant a motivational role for many children joining armed groups in contemporary conflicts, one-size-fits-all ideological interventions are more likely to be “one-size-fits-none.”<sup>52</sup> In addition, such programmes can have unintended, negative consequences. As such, it makes sense to incorporate activities related to ideology only when it appears that they will facilitate a particular child's positive

reintegration into society. This could be a result of individual needs (i.e., the beliefs or ideology a child adheres to inhibit disengagement from the group or its identity or undermine desistance from political violence) or community needs (i.e., the community sees this as a necessary hurdle for a child to be accepted back into the fold). To the latter point, if a risk assessment suggests that the benefit of such an activity in easing a child's return home outweighs any stigma or frustration it may cause, then it may make sense to include such an intervention. There is still reason for caution in branding and messaging these activities, in order to prevent the further stigmatization of beneficiaries.

**Second**, any activities that target beliefs and ideology should be embedded into a larger, holistic programme that addresses the full range of children's needs and risk factors. Ideally, programmes would be able to attend to every need and risk, but when they can't, they should prioritize those needs and vulnerabilities that may also correlated with ideology (e.g., identity, community, social norms, and possibly feelings of guilt and shame).

**Third**, to the extent possible, specialized activities for jihadist groups or contexts should be employed only after a thorough risk analysis and based on empirics, particularly around what types of interventions have been shown to work. This may mean going beyond ideology and focusing on other more empirically supported concepts such as group processes, efforts to shift social norms around violence, and interventions that make political violence costlier. This will inevitably require pulling strategies from other contexts, such as street gang involvement interventions. Many such approaches may have religious or ideological components but can often be cast more broadly (e.g., involving religious officials among other community leaders and role models to help re-articulate and enforce social norms).

<sup>51</sup> The technical note is expected in Spring 2018. Much of the substance of this note may also be relevant to efforts to prevent and respond to child association with armed forces.

<sup>52</sup> Quoting Ibrahim Sesay (with his permission), “Prevention and Response to Child Recruitment and Use by Contemporary Non-State Armed Groups Engaged in ‘Extreme Violence’”, Expert Level Working Meeting, Abuja, 4-5 July 2017.



#### MOPTI, MALI

A child plays on the shore  
of the Niger River.  
— March 2017

Marc-André Boisvert

**Fourth**, when any changes or innovations are made to programming, they need to be rigorously assessed and over the long term to determine if they were beneficial or had unintended consequences. This is essential not just for improving programmatic responses to children in contemporary conflict contexts, but for the larger purpose of understanding how to contribute to conflict resolution and efforts to build peace. It is important to remember that even where child recruitment is pervasive, as it is in Syria and Iraq, Mali, and Nigeria, it is not necessarily an inevitable feature of conflict. Improved assessment, better tailored interventions, and possibly more engagement with armed actors may help reduce child recruitment and use and end the cycle of violence and exploitation for children who have already been associated with armed groups.

**Lastly**, many of the policy and programmatic implications of the research findings presented in this volume apply beyond the conflict case studies featured herein. Recognizing that there are differences across and within conflicts that need to be considered and addressed, there are nonetheless numerous commonalities across contexts and significant opportunities for cross-learning. From a programmatic perspective, a flexible, child-centred focus that adheres to a few key principles (e.g., community-based and embedded, built on rigorous situational analysis) can be applied anywhere. This is true of contemporary conflict contexts characterized by jihadist armed groups. The emergence of these groups is not the result of a fundamental shift in the nature of human involvement in armed conflict, particularly for children. Today, children continue to become involved in conflict for a host of reasons in situations where they face an onslaught of pressure and stressors. Whatever high rhetoric armed groups may espouse, many children become associated with them for much more mundane reasons: They need protection, they need food, their cousin joined, etc. In cases where individual children are influenced or motivated by ideology or other factors specific to a conflict or an armed group, a well-designed and fully implemented prevention or release or reintegration programme should be able to address these factors as part of a larger holistic approach.

In many ways, the focus on particular types of armed groups misses the real challenge facing prevention and release and reintegration programming: ongoing, hot conflicts. Can even the best-designed prevention programme prevent child recruitment and use in active conflicts where there is no benefit to remaining neutral? Will programmatic interventions, no matter how well funded, effectively transition children back into civilian life when they are being reintegrated into conditions that make success virtually impossible? Perhaps, in such contexts, it is not the programmatic approach that must change, but rather our expectations.



Ultimately, the key to ending child recruitment and use is to create peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive societies, where children do not need to rely on armed groups for their basic needs or self-worth. That end goal is not achieved easily or quickly, but prevention and release and reintegration programming for children can play a role in the larger efforts to resolve conflict and sustain peace. Most important, children are not just beneficiaries of such efforts, but should be partners on their own road to recovery, reintegration, and reconciliation. The journey to peace is long and difficult; we may have to carry children at the outset, but they will carry us at the finish.





**QAYYARA, IRAQ**

A newly displaced woman walks with two children  
at a check point south of Mosul.

—October 2016

© UNICEF/Alessio Romenzi

ISBN 978-92-808-9062-4



9 789280 890624 >