Children In Violent Extremist Organisations In The Middle East And Africa

NSD-S

HUB

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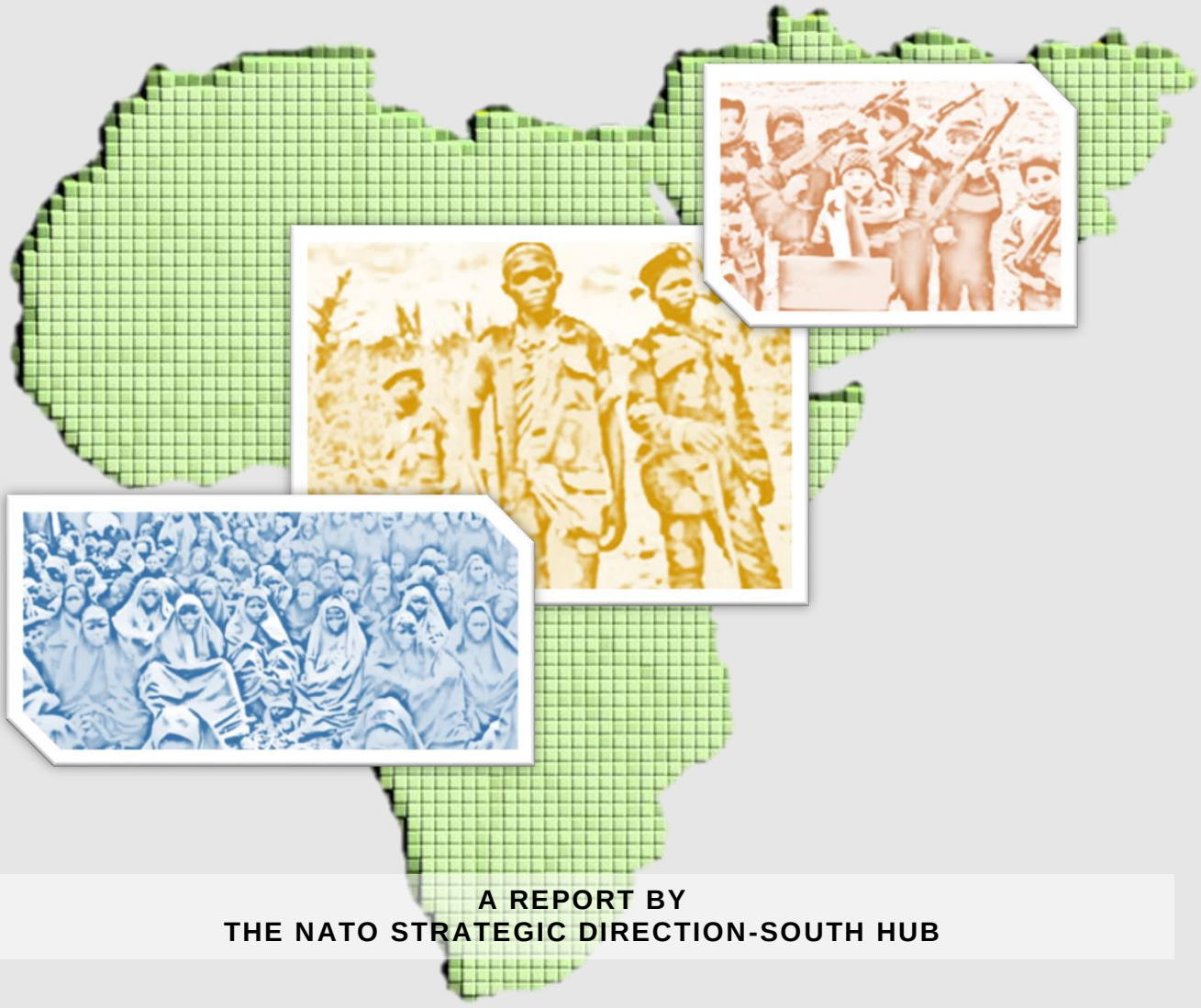

A REPORT BY
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ABSTRACT

Child recruitment in Africa and the Middle East continues largely unabated. Although the annual rate of recruitment appears to have slightly declined since 2017, such changes are assessed to be primarily driven by temporary fluctuations. With the emergence of new conflicts or the escalation of existing ones, the number of children recruited per year is estimated to increase. The phenomenon continues to significantly change and evolve. Increasing numbers of groups have, over the past years, engaged in systematic and sophisticated indoctrination of recruited minors. Likewise, some groups demonstrate gradually increasing willingness to recruit girls, assigning them more operationally relevant roles, suicide-bombing missions included.

The specific purpose of this study is to analyse the phenomenon of child recruitment in relation to violent extremist organisations (VEOs) in the Middle East and Africa. Firstly, the report analyses the structural factors that increase the vulnerability of children to recruitment – in other words, the 'supply side'. This includes both micro and macro factors, such as the family and social network environment, as well as the socio-economic and socio-cultural setting. Secondly, the report examines the 'demand side' represented by the VEOs. These are analysed with regard to their *modus operandi*, incentives and key trends, including differences based on gender.

Importantly, the scope of the report goes beyond the strict confines of child recruitment, for two primary reasons. Firstly, the available data provides only a mere approximation of the phenomenon. Secondly, recent trends point to a much broader challenge stemming from children's indirect affiliation with VEOs. Currently, the numbers of recruited children are estimated in the thousands, whereas those indirectly affiliated with VEOs are estimated in the hundreds of thousands. The high vulnerability of the latter puts them at risk for future recruitment.

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INTRODUCTION

The evolution of legal and policy instruments addressing the phenomenon of child soldiers demonstrates the international community's continuing effort to offer specific protection for children, including in the context of armed conflict (See Figure 1). International and regional instruments, coupled with national legislation, have created a comprehensive framework for governmental action to prohibit, prevent and penalise the recruitment of children in armed conflict (See Annex A for an overview of States' obligations in this regard).

NAME OF INSTRUMENTS	NUMBER OF COUNTRIES THAT HAVE RATIFIED	REMAINING COUNTRIES (in Africa and the Middle East)	
The III and IV Geneva Convection (GC III and GC IV), 1949	**196 State parties**	Figure available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/dihl_setup.nsf/xsp/.ibmmodres/domino/OpenAttachment/applic/ihl/dihl_setup.nsf/58068F6508A7EE86C1257DF1004C2463/%24File/icrc-annual-report-2017-A3.pdf?Open	
The I and II Additional Protocol of Geneva Convection, 1977	• **174** state parties only **AP I** • **168** state parties both **AP I** and **AP II**	Figure available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/dihl_setup.nsf/xsp/.ibmmodres/domino/OpenAttachment/applic/ihl/dihl_setup.nsf/58068F6508A7EE86C1257DF1004C2463/%24File/icrc-annual-report-2017-A3.pdf?Open	
***Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), 1989**	**It has been ratified by 195 countries,** making it the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world.	**2 countries worldwide have not ratified the Convention** (Somalia and Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic but it is not a UN member*)	
African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), 1990	**50**	Morocco, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic*, Somalia, South Sudan, and Tunisia	
***The Statute of the International Criminal Court* (ICC), Rome 1998**	**123 states have ratified or acceded to it**	**31 states have not ratified** (Algeria, Angola, Bahrain, Cameroon, Egypt, Eritrea, Guinea Bissau, Iran, Kuwait, Morocco, Mozambique, Oman, Sao Tome and Principe, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and Zimbabwe)	**Other 41 states have neither signed nor acceded* to it and other 4 withdrawal** in 2018.** (Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Libya, Mauritania, Qatar, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and South Sudan) (Burundi, Gambia and South Africa)
***International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 182*, 1999** concerning the prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour	**187 countries have ratified the Convention**	(In Africa and the Middle East, only the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic that is not a UN member)	
***Optional Protocol on the Involvement of the Children in Armed Conflict* (OP-CAC), 2000**	**As of September 2020, 170 states, all over the word, had ratified or acceded to the treaty;** a further 10 states had signed but not yet ratified it.	(Comoros, Equatorial Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Sao Tome and Principe, Somalia, and Zambia, Iran and Lebanon)	

Figure 1 - Ratification of the main international instruments related to children's rights

However, despite the notable progress achieved to date, a wide gap remains between these norms and the situation on the ground. Between 2005 and 2020, more than 93,000 children were recruited and used by parties to conflict, as verified by the United Nations (UN). For 2020 alone, 8,521 children were identified as recruited, with the highest numbers recorded in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic and

Myanmar.[1] Notably, 80% of the cases of child recruitment verified over the past five years were attributed to non-state armed groups (NSAGs).

The situation is particularly complex when it comes to children recruited by violent extremist organisations (VEOs) and even those indirectly associated with them (i.e. through family ties). These groups continue to recruit and exploit children within and across borders, mostly in situations of armed conflict, but also in its absence. Whereas the global consensus among States, that children should not be recruited and used in conflict settings, has allowed engagement with certain NSAGs and facilitated progress in this area,[2] recruitment of children by VEOs remains a far greater challenge.

In general, NSAGs lack knowledge of the comprehensive international legal framework protecting children in armed conflict, are less incentivized to abide by the applicable rules, and oftentimes lack the structure and capacity for implementation. Among them, however, are the groups that have been classified as VEOs, which are the least likely to show a degree of commitment towards respecting children's safeguards. For groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (Daesh), Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad (Boko Haram) and Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabaab), efforts to foster accountability and compliance with international child protection standards stand in stark contrast with their attempts to establish alternative realities, which are governed by distorted interpretations of religion. While VEOs have long mobilized "youth wings" for tactical and strategic reasons (i.e. to boost recruitment, get media attention, expand their support among the populace etc.),[3] Daesh, in particular, has created a worrying precedent through its doctrine of child recruitment, which the group deems key to its survival.

In light of the above, the starting point for this study is the gap between law and practice, as well as the assumption that efforts to address and prevent the recruitment of children by NSAGs require tailored policy and programmatic responses. With this in mind, this study does not seek to offer a comprehensive overview of all the potential explanatory variables. Instead, it analyses the issue from two perspectives that help explain why VEOs continue to recruit children.

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[1] "Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict," *United Nations*, 26 July 2021, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2059410/N2120600.pdf.

[2] United Nations engagement with armed groups in Central African Republic, for example, resulted in the issuance of command orders by two armed groups barring the recruitment and use of children. Similar engagement with the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in Nigeria resulted in the formal disengagement of 2,202 children from the ranks of the group. In the Philippines, United Nations engagement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) resulted in the release of 1,869 children. For more information, see: "25 Years Of Children And Armed Conflict: Taking Action To Protect Children In War," United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, June 2022, https://www.unicef.org/media/123021/file/25%20Years%20Children%20in%20Armed%20Conflict.pdf. Likewise, more than 40 children were released by NSAGs operating in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) following engagement by Geneva Call. For more information, see: https://genevacall.org/dr-congo-child-soldiers-leave-armed-actors-following-geneva-calls-awareness-raising-efforts/.

[3] Peter Singer, *The New Children of Terror*, in **"**The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training, and Root Causes", James Forest, ed. (Praeger, 2005).

Firstly, on the 'supply side', this study explores the critical, and often overlapping, structural factors that make children more vulnerable to engagement by violent extremist groups. The focus is on the confluence of social, economic and cultural factors in regions of interest across the Middle East and Africa, especially in relation to recent dynamics on the ground. Secondly, on the 'demand side', the study primarily focuses on the perpetrators of child recruitment – identifying factors such as NSAGs' *modus operandi* and reasoning, key trends, or major distinctions among individual groups. Although this section covers the period from 2011 to 2021 data-wise, it predominantly focuses on recent years. In addition, this part of the report also highlights gender-differentiated patterns of recruitment.

The study is structured in keeping with the above-mentioned analytical approach. Following a brief overview of the methodology and the relevant definitions, the first chapter scrutinises the 'supply side', while the second chapter provides an assessment of the 'demand side'. The concluding section wraps up the analytical inquiry and provides a series of recommendations on the areas that require greater attention from policymakers, practitioners and researchers.

Methodology and Acknowledgments

This study combines wide-ranging desk research, secondary data analysis and in-depth consultations with experts and practitioners focusing on the Middle East and Africa.

In an effort to highlight regional and local particularities, as per the mission of the NSD-S Hub, a scrupulous effort was made to engage Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) who have conducted original field research in the Middle East and Africa, or who have focused extensively on issues related to children in armed conflict, violent extremism and terrorism. Towards this end, in preparation for this study, the NDS-S Hub commissioned a series of 'Food-for-Thought' papers that helped bring to light contextual knowledge, insights and recommendations.

This study is informed by the contributions received from **Prof. Mia Bloom,** Professor of Communication and Middle East Studies at Georgia State University; **Ms. Maha Ghazi,** Doctoral Researcher and Member of the Executive Board at the Moroccan Observatory on Extremism and Violence; **Dr. Haid Haid,** Senior Consulting Research Fellow with the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme; **Prof. Dr. Thoko Kaime**, Professor and Chair of African Legal Studies at the University of Bayreuth; **Mr. Omar Mohammed**, Research Fellow at The Program on Extremism, George Washington University; **Mr. Murhabazi Namegabe,** Director of the Office for Volunteering in the Service of Childhood and Health in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; **Prof. Robert Nanima**, Member of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and a Special Rapporteur on Children in Conflict Situations; **Prof. Benyam Dawit Mezmur**, Eleanor Roosevelt Fellow at Harvard Law School, and member and former Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Methodologically, this study places emphasis on the issues highlighted by local and regional experts, particularly those who have collected the original data through the following:

- Key informant interviews (KIIs) with 25 parents and teachers from Anbar, Fallujah, Mosul, Qaim Telefar and other cities in Iraq.
- Field interviews with 106 community leaders, representatives from civil society organizations, parents and teachers from northeast Syria;
- Participatory workshops with 70 adolescents (40 boys and 30 girls) from northeast Syria;
- A household face-to-face survey with 514 adolescents in northeast Syria;
- Interviews with 10 experts on violent extremism, stabilization programming and education in Syria;
- Key informant interviews with: 3 families of Moroccan children stranded in Iraq and Syria; and with the Moroccan national coordination body overseeing matters related to the Moroccan nationals detained in Iraq and Syria.
- The report of the parliamentary exploratory Mission in charge of enquiring on the situation of Moroccan children, women and citizens stranded in Iraq and Syria.
- First-hand accounts of former child soldiers in the DRC.

Aside from a host of relevant sources of secondary data and research, the NSD-S Hub also analysed the annual reports of the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General on children and armed conflict from 2012 to 2022. Despite inherent limitations, the UN data regarding child recruitment is assessed to be among the most comprehensive. Individual reports were analysed and data-points for all observed countries, in the given timeframe, were collected. The resulting figures largely informed the analysis and assessment of the 'demand side' of the report. The assessments and conclusions have been further supported by SWOT analysis and other research methods, such as comparative analysis or process tracing.

Caveats and Limitations

The focus of this study is not intended to distract in any way from the grave violations of children's rights in situations of armed conflict, such as killing and maiming, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, sexual violence and blocking humanitarian access. These violations are widespread and their effects on the lives and wellbeing of children are no less reprehensible – or less of a priority for policymakers – than those entailed by the recruitment and use of children by VEOs.

Furthermore, the topic of this study should not be interpreted as attempting to shift the discourse from protection to punishment, from protected victim to security threat, a concern which has been noted by those working to address issues at the intersection of children's rights, countering terrorism (CT) and violent extremism.[4] On the contrary, this study notes the multiple violations to which children are exposed in these contexts and acknowledges the fact that children are, first and foremost, victims.

[4] Statement made by Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism, *Human Rights Council Panel Discussion on Family Reunification in the Context of Armed Conflict and Counter Terrorism*, 9 March 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/human-rights-council-holds-panel-discussion-family-reunification-context-0.

Likewise, the geographic focus of this study is on Africa and the Middle East, where most child recruitment violations occur.

In addition, there are also challenges with defining perpetrators and child soldiers. Regarding the former, this report refers NSAGs and VEOs. NSAGs are defined as "distinctive organizations that are (i) willing and capable to use violence in the pursuance of their objectives and (ii) not integrated into formalized state institutions such as regular armies, presidential guards, police or special forces; and (iii) possess a certain degree of autonomy with regard to politics, military operations, resources and infrastructure."[5] VEOs are defined as NSAGs that "support or use ideologically-motivated violence to achieve radical ideological, religious or political views".[6]

The Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 urged parties to conflict to take all "feasible measures in order that children who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities and, in particular, they shall refrain from recruiting them into their armed forces".[7] It does not, however, contemplate the recruitment of children below the age of 15 without their participation in direct hostilities, which has actually emerged as a commonplace practice. Meanwhile, the Rights of the Child (CRC) defined the child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier".[8] The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) held that all ratifying states ought to take 'all feasible measures' to ensure that youths below the age of 15 do not take direct part in armed conflicts. Finally, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which is the only regional mechanism to address the issue of child soldiers, established the age threshold for enlistment at the age of 18 and required the ratifying states to "take all necessary measures to ensure that no child shall take a direct part in hostilities and refrain, in particular, from recruiting any child."[9] The ACRWC clarified that the rules applied to children in situations of internal armed conflict, tension and strife, but did not consider the prospect of child soldiers who were not actively involved in hostilities.

In addition to the fact that the existing international laws do not provide a precise, universal definition of a child soldier, there is also the reality on the ground, whereby the "chronological boundaries between childhood, youth and adulthood are highly varied and rooted in the historical experience of each society and culture".[10] In its General Comment on article 24 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the UN Human Rights Committee acknowledged the need for flexibility in outlining the concept of a

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[5] Claudia Hofmann and Ulrich Schneckener, "Engaging non-state armed actors in state and peace-building: options and strategies". *International Review of the Red Cross*, 93 (Sept 2011), Engaging non-state armed actors in state and peace-building: options and strategies (corteidh.or.cr)

[6] "A teacher's guide on the prevention of Violent extremism," UNESCO, 2016, A Teacher's guide on the prevention of violent extremism; 2016 - 244676eng.pdf (unesco.org).

[7] Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), of 8 June 1977. Available at: https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0321.pdf.

[8] "Convention on the Rights of the Child," 20 November 1989, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/crc.pdf.

[9] "African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child". https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36804-treaty-0014_-_african_charter_on_the_rights_and_welfare_of_the_child_e.pdf

[10] David Rosen, *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism.*

child: “The right to special measures of protection belongs to every child because of his status as a minor. Nevertheless, the Covenant does not indicate the age at which he attains his majority. This is to be determined by each State party in the light of the relevant social and cultural conditions.”

Noting the above, this study uses the terms children, minors and adolescents interchangeably to denote a person under 18 years of age. A child recruited by an NSAG refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been enlisted or used in any capacity by the group, in keeping with the Paris Principles on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.[11]

Last but not least, limitations and constraints on data collection have influenced the findings of this study. The information available on VEOs varies greatly in specificity and accuracy and hard data is not easily accessible in the public domain. While the UN collects valuable data on child recruitment, it does not cover all the areas affected by terrorism and violent extremism. Furthermore, judging trends over time can be difficult because monitoring and reporting on children in conflict has not been consistent over the years. Oftentimes, there is little available information about the nature and duration of recruitment, as well as insufficient data disaggregated by key characteristics such as age and gender. Additional limitations are also imposed by the need to do no harm - when researchers conduct fieldwork and collect primary data, they need to act ethically and responsibly towards communities which may otherwise be harmed if they reveal information about VEO recruitment practices.

[11] “The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups,” *United Nations Children's Fund,* February 2007, https://www.unicef.org/mali/media/1561/file/ParisPrinciples.pdf.

I. ANALYSIS OF THE 'SUPPLY SIDE'

Urie Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological model provides a useful framework for understanding the personal, social and cultural factors that enable children's involvement in violent extremism and terrorism.[12] According to this theoretical model, the individual child is nested within the different layers of the social environment, including family, society and culture.[13] These structural factors are closely interlinked and their interaction, in combination with the individual attributes of the child, contributes to increasing or decreasing the risk of engagement with violent extremism and terrorism.[14]

The Family Unit and Social Networks: Failsafe or Green Pass?

Families and social networks play a significant role in inhibiting or enabling children's association with and recruitment by VEOs. Their influence can be a source of resilience against violent extremism or act as a conduit towards it. The case of Morocco illustrates quite well how children are negatively impacted by extremism in their family circles and social networks.

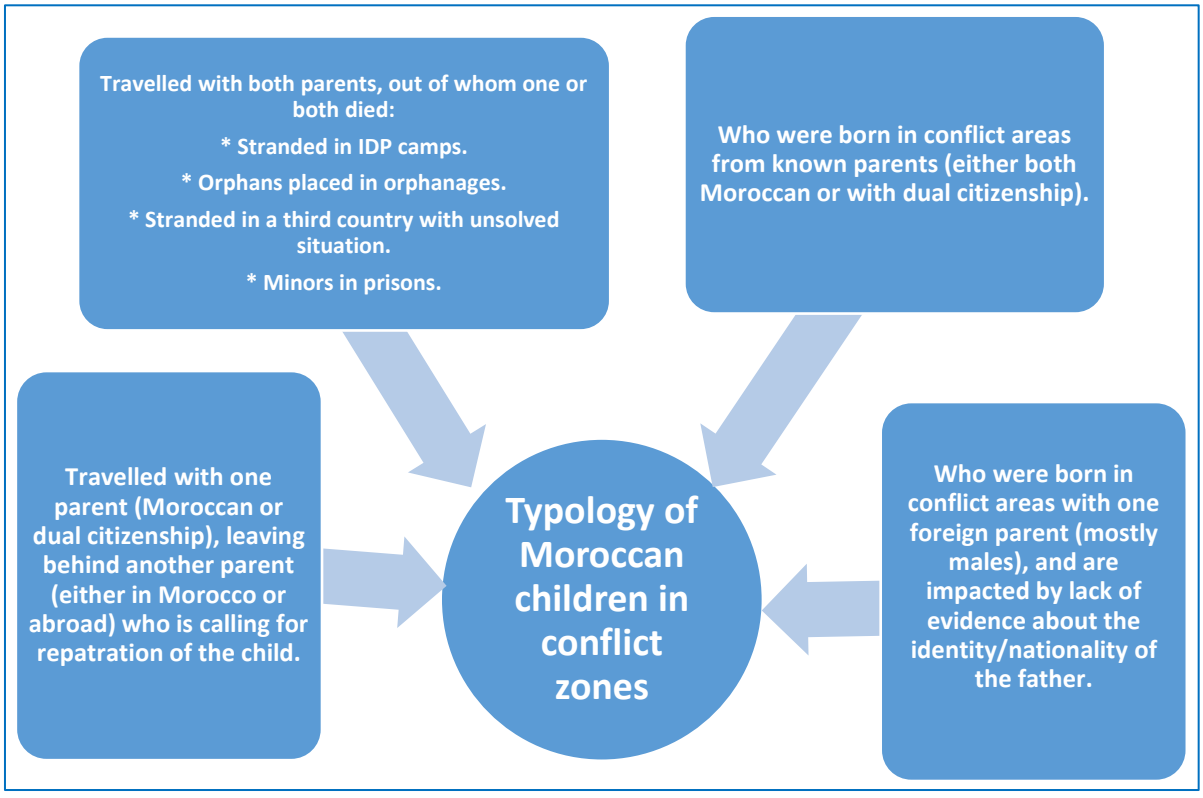

Figure 2: Typology of Moroccan children in conflict areas in Syria and Iraq
Source: Typology produced by Ms. Maha Ghazi, based on the report of the parliamentary exploratory Mission in charge of enquiring on the situation of Moroccan children, women, and citizens stranded in certain conflict areas in Syria and Iraq. The report can be found at: Abdellatif Ouahbi, Ibid. p144.

[12] Mia Bloom, "The Role of Children in Terrorist Groups in the Middle East and Africa", September 2022, Food-for-thought paper submitted to the NSD-S Hub.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

When Daesh first established its 'caliphate', family members, neighbours, friends and acquaintances travelled together from Morocco to Syria and Iraq to join the VEO. In one small neighbourhood, as many as 60 inhabitants left to join Daesh.[15] Such dynamics led to children being associated with Daesh under very complex circumstances, as elaborated in Figure 2. These circumstances have since given rise to a host of legal, humanitarian, psychological and security challenges, including in relation to the repatriation and reintegration of the children into Moroccan society.

Dynamics in Iraq are also a testament as to how VEOs exploit familial bonds to pave the way for children's recruitment. Deconstructing and destroying familial bonds was the first step taken by Daesh towards transforming children into child soldiers and ensuring a sustainable recruitment drive. Testimonials from families who lived in Mosul under its occupation indicate that children were offered 'independence' from parental control and were encouraged to disobey their parents, while being exclusively obedient and loyal to the 'caliph'.[16] In many cases, as illustrated below (Figure 3), the families shared a common experience of fearing their children following exposure to Daesh media, especially as the group encouraged them to provide information on their parents and other relatives. Children were said to have become aggressive in defending Daesh and accusing their parents of being 'apostates' for not supporting the group.[17]

In addition, during its rule, Daesh invested heavily in building a social, 'historical' narrative that passed the responsibility for protecting and expanding the 'caliphate' from the 'martyred' fathers to their sons.[18]

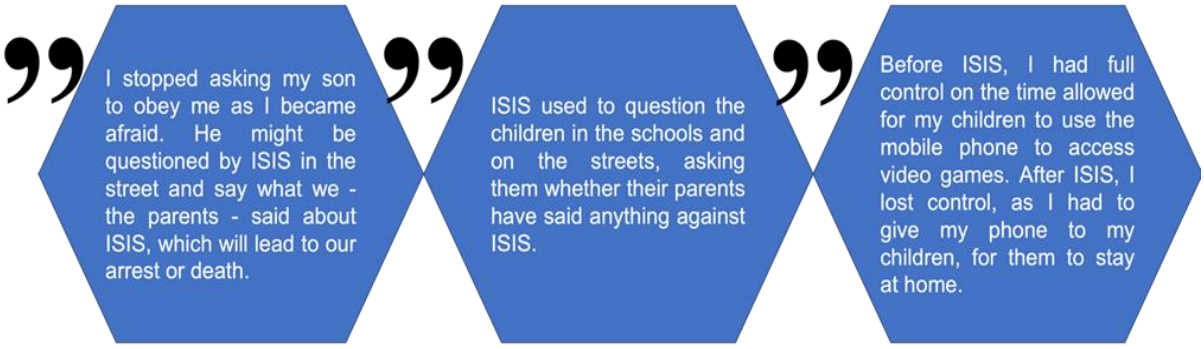

Figure 3: Testimonials from Mosul
Source**:** Omar Mohammed (2022), 'The Doctrine of Child Soldiers: ISIS' Systematic Attempt at Creating a Future of Violence'. Food-for-Thought Paper submitted to the NSD-S Hub.

Known as the "Hagiography of Jihad" (in Arabic: Siyar A'lam Al Shuhadaa), this narrative essentially dictates that the 'sons of martyrs' have the moral duty to defend and advance the 'legacy' of their fathers, meaning they must

[15] NSD-S Hub Roundtable on "The Role of Children in Violent Extremist Organisations in Africa and the Middle East", 22 Sept 2022.
[16] Omar Mohammed, "The Doctrine of Child Soldiers: ISIS' Systematic Attempt at Creating a Future of Violence", September 2022, Food-for-Thought Paper submitted to the NSD-S Hub.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

also kill and be killed for the 'caliphate'.[19] Due to their lineage, the descendants need neither vetting nor recommendations, neither indoctrination nor training.[20] The families in question are said to prepare the future recruits, especially those located in camps in Syria and in Iraqi prisons.

Analysis of Daesh propaganda from 2016 to 2017, in the wake of its territorial losses, seems to corroborate these dynamics. During that period, 62% of the 25 children-centred videos examined by researchers emphasized resolute preparedness, both ideological as well as military.[21] Similarly, an analysis of 254 images disseminated by Daesh from August 2015-February 2016 found that most children were depicted as perpetrators of violence or were shown witnessing violence.[22] In fact, while children perpetrators were found to be a rarity in propaganda disseminated by Al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab, the Daesh imagery denoted the high status and important responsibility assigned to (male) child perpetrators.[23]

Field data from northeast Syria, collected from August-December 2021, highlights the central role of family and social networks even further. According to a face-to-face household survey of 514 adolescents inhabiting the area, a majority (63%) of adolescent respondents agreed that sympathy for or involvement with Daesh among their peers was 'influenced by the people they know'. Likewise, participatory workshops involving 70 Syrian adolescents also noted how family and friends propelled those of similar age towards Daesh (NB: only half of the adolescent participants were willing to discuss Daesh).[24]

In addition, the findings of the above-mentioned household survey suggest that the desire to seek revenge for the death of a family member or for perceived injustice has more weight nowadays than during the occupation of Daesh.[25] Accordingly, 57% of the adolescents surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that revenge helped to explain sympathy for or direct engagement with Daesh among adolescents.[26] On a similar note, 38% of the adult respondents in the survey agreed that revenge may be a driver of recruitment for certain adolescents, noting the high number of people killed during the fight against Daesh, as well as the imprisonment of thousands of alleged members and their families.[27] These findings echo previous research undertaken in the Sahel, which suggests that the most decisive factor pushing Fulani youth towards

[19] Omar Mohammed, "The Doctrine of Child Soldiers".
[20] Ibid.
[21] "The Children in Daesh: 'Future Flag Bearers' of the 'Caliphate", The Carter Center, 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/children-in-daesh.pdf.
[22] Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, "The Children of Islamic State," *The Quilliam Foundation*, 2016, 1–100.
[23] Amy-Louise Watkin and Seán Looney, "The Lions of Tomorrow": A News Value Analysis of Child Images in *Jihadi* Magazines, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 2019, 42:1-2, 120-140, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513696.
[24] Haid Haid, "Daesh engagement with adolescents in northeast Syria," September 2022, Food-for-Thought Paper submitted to the NSD-S Hub.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

violent extremism is the experience (or perception) of abuses committed by government authorities.[28]

Notwithstanding all of the above, as noted earlier, families and social networks can also play a significant role in influencing children away from VEOs and in promoting reintegration back into society. Among the adolescent respondents to the survey conducted in northeast Syria, 92% mentioned that they turned to their parents for advice or help – far exceeding the figure associated with siblings (50%), other relatives (36%) and friends (27%).[29] In addition, adult respondents emphasized the importance of certain parenting styles in dissuading adolescents from engaging with Daesh. According to some of the adult interviewees, spending time with children, offering them a sense of belonging and protection and engaging them in dialogues about Daesh had a more positive dissuasive impact, as opposed to berating the children.[30] Such efforts are said to have convinced some children to leave the VEO. In a similar vein, active parental monitoring of children's behaviour and activities, including their use of phones and the internet, was also thought to inhibit children's engagement with Daesh.[31]

Socio-economic Needs – a Pathway In and Out of VEOs

Socio-economic drivers are fluid, evolving across different time periods and age groups, as well as in keeping with the circumstances on the ground. For the most part, as elaborated below, these factors converge to create pathways for direct engagement or indirect association of children with VEOs. In other instances, albeit less frequently, socio-economic needs can also provide a pathway out of VEOs.

Data collected in 2021 in northeast Syria suggests that the individual incentives that contributed to adolescents joining Daesh in the past – power seeking, status and protection – have become less relevant since the group's territorial defeat.[32] With Daesh no longer able to provide such incentives to the same extent as before, other drivers have gained prominence in recent times. Among them, financial incentives are nowadays perceived to be a significant driver of recruitment for adolescents in northeast Syria, more so than in the past. Survey data shows that 74% of the adolescent respondents agree or strongly agree that financial benefits help to explain why adolescents might become involved with Daesh (see Figure 4).

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[28] "Si les Victimes Deviennent Bourreaux : Facteurs contribuant à la vulnérabilité et à la résilience à l'extrémisme violent au Sahel central, International Alert, 2018, https://www.international-alert.org/fr/publications/si-les-victimes-deviennent-bourreaux-facteurs-contribuant-a-la-vulnerabilite-et-a-la-resilience-a-lextremisme-violent-au-sahel-central/.
[29] Haid Haid, "Daesh engagement with adolescents in northeast Syria".
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

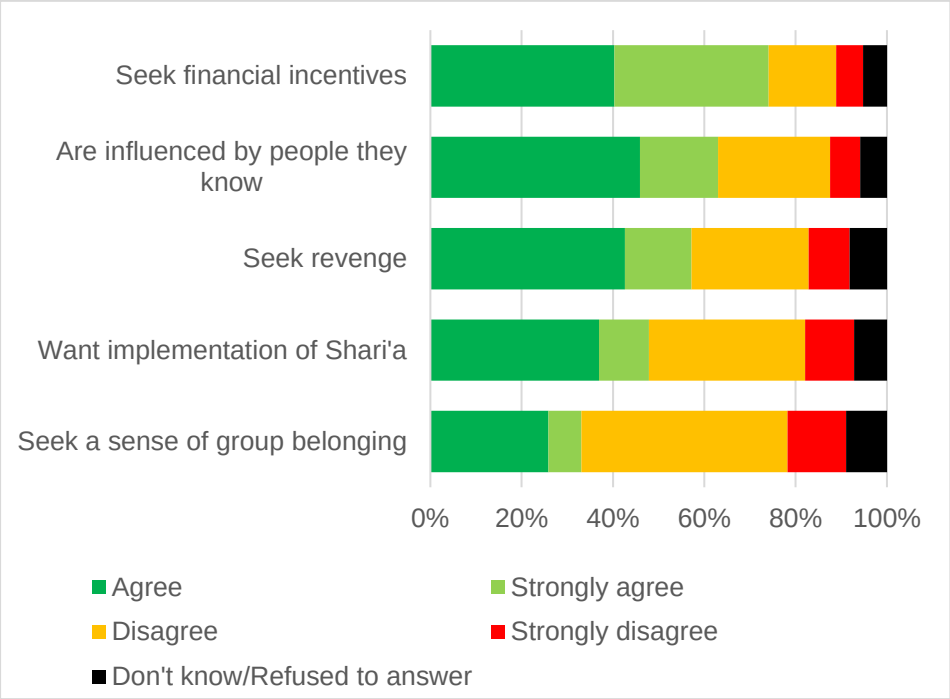

Figure 4: Perceived Drivers of Involvement in Daesh
Source: Dr Haid Haid (2022). "Daesh engagement with adolescents in northeast Syria." Food-for-Thought Paper submitted to the NSD-S Hub.

This perception was reinforced by two thirds of the adult interviewees in northeast Syria who agreed that material incentives could motivate certain adolescents to join Daesh.[33] According to some of these respondents, adolescents might be enticed by the monthly salary provided by Daesh (i.e. alleged to be somewhere between $500 and $1000, in a context where the average wage is less than $100/month).[34] In some cases, even the promise of a phone might be enough to generate support, given the fact that many families in the area are otherwise unable to provide mobile devices for their children.[35]

These individual-level findings from northeast Syria mirror research undertaken in other areas, which also highlights the importance of socio-economic vulnerability as a factor supporting recruitment by VEOs. Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia have long been known to exploit economic deprivation, insufficient employment opportunities and the families' inability to pay school fees to draw in young recruits.[36]

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[33] Haid Haid, "Daesh engagement with adolescents in northeast Syria".
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] "Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth". Mercy Corps, 2016, https://www.mercycorps.org/research/motivations-and-empty-promises-voices-former-boko-haram-combatants-and-nigerian. See also: Irene Ndung'u, Uyo Salifu, and Romi Sigsworth, "Violent Extremism in Kenya". Institute for Security Studies, 2017, https://issafrica.org/research/monographs/violent-extremism-in-kenya-why-women-are-a-priority. See also: "Journey to Extremism in Africa," UN Development Programme 2018, http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/journey-to-extremism.html.

Furthermore, the findings from northeast Syria should also be judged in the broader context. Roughly half of the male adolescent boys willing to openly discuss Daesh expressed positive views about the group, largely based on the perception that economic conditions, services and security were better under their rule.[37] The other half noted improvements in economic conditions, access to education and humanitarian aid, and freedom of movement after the fall of Daesh. Notably, the vast majority of adolescent girls in northeast Syria rejected the legacy of Daesh, largely on account of the terror inflicted by the group, its oppression of women and girls (including through early marriage), the restrictions on their movements, and the harsh punishments (including for breaking dress codes).[38] This suggests that the potential link between socio-economic factors and recruitment is more relevant for male adolescents in the region, whereas the lived experience under Daesh' harsh rule is a key factor limiting the group's recruitment prospects among adolescent girls.

Trends observable in the context of Iraq also speak to the importance of socio-economic grievances. Long before Daesh established its 'caliphate' in the region, the economic situation had been deteriorating in the country, aggravating real and perceived social injustices among the local population. The average Iraqi family had been struggling to make a living before the Daesh occupation, with farming practices having subsided across the country due to desertification, land degradation and urban expansion. Conversely, after the group rose to power, an average family could generate enough income to live in dignity in the event that some of its children joined Daesh.[39]

In fact, in the eyes of many ordinary people, the economic system set up by Daesh was more effective than that of the Iraqi state.[40] The benefits offered by the former were in stark contrast to the dysfunctionality of the official system. For example, Daesh members and their families did not have to pay for energy, transport and healthcare.[41] The VEO provided allowances for the children, wives and parents of its fighters; it had a special budget to cover expenses for the families of 'martyrs', captives and those disabled by war; and it also provided social aid in support of marriage.[42] To this day, in some quarters in Mosul, people express nostalgia about the basic services provided by Daesh (Figure 5). This is a key message that, according to some local observers, Daesh is bound to use for its ongoing and future recruitment drive across African countries, including in relation to children.[43]

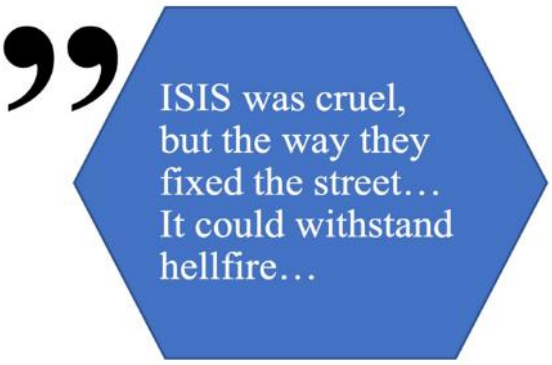

Figure 5 - Testimonial from Mosul

Source: Op. Cit. Omar Mohammed (2022)

Developments in north-eastern Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad region suggest that the prospect of socio-economic empowerment might indeed

[37] Haid Haid, "Daesh engagement with adolescents in northeast Syria".
[38] Ibid.
[39] NSD-S Hub Roundtable (September 2022).
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

facilitate recruitment by the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), a group which has established its dominance over the remnants of Boko Haram.[44] Over the past 4-5 years, ISWAP has reportedly focused not only on building its capabilities, but also on winning 'hearts and minds' and encouraging people to migrate to its territory for economic empowerment.[45] By some assessments, ISWAP is also attempting to monopolise movement, trade, provision of basic services and aid in the Lake Chad region, presumably in an effort to emulate the governing experience of Daesh in Iraq and Syria.[46] The extent to which ISWAP may be following ideological guidance from Daesh in this regard is not entirely clear to date, but there are indications that the latter has influenced the child recruitment practices of its affiliate in the Lake Chad region. With Daesh said to disapprove of the use of girls (and women) as suicide bombers, this practice appears to have declined in relation to ISWAP (in contrast to Boko Haram, which was known not only for its widespread abduction, recruitment and use of child soldiers, but also for its extensive use of girls in suicide attacks).

Recent propaganda released by the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) suggests that the group might be seeking to carve out a growing role for children in the area that it controls. The video released by ISWAP in January 2022, for example, showcased young boys undergoing religious indoctrination and military training.[47] It has been described as a graduation ceremony for the first set of ISWAP's "cubs of the caliphate" who are trained "to love martyrdom and slaughtering" in the name of religion.[48] Three children are even shown executing captive soldiers. By some accounts, an estimated 200 young boys graduated early in 2022 from one of ISWAP's training and radicalization camps.[49] As many as 50 such camps spread across the Lake Chad islands are said to host and train youth from Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.[50]

Notably, the influence of socio-economic factors also works in the other direction, at times providing a pathway out of VEOs. For instance, more than 200 women and children were reportedly released by Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a (ASWJ) in Mozambique in April and May this year, at a time when multiple famine alerts were issued for the northern part of the country.[51] Reports indicate that large numbers of malnourished ASWJ fighters laid down their

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[44] "Letter dated 11 July 2022 submitted to the President of the UN Security Council (S/2022/547)," Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S%202022%20547.pdf.
[45] Bulama Bukarti, "It's a Bit Tricky: Exploring ISIS's Ties with Boko Haram," 7 March 2022, Program on Extremism at George Washington University, https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Bukarti_March-2022_ISIS-Ties-with-Boko-Haram.pdf.
[46] Bulama Bukarti, "It's a Bit Tricky: Exploring ISIS's Ties with Boko Haram,". See also: Vincent Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad", 29 October 2020, International Crisis Group, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/islamic-state-franchises-africa-lessons-lake-chad.
[47] Jacob Zenn. "Unmasking Boko Haram", January 18, 2022, https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2022/01/19/iswap-empowerment-generation-video-january-18-2022/ .
[48] Bulama Bukarti, "It's a Bit Tricky: Exploring ISIS's Ties with Boko Haram,"
[49] Malik Samuel and Oluwole Ojewale, "Children on the battlefield: ISWAP's latest recruits", 10 March 2022, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/children-on-the-battlefield-iswaps-latest-recruits
[50] Ibid.
[51] Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, 2022.

weapons and surrendered to the authorities in Mozambique, also releasing children as a result of food shortages.[52]

The Unconstrained Influence of Socio-cultural Dynamics

The involvement of minors in VEOs is also facilitated by socio-cultural norms. Broadly speaking, culture provides the settings in which children and their families live their lives and the meanings ascribed by society to these activities and lifestyles.[53] The socio-cultural context "determines the people with whom children will interact, the settings in which they will carry out their daily activities, the tasks they will be assigned, the resources available to them, and the behaviour and values that they will be encouraged to develop and embrace."[54] All of these contextual factors can influence child vulnerability and create an enabling environment for recruitment by armed groups. If children are raised in a context where violence is widespread, encouraged or glorified, involvement with an armed group is no longer outside societal norms and can become endemic.

In the DRC, for example, the country with the largest population of internally displaced people on the African continent[55], displaced children often grow up in an environment marked by child recruitment, civilian massacres, conflict-related sexual violence, gang violence, criminality, child labour and exploitation, violent demonstrations etc. Among the displaced children, some feel that they have no choice but to join local or foreign NSAGs, even before they come of age. Other minors veer towards making a living in the artisanal mines, where they can also be subjected to kidnapping and forced recruitment, [56] while others migrate to urban areas where they can be manipulated to join urban gangs or support political agendas through violent means.[57]

This socio-cultural context, in combination with extreme insecurity, allows NSAGs to operate with impunity and to engage in horrific abuses against children. They place boys and girls on the frontlines of conflict as human shields and as 'protection charms' against enemies.[58] Boys over the age of 10 are trained to recognize the 'enemy' (i.e. an opposing armed group and/or the Congolese army), infiltrate its camp and cause harm.[59] Meanwhile, girls are subjected to sexual violence and tasked to fetch food, water and firewood, to cook and wash clothes for the male combatants.[60]

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[52] Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, 2022.
[53] Yochay Nadan and Jill Korbin, "Cultural Context, Intersectionality, and Child Vulnerability", *Childhood Vulnerability* Journal, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1007/s41255-019-00003-7.
[54] Ibid, 54.
[55] 5.9 million people, including 700,000 newly displaced people this year. For more information, see: https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1122162.
[56] Murhabazi Namegabe, "Reflections on the Dynamics Surrounding Child Soldiers in the DRC and the broader Great Lakes Region", September 2022, Food-for-thought paper submitted to the NSD-S Hub.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid. See also: "*All That I Have Lost* – The Impact of Attacks on Education for Women and Girls in Kasai Central Province Democratic Republic of Congo', Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2019, https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/documents_drc_kasai_attacks_on_women_and_girls.pdf.
[59] Murhabazi Namegabe, "Reflections on the Dynamics Surrounding Child Soldiers".
[60] Ibid.

In 2021, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) – rebranded as the Congolese wing of the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP) – was reported to have used women and children as human shields while expanding its area of operations from the North Kivu and Ituri Provinces to the South Kivu and Tanganyika Provinces.[61] Whereas international reporting has recently noted that ISCAP attracts new recruits with loans, employment and a sense of community and solidarity, local observers suggest that the militants in the DRC have been focusing on recruiting Muslim children for many years, providing cash to their families and promising to pay school fees for their siblings.[62]

Children who have escaped ADF or have been released from detention have apparently provided disturbing accounts of their training and initiation into violent extremism in North Kivu.[63] An example given was that children who resisted, or attempted to run away, would be abused in front of the others, as a means of deterring similar behaviour and ensuring compliance. In recent years, as ADF has continued to release propaganda emphasizing its affiliation with Daesh, it has also used children to proclaim the latter's infamous motto: "Remaining and expanding!"[64]

In addition to the dynamics outlined above, the expectation that children contribute to the family economy also creates significant recruiting environments in certain socio-cultural contexts, especially when coupled with the breakdown of the family unit. In Syria and Iraq, for example, the customary age for young people to enter the workforce, get married or begin military service has long deviated from the international standard of 18 years.[65] Given the high casualty rates among working/fighting-age males during the conflict in Syria and Iraq, boys in these areas prematurely inherited the roles and responsibilities of their fathers.[66] Becoming breadwinners for their families did not only imbue such boys with a sense of newfound familial duty, it also amounted to a consistent pull factor for joining armed groups.[67]

One other important socio-cultural aspect that increases the risk of recruitment for children is tied to social stigma. The challenges that this phenomenon poses in the areas affected by terrorism and violent extremism are often highlighted by researchers and analysts.[68] Its magnitude and

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[61] "Letter dated 15 July 2021 submitted to the President of the UN Security Council (S/2021/655)", *Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*, 2021, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_655_E.pdf.
[62] Ibid. See also Murhabazi Namegabe, "Reflections on the Dynamics Surrounding Child Soldiers".
[63] Murhabazi Namegabe, "Reflections on the Dynamics Surrounding Child Soldiers".
[64] Tara Candland et al, "The Islamic State in Congo". *Program on Extremism at George Washington University*, March 2021, https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/The%20Islamic%20State%20in%20Congo%20English.pdf
[65] Mara Redlich Revkin. "After the Islamic State: Balancing Accountability and Reconciliation in Iraq," *United Nations University*. 2018, https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/3127/2-LoP-Iraq-final.pdf.
[66] Gina Vale, "*You are no longer cubs, you are now lions*: examining the constructed masculinities of Islamic State child executioners and their victims," *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 2022, 10.1080/17539153.2022.2116155.
[67] Ibid, 57.
[68] Belkis Wille. "Iraq's So-Called ISIS Families: Rounded up, Vilified, Forgotten". Human Rigths Watch, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/14/iraqs-so-called-isis-families-rounded-vilified-forgotten. See also: Jason Beaubien, "A Life in Limbo for the Wives and Children of Isis Fighters", NPR, 15 March 2022,

repercussions, however, are not well understood and appear to be far from sufficiently addressed in practice.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this more evident than in Iraq. At the height of its expansion in 2014, Daesh controlled 20 major cities in the country with an estimated population of over 5 million people.[69] After its defeat, civilians who lived under its rule for an extended period of time from 2014-2017 were labelled as 'collaborators', even if that meant being just a cook, a cleaner or a stay-at-home wife. According to the Iraqi authorities more than 300,000 individuals[70] among the suspected 'collaborators' are thought to have had family ties to Daesh, of whom the vast majority are said to be women and children.[71] Data derived from a Daesh registry captured by U.S. military forces in Iraq referred to 101,850 minors linked to male adults on the group's payroll, with 92% of the guardians being from Iraq.[72]

Subjected to social stigma and marginalization, most of these families and their children have been languishing in camps and informal settlements across different Iraqi governorates. They do not have access to permanent homes, jobs, civil documentation and schools, and receive limited specialized assistance from international organizations.[73] Local organisations are unable to engage with them for fear of backlash from the local authorities and the rest of the populace.[74]

Furthermore, the suspected collaborators have been placed on a government-controlled security list and their reintegration process into society has been described as arbitrary and short-sighted.[75] Tribal and religious affiliations influence their reintegration prospects, as does their origin (rural/urban), as well as notions of dignity and honour (women and girls, for example, are said to have 'lost' their honour forever, whereas the same does not seem to apply to men and boys).[76] In practice, this means that some families and their children are being reintegrated into communities, whereas others are condemned to living on the margins of Iraqi society, which arguably sets the conditions for future recruitment.

In particular, the undocumented children in families with perceived Daesh association are at high risk of becoming a "neglected generation unable to

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https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2022/03/15/1086488950/a-life-in-limbo-for-the-wives-and-children-of-isis-fighters.

[69] Mara Redlich Revkin, "Pathways to Reintegration: IRAQ Families Formerly Associated with ISIL." *United Nations Development Programme*, August 2021, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/iq/UNDP-IQ-Pathways-to-Reintegration-Report.pdf.

[70] Ibid. In addition, an estimated 30,000 Iraqis who lived under Daesh in northeastern Syria may also be repatriated to camps in Iraq. For more information, see: "Baghdad plans detention camp for 30,000 Iraqis who lived under ISIS in Syria", Kurdistan 24, 2 May 2019, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/19530-Baghdad-plans-detention-camp-for-30,000-Iraqis-who-lived-under-ISIS-in-Syria.

[71] Mara Redlich Revkin, "Pathways to Reintegration".

[72] Daniel Milton and Don Rassler, "Minor Misery: What an Islamic State Registry Says About the Challenges of Minors in the Conflict Zone," *Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy*, October 2019, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Minor-Misery.pdf.

[73] Basma Alloush, "Living in the Shadows: Iraq's Remaining Displaced Families". War on the Rocks, 3 February 2022, https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/living-in-the-shadows-iraqs-remaining-displaced-families/.

[74] Ibid.

[75] NSD-S Hub Roundtable (September 2022).

[76] Ibid.

travel between Iraqi cities and towns, barred from attending formal schools and obtaining educational certificates, and denied access to health care or state social welfare programs."[77] The social marginalization and material deprivation that these children are subjected to amounts not only to a collective punishment that violates Iraqi law,[78] but also a potentially destabilizing practice in the mid- to long-term. The literature on child soldiers and juvenile justice emphasises that societal rejection prevents children from gaining a stake in society and leads to forms of deviant behaviour.[79] At the same time, evidence from situations of conflict in Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Uganda suggests that children's acceptance into the family and community is the key factor in successful rehabilitation.[80]

The empirical research available to date, therefore, implies that the extreme vulnerability of children with links to Daesh can create or exacerbate grievances and hostility towards State authorities or other communities. In turn, such grievances and hostility can easily perpetuate the conditions for continued recruitment by Daesh, especially as the latter seeks to regenerate its capabilities. In addition, this vulnerability can also be exploited by other VEOs in the region. In 2021, for example, the President of the Islamic Commission of Spain was arrested for diverting humanitarian funds to finance a school for orphaned Syrian children in Idlib with the intention of recruiting and training future terrorist fighters for Al-Qaida militias.[81] In the absence of targeted efforts commensurate with the scale of the challenge, it is likely that fears of Daesh's resurgence[82] will complicate even further the prospects for these children's societal integration and rehabilitation in both Iraq and Syria.

Similar dynamics have been observed in Nigeria, where there has long been fear and suspicion of the children born out of sexual violence and whose fathers are believed to be Boko Haram fighters. As far back as 2016, empirical research showed that, in the eyes of local communities, these children were deemed to have 'bad blood'.[83] Described by some community leaders as 'snakes' or 'hyenas among dogs', these children – along with their mothers – faced significant reintegration challenges.[84] As noted in the literature, even when husbands were willing to welcome their wives back upon their release

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[77] Alexandra Saieh. "Barriers from Birth: Undocumented children in Iraq sentenced to a life on the margins". *Norwegian Refugee Council*, 2019, https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/iraq/barriers-from-birth/barriers-from-birth-med-pages.pdf.
[78] Mara Redlich Revkin, "Pathways to Reintegration".
[79] "Solutions for Children Previously Affiliated With Extremist Groups: An Evidence Base to Inform Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration", *United Nations, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children*, 2020, https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/2020/reports_extremism/un_hq_osrsg_solutions_for_children_previously_affiliated_with_extremist_groups_20-01153_lo-res.pdf
[80] "Solutions for Children Previously Affiliated With Extremist Groups: An Evidence Base to Inform Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration", *United Nations,* 64.
[81] Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (2022).
[82] In early 2020, the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team warned that Daesh had begun to reassert itself in Syria and Iraq, mounting increasingly bold attacks, planning for the release of its detained fighters and exploiting security weaknesses in the two countries. For more information, see: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3848705?ln=en.
[83] "*Bad Blood*: Perceptions of children born of conflict-related sexual violence and women and girls associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria." *International Alert/UNICEF Nigeria*, 2016, https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Nigeria-Bad-Blood-EN-2016.pdf.
[84] Ibid.

from Boko Haram captivity, the other wives in polygamous families feared that the returning children could radicalise the other members of the household.[85] While communities in the region have generally regarded children as victims, their perceptions have seemingly oscillated between empathy and distrust. Research has highlighted that discrimination or rejection of these children may lead to 'self-fulfilling prophecies', increasing children's vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment by VEOs. Assumptions that the mistrust towards these children might reduce over time may have been too optimistic, with reports pointing towards continued stigma and social exclusion.[86]

[85] "*Bad Blood,*" *International Alert, UNICEF Nigeria,* 2016.
[86] "UNODC steps up effort to protect child victims and witnesses in terrorism-related proceedings in Nigeria", *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, 2022, https://www.unodc.org/nigeria/en/unodc-steps-up-effort-to-protect-child-victims-and-witnesses-in-terrorism-related-proceedings-in-nigeria.html.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE 'DEMAND SIDE'

The recruitment of children represents a phenomenon that is difficult to accurately quantify due to various data-gathering impediments. Although the UN's collection and verification process has improved over the past few years, the assembled data (whilst more reliable) still provides only an approximation of the phenomenon's actual size and scope.[87] Despite these limitations, the available figures strongly indicate that Africa and the Middle East are the regions where child recruitment continues to be most prevalent. In 2021, local State and NSAGs accounted for more than 5,800 of UN's documented/verified cases of child recruitment – a figure which represents over 90% of all UN's reported cases in that year.[88]

Although the majority of child recruitment is attributed to NSAGs, the phenomenon tends to have significant ripple effects. Once the practice emerges in a conflict zone, it often becomes widespread (sometimes instantaneously). As a result, child recruitment is almost never limited to only one group, but is instead regularly associated with multiple and often opposing factions.[89] Over the past years, Al-Shabaab has consistently been the most notable perpetrator of child recruitment in Somalia.[90] Nevertheless, aside from Al-Shabaab, the practice of recruiting Somali children has also been regularly linked with local government forces (police, army and intelligence), regional forces (Puntland, Jubbaland, Galmudug, etc.), clan militias and Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a.[91]

A security situation in which a wide variety of actors actively and simultaneously engage in child recruitment has not emerged only in Somalia, but can be found in other conflict zones across Africa and the Middle East. Between 2020 and 2021 the number of identified (documented/verified) actors that engaged in the practice of child recruitment in the DRC stood at 12, in Syrian Arab Republic - 11, in Mali - 10, in Central African Republic (CAR) - 7, in South Sudan - 7, etc.[92,93] In fact, in just the ten-year period between 2010 and 2020, the number of NSAGs that were reported to have recruited children

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[87] "Staggering scale of grave violations against children in conflict revealed in new UNICEF analysis," *UNICEF*, 27 June, 2022, https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/staggering-scale-grave-violations-against-children-conflict-revealed-new-unicef.
[88] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict – Annual Report (General Assembly Seventy-sixth session)," *United Nations*, 23 June, 2022, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/344/71/PDF/N2234471.pdf?OpenElement.
[89] "Annual Report Summary 2019," *Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict – United Nations*, August, 2020, https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CAAC-Children-Armed-Conflict-Annual-Report-Summary-2019-WEB.pdf.
[90] Between 2016 and 2021 the number of documented/verified children recruited by the group oscillated from 854 to 1865 per year.
[91] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict – Annual Report (General Assembly Seventy-sixth session)," *United Nations*, 23 June, 2022. https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/344/71/PDF/N2234471.pdf?OpenElement
[92] "Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," 23 June, 2022.
[93] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict – Annual Report (General Assembly Seventy-fifth session)," 6 May, 2021, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/113/09/PDF/N2111309.pdf?OpenElement.

worldwide almost tripled from 38 to 110 – it is likely that the identified ripple effect belongs among the major contributors to such a trend.[94]

SWOT Analysis

The increasing number and diversity of actors that recruit children suggests that some of them, if not the majority, engage in this practice to advance their strategic and operational objectives. In order to better understand the 'demand side' an evidence-based Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis was conducted (Figure 6) - assessing the recruitment of children from the perspective of non-state perpetrators.[95]

Figure 6: SWOT Analysis – Recruitment of Children

The identified attributes suggest that strengths and opportunities far exceed the number of weaknesses and threats that NSAGs associate with the phenomenon. This provides further credence to the viewpoint that child recruitment is, to a certain degree, driven by intent and its perceived advantages, rather than by mere necessity. Such inference is additionally corroborated by the fact that some of the most prominent NSAGs have engaged in child recruitment across vastly different geographical areas. The recruitment and use of children has been, among many others, frequently reported with regards to groups ranging from the Taliban (TB) in Afghanistan, Ansar Allah (Houthis) in Yemen, and Al-Shabaab in Somalia to Coalition des

[94] Pia Podieh, Kristen Kamoy, Keyan Salarkia, "Stop the War on Children – a Crisis of Recruitment," Save the Children, 30 November, 2021, https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-11/apo-nid315376.pdf.
[95] Individual attributes are evidence-based and were collected through extensive literature review regarding the child recruitment phenomenon.

patriotes pour le changement (CPC) in CAR, Boko Haram in Nigeria, or Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) in Mali.[96,97]

In addition, the SWOT analysis has two inherent features that are of relevance. Firstly, the identified 'weaknesses' gradually diminish in significance as recruited children age and gain further experience. In fact, in the mid- to long-term, the factors such as inferior physical power, inexperience, low-skills or limitations to improvised explosive devices (IEDs)/small arms and light weapons (SALW) become negligible. At the same time, many of the 'strengths' that NSAGs associate with child recruitment simultaneously diminish as well (e.g. lack of sense of fear, easily controlled, cheap to maintain, less detectable, etc.). Nevertheless, as these 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' progressively dissipate, the group gains a more experienced combatant, potentially even a willing member.[98,99] As a result, various NSAGs can also view the recruitment of children, aside from more immediate 'strengths' and 'opportunities', as a long-term strategic investment.[100]

Secondly, the attributes identified within the SWOT analysis have an oscillating significance, contingent upon the age of the recruited child. For instance, given their mental maturity and physical aptitude, 7-year-old children can be considered significantly more malleable than 16-year-olds. However, the former's competence in aiding the group during combat itself is notably lower. While difficult to accurately categorize, the available data suggests that the majority of non-state perpetrators tend to recruit children between the ages of 12 and 17.[101,102] This range likely represents an age group which maximizes identified 'strengths' and minimizes 'weaknesses'. Nonetheless, the recruitment of children who are younger is not uncommon. Although cases of recruits as young as five exist, more significant child recruitment reportedly

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[96] "Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," 23 June, 2022.
[97] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict – Annual Report (General Assembly Seventy-third session)," *United Nations*, 20 June, 2019, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N19/186/21/PDF/N1918621.pdf?OpenElement.
[98] Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram: Recruitment, Financing, and Arms Trafficking in the Lake Chad Region," *CTC Sentinel* 7, issue 10, October 2014, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/boko-haram-recruitment-financing-and-arms-trafficking-in-the-lake-chad-region/.
[99] Jessica Wolfendale, Matthew Talbert, "The Moral Responsibility of Child Soldiers and the Case of Dominic Ongwen," *Stockholm Center for Ethics of War and Peace*, http://stockholmcentre.org/the-moral-responsibility-of-child-soldiers-and-the-case-of-dominic-ongwen/.
[100] Mick Mulroy, Eric Oehlerich, Zack Baddorf, "Begin with the children: Child soldier numbers doubled in the Middle East in 2019," *The Middle East Institute*, 14 April, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/begin-children-child-soldier-numbers-doubled-middle-east-2019.
[101] Michelle Steel, "Child Soldiers," Vision, Fall 2008, https://www.vision.org/social-issues-child-soldiers-1049.
[102] Rafiu Oriyomi Ajakaye, "3,500 child soldiers recruited in Nigeria: UNICEF," *Anadolu Agency*, 12 April, 2019, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/3-500-child-soldiers-recruited-in-nigeria-unicef/1450584.

begins at the age of 10.[103,104,105,106] This overlaps with the assessment that many small arms, such as the Avtomat Kalashnikova (AK-47) and its variants, can be easily carried and used by children of that age.[107]

Trends and Enablers

Although child recruitment remains a wide-spread yet underreported phenomenon across Africa and the Middle East, the UN data suggests that, following two peak years in 2016 and 2017, its local scale (total number of recruited children per year) has in fact decreased and since 2018 has remained within a relatively stable range (See Figure 7 - in order to accurately identify ongoing trends, it is essential to differentiate between (1) children recruited in the given year and (2) children that were identified as child recruits, but the recruitment itself occurred in the previous years. Failing to make such a differentiation would lead to data misinterpretation).[108]

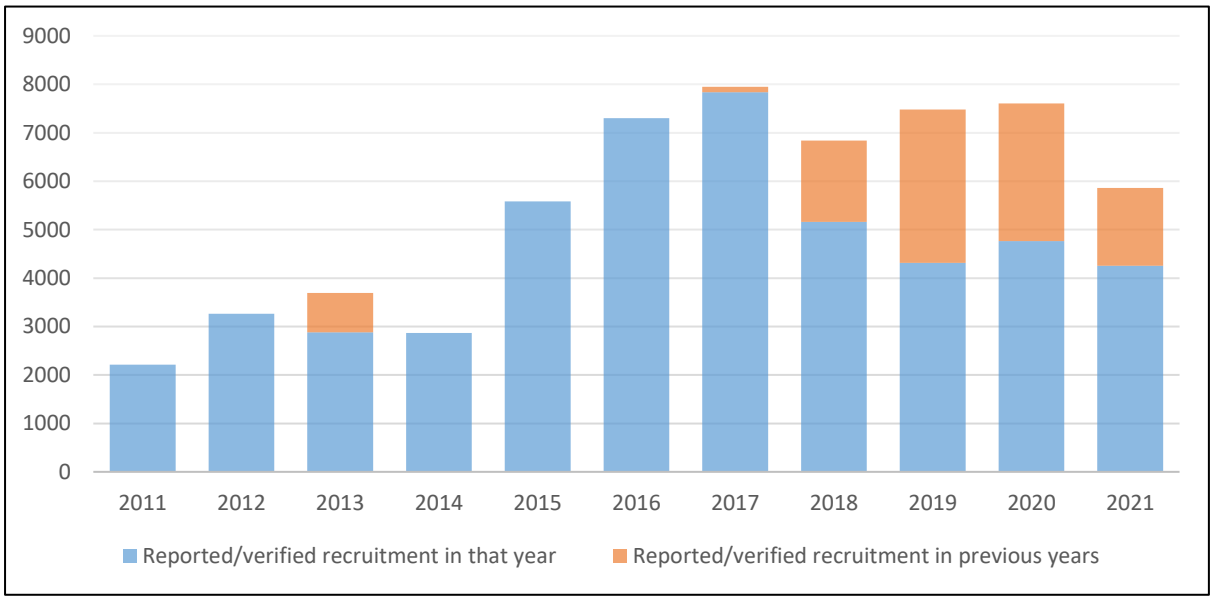

Figure 7: Recruitment of Children – Africa and Middle East

(Source: Graph elaborated by NSD-S Hub. Data gathered from Reports of the Secretary-General on Children and armed conflict 2012-2022)

[103] Peter W. Singer, "Young Soldiers Used in Conflicts Around the World," *Brookings*, 12 June, 2006, https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/young-soldiers-used-in-conflicts-around-the-world/.
[104] "Children Affected by Armed Conflict/ Child Soldiers," *The Youth Advocate Program International*, http://yapi.org/youth-wellbeing/children-affected-by-armed-conflict-child-soldiers/.
[105] "Child Soldiers: One of the worst abuses of child labour," *Amnesty International*, 1 January, 1999, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior42/001/1999/en/.
[106] "Child Soldiers," *Humanium*, 05 October, 2011, https://www.humanium.org/en/child-soldier/.
[107] Anne-Lynn Dudenhoefer, "Understanding the Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Africa," *The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD)*, 16 August, 2016, https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/understanding-recruitment-child-soldiers-africa/.
[108] Data were gathered from Annual Reports of the Secretary-General on Children and armed conflict 2012-2022.

Whilst these figures provide further insight and understanding of the child recruitment phenomenon, they still need to be approached with caution. As already indicated, earlier reports have lower reliability than more recent ones. Not only has the collection and verification process improved over the observed period, but recent reports include data covering more countries than in the past – two facts which, aside from deterioration on the ground, may have also contributed to the reported upsurge since 2011. Likewise, increases in reported child recruitment can be, on occasion, attributed to groups inflating the number of recruited children in order to benefit from disarmament, demobilization and reintegration packages.[109] Inversely, any documented reduction in the number of recruits can be caused by security restrictions, access limitations, or by local communities' fears to report recruitment incidents.[110,111] Nevertheless, the drop following 2017 suggests the existence of multiple causes, possibly including efforts to end hostilities (e.g. South Sudan, CAR, Yemen) as well as military losses incurred by groups such as Boko Haram or Daesh.

Data indicates that non-state actor's ability to directly control or project notable influence over territory/communities potentially belongs among the key determinants affecting the group's capacity to recruit children in large numbers. Following the loss of territory, the reported number of children that were recruited by Boko Haram in Nigeria dropped from 1,947 in 2016 to 1,051 in 2017 and later to 301 in 2018. Similarly, following the reduction of territory under the control of Daesh, the number of Syrian children recruited by the group reportedly dropped from 284 in 2017 to 30 in 2018. By 2019, the UN was able to verify only one child as recruited by Daesh in Syria and none in Iraq.[112,113,114,115,116]

While the territory control, or the uncontested/semi-contested influence over it, is not a prerequisite for engaging in child recruitment (e.g. child recruitment can be conducted online, via family ties, or by clandestine cells) it likely serves as one of phenomenon's major enablers – providing the group with access to a larger pool of potential recruits. Available figures from recent years indicate that Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, CPC in CAR, Kurdish People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) in Syria, Mai-Mai Mazembe in DRC, CMA in Mali, Houthis in

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[109] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," 24 August, 2017.
[110] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict – Annual Report (General Assembly Seventy-fourth session)," *United Nations*, 09 June, 2020, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/117/04/PDF/N2011704.pdf?OpenElement.
[111] "Children and Armed Conflict (General Assembly Forty-third session)," *United Nations Human Rights Council*, 24 December, 2019, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/352/99/PDF/G1935299.pdf?OpenElement.
[112] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict – Annual Report (General Assembly Seventy-second session)," *United Nations*, 16 May, 2018, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/151/09/PDF/N1815109.pdf?OpenElement.
[113] Gudrun Østby, Aas Siri Rustad, Roos Haer, Andrew Arasmith, "Children at risk of being recruited for armed conflict, 1990–2020," *Children & Society*, 2022;00:1–20.
[114] "Children and Armed Conflict (General Assembly Fortieth session session)," *United Nations Human Rights Council*, 26 December, 2018, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/446/72/PDF/G1844672.pdf?OpenElement.
[115] Data were gathered from Annual Reports of the Secretary-General on Children and armed conflict 2016-2019.
[116] As indicated above, reported figures should be considered as an approximation given the high likelihood that many cases are not documented/reported.

Yemen, Nyatura in DRC, the TB in Afghanistan, and Platform in Mali are among the most notable non-state perpetrators of child recruitment in Africa and the Middle East.[117,118,119] Not only has the majority of listed entities demonstrated competency in controlling territory, but many have been able to establish effective shadow state structures - appoint 'governors', collect taxes, operate educational facilities, provide judicial services, etc.[120,121]

Separately, territorial control can also affect other recruitment venues, such as the internet and social media. As Daesh territory shrunk, losing all its key bases in Syria and Iraq by the end of 2017, so too did the group's capability to produce propaganda material in its previous size and scope.[122,123] This trend, further bolstered by the military campaign targeting key Daesh propagandists, resulted in a notable decline in the group's online recruitment capabilities and radicalization efforts.[124] Just between November 2016 and April 2017, the monthly output of Daesh propaganda dropped by 75%.[125]

It is highly likely that by gradually diminishing an NSAG's territorial control, its capacity to conduct large scale child recruitment would be progressively degraded as well. Nevertheless, such an outcome does not always translate into the overall decline of child recruitment in the affected area. Whilst Boko Haram's military losses led to an overall drop of reported child recruitment in Nigeria, the same is not true for Syria following the decline of Daesh. In fact, after the initial dip in local child recruitment in 2018, the phenomenon quickly regained traction as other actors, especially HTS, YPG/YPJ and the Syrian National Army (SNA), filled in the emerging vacuum.[126]

In a wider context, the child recruitment phenomenon in Africa and the Middle East remains largely unabated. It is likely that the reported decrease in the number of children recruited per year following 2017 (see Figure 2) was primarily circumstantial and not indicative of significant long-term improvements. Furthermore, it is assessed as highly likely that with the

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[117] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," 23 June, 2022.
[118] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," 6 May, 2021.
[119] Listed are African and Middle Eastern top 10 main perpetrators of child recruitment in 2020 and 2021 (descending order) – data gathered from the UN Annual reports on Children and Armed Conflict. NB., included are only NSAGs that have been reported to recruit children in both years.
[120] Pamela Constable, "The Taliban has successfully built a parallel state in many parts of Afghanistan, report says," *The Washington Post*, 21 June, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/06/21/the-taliban-has-successfully-built-a-parallel-state-in-many-parts-of-afghanistan-report-says/.
[121] Sudarsan Raghavan, "An attack on a military base in Somalia shows al-Shabab's deadly power," *The Washington Post*, 17 July, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/17/somalia-al-shabab-us-troops/.
[122] Mina Al-Lami, "The Rise, Fall and Rise of ISIS Media, 2017–2018," *Terrorism, Radicalisation & Countering Violent Extremism*, 31 January, 2019, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-13-1999-0_9.
[123] Henry Ridgwell, "Huge Decline in ISIS Propaganda Mirrors Losses on Battlefield," *VOA*, 01 December, 2017, https://www.voanews.com/a/isis-propaganda-declies-mirrors-losses-on-battlefield/4144838.html.
[124] Ryan Dillon, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Dillon via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq," *US Department of Defense*, 27 July, 2017, https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1260398/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-colonel-dillon-via-teleconference-from/.
[125] "ISIS After the Caliphate," *Wilson Center*, 28 November, 2017, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-after-the-caliphate-0.
[126] Data were gathered from Annual Reports of the Secretary-General on Children and armed conflict 2016-2019.

emergence of new conflicts or the escalation of existing ones, the number of children recruited per year will increase correspondingly.

Ideological Legacy versus Undogmatic Recruitment

The recruitment of children is not a monolithic phenomenon. In fact, various NSAGs across Africa and the Middle East that recruit minors often have vastly diverging approaches, reasoning and *modus operandi*. These distinctions should be taken into consideration when attempting to engage with these actors or when seeking to reintegrate formerly recruited children.

An assessment of the recent tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) of various NSAGs reveals that recruited children are systematically imbued with a strong ideological worldview. This increasing trend was particularly evident during the 2010s when various militant groups began to implement more sophisticated and institutionalized mechanisms for such a purpose. This primarily refers to groups such as Daesh, Al-Shabaab and, to some extent, Boko Haram. The common denominator in their *modus operandi* being an elimination of traditional education and curriculums (erasing or limiting 'unholy' and 'contentious' subjects such as history, philosophy, music, art, literature, geography etc.) and replacing it with classes focused on Arabic language and religious education. In addition, physical training, including exercise in shooting or wrestling, is often incorporated.[127,128,129] The strategy of recruiting children and indoctrinating them with extremist narratives therefore likely aims to primarily ensure the group's long-term survival while simultaneously generating a dedicated and skilled fighting force. In that regard, the NSAGs almost certainly perceive the recruitment of children as a long-term strategic investment.

Nevertheless, not all groups that recruit children engage in their systematic indoctrination, although some might still have a form of 'initiation' or training, often brutal and traumatic.[130] In fact, various militias in countries such as Liberia, Uganda, Sierra Leone or DRC have demonstrated no significant inclination to re-educate or indoctrinate the minors they have recruited. Such groups perceive child recruitment primarily as a cheap and available instrument for increasing their firepower or for fulfilling immediate ad-hoc tasks.[131] When compared, the NSAGs that demonstrate inclination for 'undogmatic recruitment' are likely to be substantially more driven by their short-term and operational objectives rather than by long-term and strategic goals.

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[127] Noman Benotman, Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State* (Quilliam, March 2016).
[128] Gina Vale, "Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory," *ICSR*, 2018, https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-Cubs-in-the-Lions%E2%80%99-Den-Indoctrination-and-Recruitment-of-Children-Within-Islamic-State-Territory.pdf.
[129] "They Didn't Know if I Was Alive or Dead" Military Detention of Children for Suspected Boko Haram Involvement in Northeast Nigeria," *Human Rights Watch*, 10 September, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/09/10/they-didnt-know-if-i-was-alive-or-dead/military-detention-children-suspected-boko.
[130] "Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups," *UNICEF*, last updated 22 December 2021, https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces.
[131] "Child Soldiers in Armed Conflict," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, July 2018, https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2018/armed-conflict-survey-2018/acs2018-03-essay-3.

The differentiation between NSAGs that engage in systematic indoctrination and those inclined for undogmatic recruitment is also assessed to potentially permeate into the group's willingness to release recruited children. This factor is not only affected by the presumed ideological convictions of the former, but also by the fact that systematic indoctrination inherently increases the 'costs' associated with child recruitment. In fact, such a group has to invest a notable amount of its own resources, logistical effort and manpower which highly likely further diminishes its willingness to release recruited children.

Male versus Female Child Recruitment

Despite the fact that reliable sex-disaggregated data regarding child recruitment is scarce and difficult to validate, the available information indicates that boys continue to be strongly preferred over girls.[132] Nevertheless, data also suggests that even the scale and degree of this preference varies. In 2021, 1,296 and 1,161 children were reportedly recruited (verified) in Syria and Somalia, respectively. In both countries more than 96% of those recruited were boys. In contrast, 329 and 352 children were reportedly recruited in the same year in CAR and Mali, respectively. In both of these countries, girls represented around 20% of those recruited. Similarly, tilted gender distribution (Syria, Somalia, CAR, Mali) can be identified in 2020, and to some extent in previous years.[133,134,135]

Other countries in the South, although based on less robust or representative sample size, demonstrate similar differentiations. For instance, the documented recruitment of girls in Afghanistan, from 2016 to 2021, reportedly never exceeded 3% of the total. Inversely, the recruitment of girls in DRC or Nigeria, during the same time period, never fell below 10% of the total (for most years, the percentage of recruited girls would oscillate around 15%).[136] Altogether, these figures suggest that the degree of preference for the recruitment of boys is not circumstantial, but rather reflective of wider trends associated with certain groups or regions.

Separately, the oscillating preference for the recruitment of boys could potentially be linked to roles that various NSAGs frequently assign to recruited girls. Daesh, which imposed strict gender segregation, generally rejected utilising girls and women in combat. Instead, recruited girls or the "flowers and pearls of the caliphate" were supposed to focus on domestic duties and bringing up children with Daesh ideology.[137,138] Although the girls' role within the group started changing as Daesh began to lose territory and to encourage women to take part in battles, it is still in stark contrast to the roles assigned

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[132] Pia Podieh, Kristen Kamoy, Keyan Salarkia, "Stop the War on Children – a Crisis of Recruitment," Save the Children, 30 November, 2021, https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-11/apo-nid315376.pdf.
[133] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," 23 June, 2022.
[134] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," 6 May, 2021.
[135] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," 09 June, 2020.
[136] Data were gathered from Annual Reports of the Secretary-General on Children and armed conflict 2017-2022. NB. Utilized data are based on the total number of documented/verified recruited children in individual reports (i.e. due to the data limitations, presented figures do not make a distinction regarding when the recruitment itself occurred – a distinction which was made in previous parts of this report).
[137] "Child Soldiers in Armed Conflict," July 2018.
[138] "The Children of Islamic State," March 2016.

by groups such as Boko Haram.[139] In relation to the latter, the UN signalled, as far back as 2015, an alarming trend regarding a growing number of girls used as suicide bombers.[140] This assessment was later corroborated. In 2016 Boko Haram was reported to carry out 30 suicide attacks using children – 26 of these were carried out by girls. In 2017, Boko Haram in Cameroon and Nigeria conducted 203 suicide attacks using children – 145 of which (almost three quarters) were girls.[141,142] In a wider context, these examples indicate that the operational relevance assigned to recruited girls can vary significantly. However, this link continues to remain tenuous due to the lack of reliable sex-disaggregated data, it is assessed as possible that groups which assign more operationally-relevant roles to recruited girls will also generally show higher willingness for their recruitment.

[139] "The Rise, Fall and Rise of ISIS Media, 2017–2018," 31 January, 2019.
[140] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict – Annual Report (General Assembly Sixty-ninth session)," *United Nations*, 05 June, 2015, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/109/23/PDF/N1510923.pdf?OpenElement.
[141] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," 24 August, 2017.
[142] "Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict," 16 May. 2018.

CONCLUSIONS

The research presented in this report has highlighted the ways in which structural factors continue to drive children towards direct engagement or indirect affiliation with NSAGs in the Middle East and Africa. The children who fall victim to this phenomenon across these regions are primarily those where the overlapping social environment, economic system and cultural norms increase the vulnerability to recruitment, especially against a background of protracted conflict. In parallel, this study has also identified patterns of recruitment on the perpetrators' side, from the *modus operandi* of NSAGs, to key trends, to distinctions based on ideology and gender. On both sides – 'supply' and 'demand' – there is ample room to address the various enabling factors through short-, mid- and long-term responses.

On the 'supply side', when it comes to VEOs in particular, an important takeaway from this study is that structural factors can be just as conducive to resilience as they are to recruitment. Whereas the involvement of parents, communities, religious leaders etc. can pave the way for children's affiliation with VEOs, this study has also highlighted the need for extended families and social networks to be mobilised to promote resilience, particularly in the short- to mid-term. Field research in Syria and Iraq, for example, has confirmed the relevance of social cohesion as a resilience factor to Daesh, especially bearing in mind that the group sought to systematically destroy family bonds in furtherance of child recruitment.

Going forward, this type of social mobilization could be geared towards:

- Preventing vulnerable families and their minors from seeking socio-economic help from VEOs;
- Sustaining awareness of and ability to detect activities by VEOs, especially those carried out by outsiders;
- Disseminating compelling local narratives about the cruelty, abuses and violence perpetrated by VEOs;
- Engaging minors in dialogues about violent extremism;
- Providing children with a sense of belonging and protection; particularly those who have suffered familial loss;
- Promoting the rejuvenation of formal education and the (re)opening of schools.

The 'supply side' analysis has also revealed gendered motivations for seeking or rejecting affiliation with VEOs. At the individual level, for example, financial motivations appear to be more relevant for boys than for girls. This is partially because of the social expectation that boys might need to assume 'male protector' roles and become breadwinners for their families before they come of age. At the same time, it would seem that negative personal experiences might be a source of resilience against VEO recruitment for girls, more so than for boys. Going forward, in the short- to mid-term, these different motivations could inform a more gendered approach to enhancing the resilience of boys and girls, respectively, against violent extremism and terrorism.

Likewise, in the short- to mid-term, there is a need to assess, in a more systematic fashion, the risks and opportunities confronting the children hosted in formal camps and informal settlements across Africa and the Middle East, particularly those in areas affected by violent extremism. Targeted research

efforts could also shed additional light on the dynamics that affect the children who have left these settlements and have been reintegrated in communities. At this time, however, there seems to be a disproportionate level of attention with regard to the children (and women) in Syria's Al-Hol and Roj camps (especially the children of foreign fighters), despite there being far more minors who have a perceived association with Daesh across Iraq and Syria.

Bearing in mind the above, this report has attempted to give a better indication of the scale of the challenge, not only by noting the massive numbers of Iraqi children indirectly associated with Daesh and potentially perceived as a security threat, but also by highlighting the dynamics which are otherwise obscured by the current counter-terrorism lens – e.g. the legacy targeting the children of 'martyrs', the manifold consequences of social stigma, the difficulties with community reintegration, the socio-economic burden befalling male minors etc.

Perhaps most notably, social stigma and marginalisation are key prospective drivers for the recruitment of children.These phenomena can entrench barriers to children's social and human development, potentially paving the way for radicalised identities and subsequent recruitment. While suggestions on how to address this situation fall outside the scope of this particular study, it is important to note that the prevalence of social stigma is deemed to be one of the most unpredictable yet dangerous legacies of violent extremism, especially in the Middle East. Developing locally appropriate interventions to mitigate the risks will arguably require long-term efforts on multiple levels of the social-ecological system.

Additionally, on the 'demand side', while attempting to give an indication of the scale of child recruitment and its evolution over the past decade, critical gaps in data collection exist. Although most child recruitment almost certainly occurs in Africa and the Middle East, data limitations make it difficult to quantify to what extent the phenomenon has increased or decreased over time. As a result, efforts to improve data collection and verification should constitute a key priority in the short-, mid- and long-term.

The practice of child recruitment has significant ripple effects. This practice hardly ever remains limited to only one actor/perpetrator in a certain area. Rather, once it emerges, it tends to spread rapidly. This proliferation significantly hinders efforts to address child recruitment, because an effective long-term solution needs to ideally target all the perpetrators in a given conflict simultaneously. For the time being, as things stand, the vacuum created by derailing one NSAG's ability to recruit children can be quickly filled by another actor operating in the same area.

Separately, data has indicated that the ability of VEOs to directly control or project notable influence over territory/communities may be one of the key drivers for large-scale child recruitment. Furthermore, recruitment accompanied by systematic indoctrination appears to have notably amplified over the past decade. The VEOs that actively engage in this type of recruitment are likely driven by long-term strategic goals, with the process of indoctrinating children being perceived as a long-term investment. Conversely, groups that primarily engage in undogmatic recruitment are more likely driven by short-term goals and ad-hoc operational needs. On account of these dynamics, there could be a more targeted effort in the short- to mid-term to engage VEOs that are less dogmatic in their recruitment of children and deemed more likely to release underage recruits from their ranks.

Although gender-disaggregated data is sparse, over the past year, in places like Syria or Somalia, up to 96% of the recruits were boys, whereas in countries like Mali and CAR that percentage stood at 80%.The preference for boys over girls seems to be linked to the roles that they are assigned. Although this link continues to remain tenuous, it is possible that the VEOs which assign more operationally-relevant roles to underage female recruits are also the ones that generally show a higher willingness to recruit them in the first place (e.g. Boko Haram in Nigeria). Moving forward, it would be important to collect the necessary gender-disaggregated data that can help guide prevention efforts over the long-term.

One final take-way from this study is related to Daesh' proclaimed expansion in Africa. To keep momentum, Daesh is trying to perpetuate an aura of an ever-expanding force that appeals to new recruits in a growing number of provinces. The tentative findings outlined in this study in relation to ISCAP and ISWAP point to the possibility that the African affiliates might seek to increasingly emulate the Daesh approaches to the recruitment and use of children. Going forward, this could entail a growing reliance on indoctrination, propaganda and military training in relation to children, in parallel with continued attempts to consolidate territorial control.

Looking ahead, there is a need to better identify child recruitment patterns, especially in relation to the areas experiencing growing VEO activity across Africa. This can help increase understanding as to how widespread the opportunities are for VEOs regarding: organisation, recruitment and development of local support; how much control VEOs exercise over territories and populations; and how much freedom of action they have. These may, in turn, be critical in supporting decision-making on military and non-military options, where appropriate, including in order to prevent child recruitment on an even larger scale.

ANNEX A: STATES' OBLIGATIONS RELATING TO CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED FORCES AND ARMED GROUPS

	Participation in hostilities	Recruitment	Voluntary recruitment	Protection	Sentencing	DDR Programmes
CRC	State Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take a direct part in hostilities. (Art. 38(2))	State Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of 15 years into their armed forces. When recruiting, State Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest (between 15 and 18 years). (Art. 38(3))		State parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict. (Art. 38(4))	Neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offences committed by persons below 18 years. (Art. 37(a))	
OP-CAC	Ensure "all feasible measures" are taken so that those under 18 years of age do not take a direct part in hostilities. (Art. 1)	Ensure that those under 18 years of age are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces (Art. 2). / Ensure that States raise the minimum age for voluntary recruitment (from the current minimum of 15 years). (Art. 3(1))	Ensure that recruitment of those under 18 years of age is genuinely voluntary, with consent of guardians, upon reliable proof of age, providing full information on duties involved. (only if permitted by law) (Art. 3(3))			States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons recruited/used are demobilized or otherwise released from service; shall accord appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social reintegration. (Art. 6(3)) States Parties shall cooperate in the rehabilitation and social reintegration of persons victims of acts contrary thereto. (Art. 7(1))
GC IV		The Occupying Power may not, in any case, change children's personal status, nor enlist them in formations or organizations subordinate to it. (Art. 50 para 2)				
AP I	State Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take a direct part in hostilities. (Art. 77(1))	State Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of 15 years into their armed forces. When recruiting, State Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest (between 15 and 18 years). (Art. 77(2))			The death penalty for an offence related to the armed conflict may not be executed on persons under 18 years of age at the time of the offence. (Art. 77(5))	
AP II	Children who have not attained the age of 15 years shall not be allowed to take direct part in hostilities. (Art. 4(3)(c))	Children who have not attained the age of 15 years shall not be recruited in the armed forces or groups. (Art. 4(3)(c))		Special protection to children under 15 years shall remain applicable to them if they take a direct part in hostilities. (Art. 4(3)(d))	The death penalty shall not be pronounced on persons who were under the age of 18 years at the time of the offence. (Art. 6(4))	
ACRWC	States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure that no child shall take a direct part in hostilities. (Art. 22(2))	States Parties shall take all Necessary measures to refrain from recruiting any child. (Art. 22(2))		States Parties shall undertake to respect and ensure for rules of IHL which affect the child. (Art. 22(1))		
Protocol to ACRWC	States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure that no child, especially girls under 18 years of age, take a direct part in hostilities. (Art. 11 al.4)	States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure that no child is recruited as a soldier. (Art. 11 al.4)				
ILO Convention. 182		Each Member shall take effective measures to prevent the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict. (Art. 7(2)(a))				Each Member shall take Effective measures to provide direct assistance for the removal of children from being used in armed conflicts, and for their rehabilitation and social integration as well as access to free basic education and vocational training where appropriate. (Art. 7(2)(b)(c))
ICC Statute	Using children under the age of 15 years to participate actively in hostilities is a war crime. (Art. 8(2)(b)(xxvi) & 8(2)(e)(vii))					

Source: ICRC 'Guiding Principles for the Domestic Implementation of a Comprehensive System of Protection for Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups' https://www.icrc.org/en/document/domestic-implementation-comprehensive-system-protection-children-associated-armed-forces-or

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