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CHILD INVOLVEMENT WITH ARMED GROUPS IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

EDITED BY
SIOBHAN O'NEIL &
KATO VAN BROECKHOVEN

UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY

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

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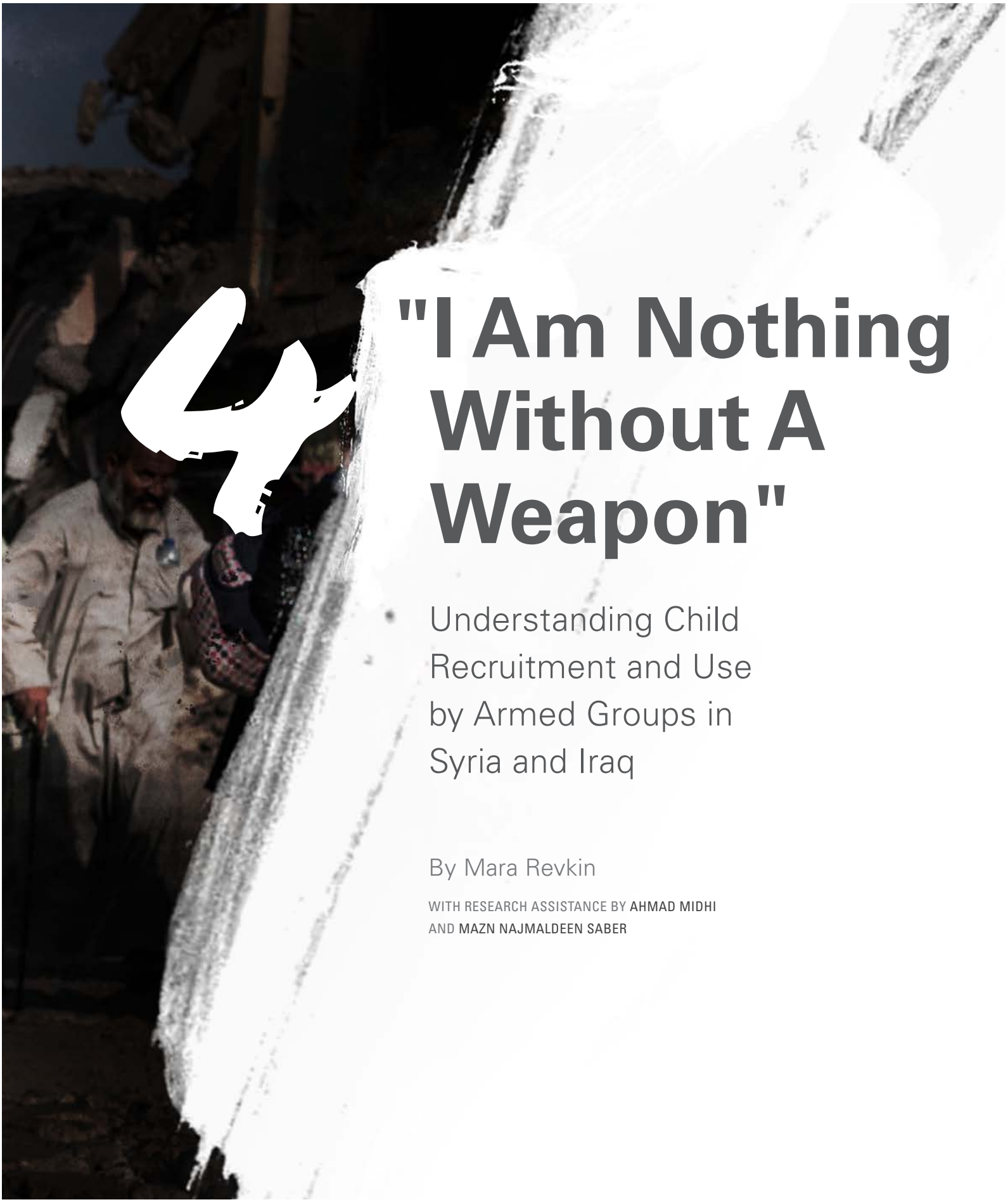
By Mara Revkin
with research assistance by Ahmad Midhi
and Mazn Najmaldeen Saber



"I Am Nothing Without A Weapon"

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

By Mara Revkin

WITH RESEARCH ASSISTANCE BY AHMAD MIDHI
AND MAZN NAJMALDEEN SABER

1 Introduction

The Syrian civil war, which began as a peaceful uprising in 2011, has since devolved into the deadliest conflict of the 21st century. According to United Nations estimates, the death toll had reached 400,000 by April 2016,[1] and 7.6 million Syrians (40 per cent of the country's population) have been displaced, either internally or as refugees to other countries. The conflict has spilled over into neighbouring Iraq, where Islamic State (IS)[2] seized a third of the country's territory in June 2014.[3] Since then, more than 26,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed as a result of the conflict, terrorism, and other acts of violence.[4] These two related conflicts have had particularly devastating consequences for Syrian and Iraqi children, many of whom have been orphaned or otherwise separated from their parents. In addition to facing the physical dangers of injury or death, children experience emotional and developmental challenges associated with exposure to extreme violence, the loss of family members or friends, and multi-year interruptions of schooling. Children are targets for several types of exploitation that are particularly prevalent in conflict settings: child labour, sexual abuse, early and coerced marriage, human trafficking, and, of particular concern for this study, recruitment and use by Government armed forces, pro-Government militias, and non-state armed groups (NSAGs). The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) established by the United Nations Security Council had verified 2,930 cases of recruitment and use of children by the Syrian army and 83 distinct NSAGs in Syria as of December 2017, but the true number of underage recruits is believed to be much higher.[5]

1 United Nations Radio, "Syria Envoy Claims 400,000 Have Died in Syria Conflict", 22 April 2016. Available from www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2016/04/syria-envoy-claims-400000-have-died-in-syria-conflict.

2 The author uses "Islamic State" and "IS" rather than some of the common alternatives (ISIL, ISIS, or Daesh) to mirror the group's self-appellation.

3 Ahmed Rasheed and Maher Chmaytelli, "Iraqi Army Declares First Major Victory over Islamic State in Ramadi", Reuters, 27 December 2015. Available from www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iraq-ramadi-idUSKBN0UA0DH20151228.

4 United Nations Iraq, "UN Casualty Figures for Iraq for the Month of June 2017," 2 July 2017. Available from www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=6995:un-casualty-figures-for-iraq-for-the-month-of-june-2017&Itemid=633&lang=en.

5 The Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM), "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification of Recruitment and Use of Children by Parties to the Conflict in Syria, March 2011–December 2017".

MOSUL, IRAQ
A woman carries her child through the debris of buildings and vehicles destroyed during intense fighting as they flee the Old City for safe areas.
—July 2017

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All of the major NSAGs participating in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have recruited children, yet these groups vary significantly in the extent to which they do so, their motives and techniques, and the roles for which child recruits are used. Despite considerable media attention to this issue, previous reporting and research has relied heavily on secondary sources or propaganda produced by the armed groups themselves, particularly in the case of IS, which has featured children prominently in its videos and publications. Existing explanations for the motivations of children who join such groups often focus on single variables, such as ideology or economic necessity, without examining interactions and correlations between different variables. Past work also tends to focus exclusively on the recruiting practices of a single group, without examining the trajectories of children who switch sides between two or more groups over time, even though such "side-switching" is commonplace in Syria and other multiparty civil wars.[6] In many cases, children are recruited or used by multiple NSAGs simultaneously. For example, Amr, an Iraqi boy who had been working in a steel factory in Ninewa Province since the age of 12, was first recruited by IS at the age of 17 to cook food for fighters. Even though IS had previously killed his own father, a former Iraqi police officer, Amr needed the job in IS's kitchen, which paid better than the steel factory, to help support his mother and six siblings. A few months later, he was again recruited by an uncle in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a primarily Shiite militia, to spy on IS.[7] After a fellow IS member caught him taking photographs—for which his uncle offered him 3 million Iraqi dinars (approximately $2,520)—he was imprisoned by IS. He eventually escaped from the IS prison after bribing one of its guards, only to be caught by Kurdish security forces and sentenced to detention in a juvenile reformatory in Erbil, where he was surveyed for this study. Amr's trajectory—from child labour to recruitment to prison—exemplifies the complexity of children's experiences before, during, and after their association with NSAGs.

Pathways into and out of NSAGs are rarely linear and unidirectional, and the roles that children perform within groups are fluid and evolve over time.

In many ways, Amr's story – from child laborer to armed group recruit, from victim of ISIS violence to ISIS employee – exemplifies the complexity of children's trajectory with armed groups today.Pathways into and out of NSAGs are rarely linear and unidirectional, and the roles that children perform within groups are fluid and evolve over time. Children who join NSAGs with the intent of serving in supporting or logistical roles may, voluntarily or involuntarily, transition into combat roles, as has been the case in Iraq, where IS has "transferred" many of its civilian employees to the front lines out of necessity.[8] Although patterns of child recruitment and use by NSAGs are highly complex and context dependent, certain trends are discernible.

This chapter, based on months of multi-method fieldwork in four countries adjacent to Syria – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey – attempts to illustrate those patterns and trends with new and rare data from key informants, including child recruits themselves. Although the primary focus of this chapter is the Syrian conflict and its effects on children, this conflict cannot be studied in isolation from the related conflict in Iraq, given the cross-border nature of the violence and the involvement of multiple armed groups and state actors in both countries. In recognition of the transnational nature of these two overlapping conflicts, this chapter examines not only groups that operate exclusively inside of Syria but also some that are based primarily in Iraq or Lebanon but are engaged in operations on or across the Syrian border. The chapter concludes with findings that are relevant for international and local actors working to prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed groups, as well as those seeking to facilitate the disengagement and demobilization of children who have already been recruited.

6 Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
7 Survey Respondent #8 (18, from Ninewa, detained on IS-related charges in Kurdistan), 16 May 2017.
8 "Specimen 227" archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi, 17 September 2016. Available from www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2

2 Methodology

This chapter is based on several sources of data: (1) interviews with 144 key informants, including children formerly and currently associated with NSAGs who were under 18 at the time of their recruitment, conducted in the conflict-adjacent countries of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey between July 2015 and December 2017; (2) a pilot survey of 45 Iraqi children between the ages of 16 and 18 who have been detained on charges of joining IS in Iraq; (3) Twitter data generated by individuals living in NSAG-controlled areas; (4) official statements and archival documents produced by NSAGs; (5) meta-analysis of data collected by the Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children; (6) local newspapers and other secondary sources; and (7) primary testimonies from war-affected children themselves, including drawings and paintings inspired by their experiences with NSAGs.[9]

The interviews and pilot survey were conducted according to strict ethical and data-security requirements in order to minimize the potential dangers to respondents.[10] Interviews and surveys with vulnerable subjects, whether children or adults, were always anonymous, voluntary, and subject to informed consent. When cited in this chapter, the subjects are referred to by pseudonyms. The interviewees, who were selected on the basis of their personal experience with NSAGs or their contact with recruited children, include 24 teachers or principals who worked in schools controlled by NSAGs; 12 children and 33 adults currently or formerly engaged with NSAGs; 4 children who have been detained on IS-related charges in Jordan; 8 social workers and doctors who have provided treatment to children engaged with NSAGs, including a senior surgeon in Mosul's main hospital who oversaw the treatment of injured IS fighters; 9 parents of children engaged with armed groups; and 2 senior Iraqi military commanders who have observed the use of children by NSAGs in combat settings. In order to include the perspectives of younger children, the research team photographed drawings and paintings found at elementary schools and in internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps.

MOSUL, IRAQ
Displaced children and adults are seen in a vehicle fleeing from IS- controlled areas in rural Raqqa.
—November 2016

© UNICEF/Delil Soulaiman

The survey of 45 children accused of joining IS was conducted in a juvenile reformatory in Erbil with the permission of the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Given time and resource constraints, it was not possible to survey the entire population of the more than 200 detainees between the ages of 16 and 18.[11] Therefore, the sample was randomly selected from a list of detainees who had already been convicted of terrorism-related charges. It is important to note the limitations of the conclusions that can be drawn from this pilot survey. All of the children surveyed are accused of joining IS, and their experiences do not necessarily generalize to children engaged with other NSAGs. Furthermore, the sample only includes boys, since no girls were housed at the reformatory at the time of the survey.[12]

9 All of the 57 children currently or formerly engaged with NSAGs who were interviewed or surveyed for this chapter are boys. It was not possible to locate girls currently or formerly engaged with NSAGs, in large part due to the social stigmas that deter girls from discussing their experiences of exploitation and that lead them to self-reintegrate. The recruitment and use of girls by NSAGs is nonetheless an important issue that is addressed in interviews with other key informants and through analysis of secondary sources.

10 The interviews were covered by Yale University's Institutional Review Board Protocol #1506016040. Key informants who have interacted with NSAGs are cited according to the following format: pseudonym (age, profession or role with NSAG, district of origin) in [location of interview, date]. Child protection specialists and NGO officers are cited according to the following format: child protection specialist/NGO officer in [location of interview], [date]. The pilot survey was covered by Yale IRB Protocol #2000020198. Detainees (survey respondents in Iraq and interviewees in Jordan) are cited with fewer demographic characteristics to ensure anonymity according to the following format: Survey Respondent #__ or interviewee pseudonym (age, from [province of origin]), date.

11 For ethical reasons, children under the age of 16 were excluded from this study out of concern that they lack the capacity for genuinely informed consent and are particularly vulnerable to re-traumatization.

12 All of the 57 children currently or formerly engaged with NSAGs who were interviewed or surveyed for this chapter are boys. Despite significant efforts, it was not possible to locate girls currently or formerly engaged with NSAGs. This is likely due in large part to the social stigmas that deter girls from discussing their experiences with exploitation. The recruitment and use of girls by NSAGs is nonetheless an important issue that is addressed in interviews with other key informants and through analysis of secondary sources. Other efforts to quantify the participation of girls suggest low rates of recruitment and use, which may either reflect a disparity in NSAG participation by gender and/or the systematic underreporting of the recruitment and use of girls – likely for the same reasons that it was difficult to identify and solicit interviews with NSAG associated girls for this chapter. For example, girls represent only 118 of the 2,930 cases of child recruitment verified by the Syria MRM from March 2011-December 2017 (4 per cent). The Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification of Recruitment and Use of Children by Parties to the Conflict in Syria, March 2011—December 2017"

3 Overview of NSAGs

Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, thousands of different NSAGs have formed, merged, splintered, changed names, and/or disbanded.[13] The vast majority of these groups are poorly documented. The term "group" is itself misleading because most groups are organized into smaller units and brigades that may vary significantly in their demographics and ideological orientations. Although the report excludes state parties to the conflict, many NSAGs receive funding and training from foreign governments, blurring the distinction between state and non-state actors. Given the large number of groups involved in the overlapping conflicts in Syria and Iraq, as well as those groups' unequal importance and strength, it was necessary to limit the scope of this chapter to a non-random sample of 10 NSAGs selected according to the following criteria:

- **Size:** The largest groups, in terms of membership and geographical scope of operations, were selected for inclusion.
- **Ideology/Ethnicity:** Islamist, Kurdish, and Yazidi groups were selected to ensure an ideologically and ethnically diverse sample.
- **Transnational Recruitment:** The chapter includes NSAGs that recruit foreign fighters in large numbers as well as those that rely primarily on Syrians or Iraqis.
- **State-Building:** Armed groups with state-like ambitions to govern people and territory tend to regard children not only as potential fighters but as the future of a multigenerational political project. State-building NSAGs were included in the report because of the unique role of children in their long-term plans.
- **State Sponsorship or Oversight:** Several of the NSAGs involved in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq receive significant financial support and training from states, or are partially organized and integrated into state armed forces (while retaining sufficient autonomy to be considered NSAGs). Since state actors are, in general, more susceptible to international pressure than NSAGs, groups that benefit from state sponsorship or oversight are highlighted.
- **Outliers:** Finally, certain groups were selected because their policies and practices concerning the recruitment of children make them outliers, either for better or worse.[14] Groups engaged in particularly egregious practices, including slavery, were included, as were groups (or brigades within groups) that stood out for their adoption of child-protective policies, such as minimum-age requirements. Understanding these variations is essential to identifying the conditions that lead some but not all armed groups to impose limits on the recruitment and use of children.

The following section presents a brief overview of the 10 groups covered in this chapter. The remainder of the chapter describes patterns observed across multiple groups, rather than the practices of each individual group. A pattern-based analysis has at least two important advantages over a group-based analysis. First, given the multiparty nature of the conflict, most children have had contact with more than one group. Second, the intended beneficiaries of this chapter – practitioners and policymakers in the child protection field – work with diverse populations of children from different regions who have had experiences with multiple NSAGs.

13 The Carter Center has documented the formation of over 7,000 armed groups in the Syrian conflict. Kane Farabaugh, "Using Social Media, Carter Center Maps Syria Conflict", Voice of America, 14 March 2017. Available from www.voanews.com/a/using-social-media-carter-center-maps-syrian-conflict/3764851.html.

14 The 2016 report by the United Nations Secretary-General on children and armed conflict listed the following non-state actors for recruiting children and grave violations against them in Syria: Ahrar al-Shama (AS), groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (referred to in this chapter as Islamic State(IS)), Army of Islam (referred to in this chapter as Jaysh al-Islam (JI)), Nusrah Front (which later changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), and the People's Protection Units (YPG). The report also listed Government forces, including the National Defense Forces and pro-Government militias. In Iraq, the report listed IS again and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, 24 August 2017, A/72/361–S/2017/821, pp. 38–39. Available from www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/821&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC.

A. AHRAR AL-SHAM (AS)

Ahrar al-Sham (AS) ("Free Men of the Levant") is a coalition of Salafi groups that aims to replace the government of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad with "a civilized Islamic Society in Syria".[15] The group's ideology is more moderate than that of Al-Qaida and IS, although it has fought alongside the group formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), an Al-Qaida affiliate that has since merged with other groups to form Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), against common enemies, particularly the Syrian army. Unlike Al-Qaida and IS, which have transnational aspirations, AS's objectives are generally limited to the territory of Syria. With an estimated membership of 15,000 to 20,000, the group is led by Syrians and has few foreign fighters.[16] AS has been recruiting boys as young as 15 since at least January 2013,[17] with 34 cases of child recruitment verified by the MRM.[18] According to a former AS fighter, the group generally requires that recruits be at least 16 years old to serve in combat roles, but 15-year-olds are used for supporting roles such as cooks and cleaners.[19]

B. GROUPS SELF-AFFILIATED WITH THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY (FSA)

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed in 2011 by Syrian army defectors whose goal is to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad and who aspire to "a free and democratic Syria where all Syrian citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, creed, religion or class shall enjoy equal rights".[20] Although initially regarded as the strongest rebel group in Syria, the FSA has struggled with infighting, corruption, and lack of discipline.[21] By 2013, jihadist groups had overtaken the FSA as the most militarily effective forces fighting the Syrian army. Nonetheless, the FSA is still considered "the cornerstone of Syria's moderate opposition"[22] and has received training and funding from the United States.[23] In 2015, it was believed to have 35,000 fighters.[24] Although initially the FSA's leadership intended for the organization to be centrally commanded, its operations have always been decentralized.[25] The group has been described as an "umbrella movement, composed of dozens of semi-autonomous armed opposition groups" that share common ideals, rather than as a unitary organization with a top-down command structure.[26] As a result, the policies and practices of the FSA's constitutive units are highly variable. Although some FSA units have adopted an official minimum age requirement of 18, others have recruited boys as young as 9 for combat roles.[27]

C. HAY'AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM (HTS)

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), or "The Body to Liberate the Levant," is a Sunni jihadist armed group formed in January 2017 through a merger between Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, or JN) and four smaller groups.[28] Despite its claim to be an "independent entity",[29] HTS is widely regarded as an unofficial proxy for Al-Qaida in Syria, as was Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.[30] HTS is believed to be seeking the creation of an "Islamic emirate" in Syria that would be a stepping stone to its eventual goal of establishing a transnational caliphate.[31] It is believed to have approximately 31,000 fighters[32] concentrated in the Syrian governorates of Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama.[33] HTS's recruiting practices have not been well documented since the merger that created it, but the largest contributor

15 Ali El Yassir, "The Ahrar Al Sham Movement: Syria's Local Salafists", Wilson Center, 23 August 2016. Available from www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-ahrar-al-sham-movement-syrias-local-salafists-0.

16 Ben Hubbard, "In Syria, Potential Ally's Islamist Ties Challenge U.S.", *New York Times*, 25 August 2015. Available from www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/middleeast/ahrar-al-sham-rebel-force-in-syrias-gray-zone-poses-challenge-to-us.html.

17 Martin Chulov, "Free Syrian Army Threatens Blood Feud after Senior Officer Killed by Jihadists", *Guardian*, 12 July 2013. Available from www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/12/free-syrian-army-officer-killed.

18 Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

19 Interview with Karam (19, former combatant with AS from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

20 Free Syrian Army, "Free Syrian Army Proclamation of Principles". Available from www.etilaf.us/fsa_proc_principles.

21 Robert Tait, "Syrian Rebel Army 'Sacked' over Corruption Claims", *Telegraph*, 27 June 2014. Available from www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10930345/Syrian-rebel-army-sacked-over-corruption-claims.html.

22 Charles Lister, "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand", Brookings Institution, November 2016. Available from www.brookings.edu/research/the-free-syrian-army-a-decentralized-insurgent-brand.

23 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Syrian Rebels Get Their First U.S.-Trained Fighters", *Washington Post*, 15 July 2015. Available from www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/first-us-trained-syrian-fighters-reenter-their-country/2015/07/15/6e6c0551-353d-4e17-961b-98995321576c_story.html.

24 Mona Alami, "Can FSA Get Back on Its Feet after Russian Intervention?", Al-Monitor, 31 December 2015. Available from www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/free-syrian-army-morale-russia-strikes.html.

25 Charles Lister, "The Free Syrian Army".

26 Ibid., p. 24.

27 Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

28 Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda and Allies Announce 'New Entity' in Syria", *Long War Journal*, January 28, 2017. Available from www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/al-qaeda-and-allies-announce-new-entity-in-syria.php.

29 Thomas Joscelyn, "Hay'at Tahrir al Sham Leader Calls for 'Unity' in Syrian Insurgency", *Long War Journal*, 10 February 2017. Available from www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-leader-calls-for-unity-in-syrian-insurgency.php.

30 Sam Heller, "Syria's Former al-Qaeda Affiliate Is Leading Rebels on a Suicide Mission", Century Foundation, 1 March 2017. Available from https://tcf.org/content/commentary/syrias-former-al-qaeda-affiliate-leading-rebels-suicide-mission.

31 Charles Lister, "Al Qaeda Is Starting to Swallow the Syrian Opposition", *Foreign Policy*, 15 March 2017. Available from http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/15/al-qaeda-is-swallowing-the-syrian-opposition.

32 Nazeer Rida, "Syria: Surfacing of 'Hai'at Tahrir al-Sham' Threatens Truce", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 30 January 2017. Available from https://english.aawsat.com/nazeer-rida/news-middle-east/syria-surfacing-haiat-tahrir-al-sham-threatens-truce.

33 Haytham Mouzahem, "Will Major Opposition Groups Face Off in Syria?", Al-Monitor, 17 February 2017. Available from https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/syria-jihadist-factions-tahrir-al-sham-

to the merger – JN – has extensively recruited children as young as 8 for both combat and supporting roles.[34] Out of the 63 cases of child recruitment by JN that have been verified by the MRM, 94 per cent were used in combat roles and 24 per cent were under the age of 15.[35]

D. HIZBULLAH

Hizbullah is a Shiite Islamist militant group and political party based in Lebanon and a strong ally of the Syrian government. Hizbullah has been heavily involved in the Syrian conflict since 2012, when its fighters crossed the border from Lebanon and took over eight villages in the al-Qusayr district of Syria.[36] Hizbullah forces have since been fighting alongside allied Iraqi Shiite militias and Iran's Revolutionary Guard in several areas of Syria. In 2016, Hizbullah had approximately 20,000 active-duty troops and 25,000 reservists.[37] Estimates of the number of Hizbullah fighters believed to be fighting in Syria range from 3,000[38] to 8,000,[39] and more than 1,000 have been killed in combat there.[40] In addition to its activities in Syria, Hizbullah's leader has admitted that the group has a "limited presence" in Iraq.[41] Since its founding in the 1980s, Hizbullah has been using its ostensibly non-military "Mahdi Scouts" programme, in which participants perform drills in military fatigues and carry toy rifles, to prepare children for eventual combat roles.[42] Reportedly, at a ceremony in 2016, 70,000 new scouts graduated from the programme.[43] Since becoming involved in the Syrian conflict, Hizbullah has begun to recruit Syrian children both inside Lebanon, targeting the large population of Syrian refugees there, and in Syria itself, where the group is operating a "branch" of the Mahdi Scouts in areas of Aleppo.[44] A pro-Syrian government media outlet has published photographs of Hizbullah "martyrs" who appear to be significantly younger than 18.[45]

E. ISLAMIC STATE (IS)

The Sunni jihadist group now known as Islamic State (IS), or "al-Dawla al-Islamiyya" in Arabic, grew out of its predecessor, Al-Qaida in Iraq, in the early 2000s. As its name suggests, the group has always aspired to transition from an insurgency into a "state" that governs people and territory based on the model of the caliphate first laid out by the Prophet Muhammad. In July 2011, the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, sent operatives from Iraq into Syria to start building a base of operations there. In 2013, the city of Raqqa fell to the Syrian opposition and several armed groups, including IS, began fighting for control of the city. Eventually IS prevailed over Raqqa and rapidly expanded into other areas of Syria and Iraq. Although IS was originally an offshoot of Al-Qaida, the two groups cut ties in 2014 over ideological disagreements. In 2016, IS was believed to have between 18,000 and 22,000 fighters, down from the previous year's estimate of 33,000 amid increasing casualties and desertions.[46] By August 2017, IS had lost most of its territory in Iraq, including Mosul, but was still clinging to areas in the Syrian governorates of Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, and Hasakah.

IS has heavily recruited children whom it calls "Cubs of the Caliphate", from among Syrian and Iraqi civilians as well as from abroad. The MRM has documented IS's recruitment of children as young as seven for combat roles,[47] and IS's own personnel records from Homs and Aleppo indicate that of fighters from those specific units, 41 per cent and 21 per cent, respectively, were under the age of 18.[48] A former IS fighter said that the proportion of underage fighters in his unit had increased from 25 per cent when he joined in 2014 to over 50 per cent by the time he deserted in 2016.[49] In general, IS uses a biological rather than a numerical definition of adulthood that is based on

34 Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

35 Ibid.

36 Al Arabiya, "Hizbullah Fighters, Syrian Rebels Killed in Border Fighting", 17 February 2013. Available from https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/17/266843.html.

37 Amos Harel and Gili Cohen, "Hezbollah: From Terrorist Group to Army", *Haaretz*, 12 July 2016. Available from www.haaretz.com/st/c/prod/eng/2016/07/lebanon2.

38 Bassem Mroue, "A Hezbollah Recruiting Drive Comes amid Losses, Deeper Involvement in Syria", Associated Press, 18 December 2015. Available from www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015-12-18/a-hezbollah-recruiting-push-covers-its-deeper-role-in-syria.

39 Dan De Luce, "Syrian War Takes Rising Toll on Hezbollah", *Foreign Policy*, 9 July 2015. Available from http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/09/syrian-war-takes-rising-toll-on-hezbollah.

40 Ali Alfoneh, "Hezbollah's Balancing Act between Syria and Lebanon", Atlantic Council, 12 April 2017. Available from www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/hezbollah-s-balancing-act-between-syria-and-lebanon.

41 AFP, "Hezbollah Chief Admits His Militia Is Fighting in Iraq", 16 February 2015. Available from https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/02/16/Hezbollah-fighting-is-in-Iraq-Nasrallah.html.

42 Robert F. Worth, "Hezbollah Seeks to Marshal the Piety of the Young", *New York Times*, 20 November 2008. Available from www.nytimes.com/2008/11/21/world/middleeast/21lebanon.html.

43 Nour Samaha, "Hezbollah's Crucible of War", Foreign Policy, 17 July 2016. Available from http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/17/hezbollahs-crucible-of-war.

44 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Syrian Hezbollah Militias of Nubl and Zahara'", *Syria Comment*, 15 August 2016. Available from www.joshualandis.com/blog/syrian-hezbollah-militias-nubl-zahara.

45 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Quwat al-Ridha: Syrian Hezbollah", *Syria Comment*, 31 July 2015. Available from www.joshualandis.com/blog/quwat-al-ridha-syrian-hezbollah.

46 Patricia Zengerle and Jonathan Landay, "CIA Director Says Islamic State Still Serious Threat", Reuters, 16 June 2016. Available from www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-fighters-idUSKCN0Z21ST.

47 Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

48 IS Personnel List from Homs, archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi, 18 June 2015. Available from www.aymennjawad.org/jawad/pics/large/612.jpg; and IS Personnel List from Aleppo, "Specimen 14U", archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi, March 2015. Available from www.aymennjawad.org/2016/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-1.

49 Interview with Mahmoud (23, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 17 March 2016.

perceptions of an individual's strength and physical maturity.[50] Interviewees from IS-controlled areas report that children who wish to enlist are inspected for signs of puberty, and "if they have armpit hair and are able to carry a weapon, they are considered old enough to fight".[51] This logic also seems to apply to the designation of enemy combatants. When IS attacked Yazidi villages on Iraq's Sinjar Mountain in August 2014, men were immediately separated from women and children to be executed en masse.[52] Boys were asked to raise their arms; those with hair were considered adults and executed accordingly.[53] After forcing thousands of Yazidi women into sexual slavery, IS indoctrinated and conscripted many of their male children, and has used some of them as suicide bombers.[54]

F. JAYSH AL-ISLAM (JI)

Jaysh al-Islam (JI), meaning "Army of Islam", was formed in 2013 through a merger of approximately 50 Damascus-area groups with Islamist and Salafi orientations.[55] JI has since expanded into Aleppo, Daraa, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Quneitra governorates, as well as the Lebanese border area of Arsal.[56] JI's objective is to overthrow the Assad regime and establish a new "technocratic" government based on sharia.[57] Unlike some other Salafi groups involved in the Syrian conflict, JI does not have transnational ambitions beyond the territory of Syria. According to its leader, "We have no intention to make war against anyone except for the Syrian regime."[58] JI does not recruit foreign fighters, and all of its members are believed to be Syrian.[59] Despite its focus on Syrian domestic politics, JI has received substantial foreign funding from Saudi Arabia, which supported the initial formation of the group as a counterweight to Al-Qaida.[60] The latest estimates of JI's size range from 12,000 to 15,000 fighters.[61]

Like many of the groups covered in this chapter, JI officially prohibits the recruitment of underage fighters but unofficially engages in child recruitment. JI has condemned both the Syrian army and IS for their recruitment of children. In one instance, JI published photographs of the ID cards of four Syrian army soldiers killed in battle who were between the ages of 16 and 18 and condemned the government's "forced recruitment of children".[62] In another, JI members arrested two young men (ages 15 and 18) at a checkpoint in Daraa who were on their way to join IS and rebuked its rival for "manipulate[ing] the minds of children".[63] Despite JI's official policies and statements, many cases of child recruitment have been documented including that of one Syrian boy interviewed for this study who joined at the age of 14[64] and 38 cases of child recruitment verified by the MRM.[65]

G. NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES (NDF)

The National Defense Forces (NDF) is a paramilitary group established by the Syrian government in 2012 as a part-time volunteer reserve to supplement the regular armed forces. By 2013, Syrian security officials claimed that the size of the NDF approached 100,000 fighters.[66] The formation of the NDF was an attempt to regularize these notoriously violent and undisciplined militias. Although the Syrian government has taken steps to integrate NDF volunteers into the state military apparatus, including training and paying their salaries, in practice, the group

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50 In some areas of policymaking, particularly welfare, IS has used a numerical definition for adulthood. For example, in Deir Ezzor, IS has reportedly provided subsidies to parents with children under the age of 14, suggesting that children older than 14 are considered adults and expected to be self-sufficient. See @DeirEzzor24, "بقيمة مالية معونات لتسليم العائلة أفراد تطلب من الأهالي في منطقة #الصور تسجيل أسماء#إذاعش 1000 عشرة الرابعة دون هون من لكل ليرة" Twitter, 5 September 2015. Available from https://web.archive.org/web/20170607170154/https://twitter.com/DeirEzzor24/status/640100779865600001.

51 Interview with Majd (27, lawyer from Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 20 September 2016.

52 Interview with Heza (36, Yazidi woman enslaved by IS) at Mamilian IDP Camp in Dohuk, Iraq, 4 January 2016.

53 Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape", *New York Times*, 13 August 2015. Available from www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html.

54 Yesica Fisch and Maya Alleruzzo, "Iraqi Boys' Harrowing Tale of Captivity, Training by IS", Associated Press, 10 May 2017. Available from www.apnews.com/4d0000cea20442bbabccd2c242f8225e/Iraqi-boys'-harrowing-tale-of-captivity,-training-by-IS.

55 BBC News, "Guide to the Syrian Rebels", 13 December 2013. Available from www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003.

56 Abdullah Suleiman Ali, "Jaysh Al-Islam Confronts Islamic State in Arsal", Al-Monitor, 5 February 2015. Available from www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2015/02/jaysh-al-islam-qalamoun-syria-arsal-lebanon.html.

57 Hadeel Oueiss, "The Rebel Commander of Damascus", Daily Beast, 30 January 2017. Available from www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/15/the-rebel-commander-of-damascus.

58 Eli Lake, "Syria's 'Army of Islam' Says It Wants No War With Israel", Bloomberg View, 29 September 2016. Available from www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-09-29/syria-s-army-of-islam-says-it-wants-no-war-with-israel.

59 Oueiss, "The Rebel Commander of Damascus".

60 Ian Black, "Syria Crisis: Saudi Arabia to Spend Millions to Train New Rebel Force", *Guardian*, 7 November 2013. Available from www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/syria-crisis-saudi-arabia-spend-millions-new-rebel-force.

61 Eli Lake, "Syria's 'Army of Islam'".

62 Al Souria, "النظام يزج بالأطفال على جبهات دمشق و"جيش الإسلام" ينشر صورا لبعضهم" 20 November 2015. Available from goo.gl/aUwC1j.

63 Hassan Burhan, "جيش الإسلام يحقق شابين أثناء توجههما لمناطق تنظيم "الدولة" في درعا" SMART News Agency, 13 October 2016. Available from http://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/PrintPage/id/203706/type/wires.

64 Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

65 Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

66 Sam Dagher, "Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad", *Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2013. Available from www.wsj.com/articles/syrias-alawite-force-turned-tide-for-assad-1377568628.

still functions as a semi-autonomous militia.[67] Members do not always wear uniforms and are permitted and even encouraged to loot houses when fighting in rebel-controlled areas.[68] The legal minimum age for compulsory military service in the Syrian army is 18, but the NDF has recruited children as young as 13 in areas around Damascus.[69] The NDF has an all-female unit named "Lionesses for National Defense".[70] It has been suggested that the Syrian government is "increasingly outsourcing the dirty work"[71] of the conflict to irregular militias, including the NDF, to avoid accountability.[72]

H. PEOPLE'S AND WOMEN'S PROTECTION UNITS (YPG/YPJ)

The People's Protection Units, or "Yekîneyên Parastina Gel" (YPG) in Kurdish, is the military arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian affiliate of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The YPG and PYD are seeking to establish an autonomous, self-governing state in the northern Syrian region of Rojava.[73] They share the PKK's Marxist-inspired ideology of "Democratic Confederalism", which aims to establish a utopian egalitarian society.[74] In 2016, the YPG had an estimated 60,000 fighters, with plans to increase its membership to over 100,000 by the end of 2017.[75] The group recruits significant numbers of women, who serve in combat roles in its Women's Protection Units (YPJ), in keeping with the PYD's purported support for gender equality,[76] as well as significant numbers of foreign fighters, including Americans.[77] The group has recruited significant numbers of boys and girls under 18; some are volunteers, while others as young as 13 have been forcibly abducted.[78] Out of 57 cases of child recruitment by Kurdish groups that have been verified by the MRM, 72 per cent were boys, 28 per cent were girls, 82 per cent were used in combat roles, 28 per cent were under the age of 15, and the youngest was 10 years old.[79]

I. POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES (PMF)

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), or "al-Hashd ash-Shaabi" in Arabic, is an umbrella organization of some 40 primarily Shiite Iraqi militias formed in June 2014 with an estimated membership of 100,000 to 150,000.[80] The size of the PMF, which receives funding and training from Iran, grew considerably in response to a fatwa issued by the leading Iraqi Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani, which called on all able-bodied civilians to take up arms against Islamic State, which regards Shiite Muslims as apostates.[81] On 5 June 2015, al-Sistani issued a new fatwa that urged students specifically to use their summer vacations to "contribute to (the country's) preservation by training to take up arms and prepare to fend off risk if this is required".[82] Since then, the PMF has come under increasing scrutiny for its recruitment of children.[83] In November 2016, the Iraqi parliament adopted a law that formally integrates the PMF into the Iraqi military.[84] Although the PMF is now required to report to the Iraqi prime minister, it remains an "independent military formation",[85] according to the text of the law, and is exempt from the education and minimum age requirements (18 years) that apply to the regular armed forces. The PMF was heavily involved in the

67 Aron Lund, "Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?", Carnegie Middle East Center, 2 March 2015. Available from http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215.

68 Erika Solomon, "Battered by War, Syrian Army Creates Its Own Replacement", Reuters, 21 April 2013. Available from www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-insight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421.

69 Ali al-Amin, "أطفال على الجبهات برفقة قوات الأسد.. النظام يجندهم بصفوفه والموت مصير ينتظرهم" Al-Souria, 28 March 2017. Available from https://goo.gl/nStgiX. Also the NDF and other pro-government militias were listed in the Secretary General's latest report on Children and Armed Conflict for recruiting children in 2016. A/72/361–S/2017/82, p. 38.

70 Liz Sly and Ahmad Ramadan, "The All-Female Militias of Syria", *Washington Post*, 25 January 2013. Available from www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/01/25/the-all-female-militias-of-syria.

71 Simon Adams, "The World's Next Genocide", *New York Times*, 15 November 2012. Available from www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/opinion/the-worlds-next-genocide.html.

72 Sabine Carey, Michael Colaresi, and Neil Mitchell, "Governments, Informal Links to Militias, and Accountability", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (1 August 2015).

73 Rodi Said, "Syria's Kurds Rebuked for Seeking Autonomous Region", Reuters, 17 March 2016. Available from www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-federalism-idUSKCN0WJ1EP.

74 Matt Bradley and Joe Parkinson, "America's Marxist Allies Against ISIS", *Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2015. Available from www.wsj.com/articles/americas-marxist-allies-against-isis-1437747949.

75 Mewan Dolamari, "Syrian Kurdish YPG Will Increase Number of Fighters to 100,000 in 2017", Kurdistan 24, 21 March 2017. Available from www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/ad2a1bc1-ffb8-4253-9f65-213c8add1fa3/Syrian-Kurdish-YPG-will-increase-number-of-fighters-to-100-000-in-2017.

76 In November 2014, the PYD issued a decree affirming "equality between men and women in all spheres of public and private life". Sylvia Westall, "Self-Ruling Region in Syria Issues Women's Rights Decree: Monitor", Reuters, 9 November 2014. Available from www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-women-idUSKCN0IT0ID20141109.

77 Jennifer Percy, "Meet the American Vigilantes Who Are Fighting ISIS", *New York Times*, 30 September 2015. Available from www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/magazine/meet-the-american-vigilantes-who-are-fighting-isis.html.

78 Human Rights Watch, "Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria", 19 June 2014. Available from www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria.

79 Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

80 United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Iraq, 9 November 2015, S/2015/852. Available from http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1535632.pdf.

81 Ali al-Sistani, "المرجع السيستاني يدعو المواطنين الذين يتمكنون من حمل السلاح ومقاتلة الارهابيين دفاعاً عن بلدهم وشعبهم ومقدساتهم التطوع في القوّات الأمنية" 13 June 2014. Available from www.sistani.org/arabic/in-news/24908.

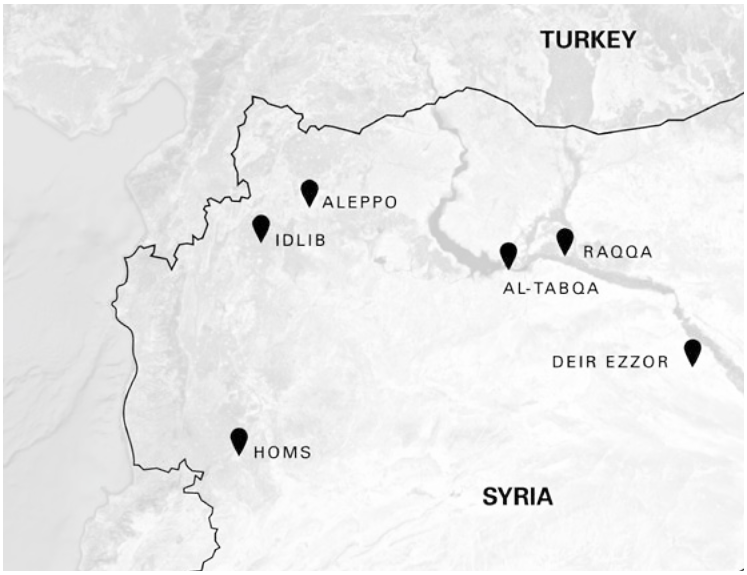
82 Associated Press, "Is the U.S. Paying to Train Child Soldiers in Iraq?", 28 July 2015. Available from www.cbsnews.com/news/iraq-shiite-militia-summer-camps-teens-learn-combat-techniques-isis.

83 S/2015/852.

84 Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Iraq's Parliament Adopts Law Legalizing Shiite Militias", Associated Press, 26 November 2016. Available from https://apnews.com/38d21400b14444b08d8169ca03ecdb1b/mortars-kill-16-iraqi-civilians-mosul.

85 Iraq Press Agency, "نص قانون الحشد الشعبي وفقا لموقع مجلس النواب العراقي" 26 November 2016. Available from www.iraqpressagency.com/?p=223503.

military campaign to expel IS from western Iraqi towns bordering Syria.[86] Although the PMF has denied crossing into Syria,[87] a PMF spokesman's statement – "We are fully ready to go to any place that contains a threat to Iraqi national security" – has been interpreted as implying that the group is prepared to do so.[88]



J. SINJAR RESISTANCE UNITS

The Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), or "Yekîneyên Berxwedana Sengalê" in Kurdish, an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), was created in 2007 as a primarily Yazidi militia. The group receives training from the YPG/YPJ in Syria's Hasakah province, and was initially funded by the Iraqi government. Estimates of YBS's membership range from 1,200 to 2,000.[89] Like the YPG, which allows women to serve in combat roles, YBS has an all-female fighting unit. Although the Iraqi government has stipulated that salaries only be paid to fighters over the age of 18, YBS appears to have pooled and redistributed funds for underage fighters, paying a monthly rate of $200 for those under 14, and $400 for those ages 14 to 17,[90] though the YBS General Command denies allegations that any fighters are under 18.[91]

4 Why and How Do NSAGs Recruit or Coerce Children into Their Ranks?

A. WHY RECRUIT CHILDREN?

NSAGs recruit children for many reasons. In the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the following motivations and logics are particularly salient.

SHORTAGE OF ADULTS: To compensate for high casualty and defection rates, many NSAGs turn to children as substitutes for adults.[92] In February 2013, the director of a "military academy" associated with the FSA that was training children between the ages of 14 and 18 in northern Aleppo explained, "There are no more adult men in the villages."[93]

COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE: In addition to recruiting children as substitutes for adults, some NSAGs recruit children because their physical or psychological characteristics are believed to give them a comparative advantage over adults in particular roles. For example, IS specifically recruits children to work as spies and informants because they are less likely than adults to attract suspicion.[94] The same logic may apply to its recruitment of foreign children. Since domestic laws usually prohibit surveillance of minors, they are less likely to be detected by intelligence

86 Reuters Staff, "Iraqi Shi'ite Militia Says Will Fight IS in Syria Border Town", 4 November 2017. Available from www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-syria/iraqi-shiite-militia-says-will-fight-is-in-syria-border-town-idUSKBN1D408H.

87 Nadia Riva, "PMF Denies Entering Syrian Territory", Kurdistan 24, 1 June 2017. Available from http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/2a4b9e68-6a63-427b-bd5a-385ee0e66a77.

88 Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran-Trained Militias Join U.S-Backed Campaign on Mosul, Flying Shi'ite Flags", Reuters, 30 October 2016. Available at www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-iran/iran-trained-militias-join-u-s-backed-campaign-on-mosul-flying-shiite-flags-idUSKBN12U0UI.

89 Joanna Paraszczuk, "Yazidi Militias Fight IS in Iraq, amid Kurdish Rivalries", Radio Free Europe, 11 June 2015. Available from www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-yazidi-militias-kurdish-region/27066780.html.

90 Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Armed Groups Using Child Soldiers", 22 December 2016. Available from www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/22/iraq-armed-groups-using-child-soldiers-0.

91 Firat News Agency, "YBS: HRW Report Not True, We Invite Them to the Battle Front", Kurdish Info, 24 December 2016. Available from https://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/ybs-hrw-report-not-true-we-invite-them-to-the-battle-front-17722.

92 Mara Revkin and Ahmad Mhidi, "Quitting ISIS", *Foreign Affairs*, 1 May 2016. Available from www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-05-01/quitting-isis.

93 AFP, "Rebels Train Syrian Teens to Become 'Killing Machines'", 6 February 2013. Available from https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/06/264772.html.

94 Interview with Fatima (42, housewife from Deir Ezzor and mother of a child recruited by IS), in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

MAP OF KEY LOCATIONS IN SYRIA & IRAQ

agencies.[95] Children also have a comparative advantage over adults in their ability to cross borders and checkpoints without triggering the suspicion of authorities. As a result, many NSAGs have used children to traffic supplies and weapons across Syria's borders as well as in and out of areas controlled by the government.

MALLEABLE MINDS: NSAG recruiters target children because they are perceived as more ideologically malleable than adults. In the words of interviewees from IS-controlled areas, the group views children as "blank slates", "raw material", and "empty vessels" who are easily indoctrinated.[96] According to a female school principal from Deir Ezzor, "IS targets children because their brains are more malleable than those of adults."[97] A former IS fighter from Deir Ezzor said, "IS knows that children are more enthusiastic and more willing to believe fully in jihad."[98]

UNDIVIDED ALLEGIANCE: Children may be preferred over adults because they are less likely to have divided loyalties. In a multiparty civil war such as that in Syria, control over contested territory tends to shift frequently and rapidly among different NSAGs. When a NSAG captures new territory, the recruitable adult men in the area are likely to have fought previously for one or more of its rivals. For example, a high percentage of IS's Syrian fighters previously fought for the FSA and either defected to IS or surrendered during fighting and were given a choice "to join or die".[99] These fighters are less likely to be fully committed to IS and its goals, and may be reluctant to fight against members of their former groups. An IS personnel form for a fighter trained in Hasakah notes with concern that he "has friends in Ahrar al-Sham and JN: considers them Muslims".[100] One adult Syrian fighter said that he defected to Turkey after IS tried to deploy him to fight in Fallujah because "it was not my fight".[101] Given the potential for divided loyalties, IS views children as ideal candidates for recruitment because many are too young to have fought previously for another armed group.

Children may be preferred over adults because they are less likely to have divided loyalties.

CHEAP LABOUR: Some children who join armed groups have already dropped out of school and are working in full-time jobs at the time of recruitment. But children who have never received a salary before see engagement with armed groups as a path to economic independence. From the perspective of NSAGs, children are cheap labour because they are willing to work for lower wages than adults, and they are usually too young to have dependents – wives and children – for whom some NSAGs provide additional benefits. For example, even though IS generally pays the same salary to adult fighters and those under 18 (base salaries had fallen from hundreds to only $50 per month by April 2016), adult fighters receive an additional stipend of $50 for each wife, $50 for each female slave, and $35 for each child, and sometimes housing for their families.[102] HTS also provides additional support for fighters with dependents.[103] Anas, who joined JI at the age of 14, reported that some of his fellow adult fighters who were struggling to support families defected to IS or HTS primarily to receive additional benefits for their wives and children.[104]

95 Anthoy Faiola and Souad Mekhennet. "They're Young and Lonely. The Islamic State Thinks They'll Make Perfect Terrorists", *Washington Post*, 11 February 2017. Available from www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2017/02/11/theyre-young-and-lonely-the-islamic-state-thinks-theyll-make-perfect-terrorists.

96 Interviews with Ahmed (43, teacher from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 18 February 2017; and Fatima (42, housewife from Deir Ezzor and mother of a child recruited by IS), in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

97 Interview with Zainab (40, school principal from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 18 February 2017.

98 Interview with Mahmoud (23, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 17 March 2016.

99 Interview with Hassan (38, FSA combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

100 Islamic State Personnel Form from Hasakah Province, "Specimen 271", archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi. Available from www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2.

101 Interview with Mahmoud (23, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 17 March 2016.

102 Joby Warrick, "Cash-Strapped ISIS Offers $50 a Month to Fighters – but More If They Own Sex Slaves", *Washington Post*, 22 April 2016. Available from www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/04/22/cash-strapped-isis-offers-50-a-month-to-fighters-but-more-if-they-own-sex-slaves.

103 Radio Rozana, "تعدد الزوجات في ريف إدلب.. من يشجع على ذلك؟" 13 March 2016. Available from goo.gl/hSXUJt.

104 Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

B. TECHNIQUES OF RECRUITMENT

NSAGs in the Syrian and Iraqi contexts use a variety of techniques to recruit children. In particular, techniques vary greatly depending on whether targets live in an area controlled or contested by a NSAG or outside of the NSAG's territory or area of operation.

TRANSNATIONAL RECRUITMENT: Table 1 summarizes transnational recruiting practices of the NSAGs covered in this chapter. Of these groups, IS has recruited the greatest number of foreign fighters, with estimates ranging from 27,000 to 31,000 fighters from at least 86 different countries.[105] The term "foreign fighters" refers to combatants recruited from outside of the country or countries in which the group is primarily based – in IS's case, Syria and Iraq. HTS has recruited significant numbers of foreign fighters from outside of Syria. In 2015, the leader of the group estimated that a majority – 70 per cent – of its fighters were Syrian, and 30 per cent were foreigners.[106] AS[107] (also based in Syria) and Hizbullah[108] (based in Lebanon but operating in Syria) recruit some foreigners, as does YBS (based in Iraq but receiving training in Syria), which recruits from the Yazidi diaspora community in Europe.[109] JI and the NDF (based in Syria) and the PMF (based in Iraq) do not recruit foreigners in significant numbers (Table 1).

NSAGs that recruit children from areas outside of their immediate territorial control, including transnationally, cannot rely on coercion and therefore are limited to the tools of persuasion and inducement. The trajectories of foreign fighters, including children who have travelled to Syria, are diverse and resist generalization, but nonetheless some patterns can be identified. Some NSAGs make individualized appeals to children through one-on-one dialogues, usually conducted over social media platforms. Sometimes these dialogues are initiated by official recruiters who do not have a pre-existing relationship with the people they target,[110] but in other cases, potential recruits are encouraged to join by friends or family members who have already joined the NSAG.[111]

Recruiters who target foreign children over social media have made efforts to isolate them from family and friends and to replace these relationships with a virtual community. Omar, a 16-year-old Jordanian boy, said that he was approached on Facebook by an IS supporter who claimed to be living in the "caliphate". With few friends in the real world, Omar saw the recruiter as a sympathetic listener and gateway to a virtual community. Eventually, Omar was arrested by Jordanian authorities on charges of spreading IS propaganda, although he claims, "I was only a supporter in my heart and online; I never planned to take any action."[112] In addition to direct recruitment, some foreign children have been taken into Syria by parents who have been recruited.[113]

TABLE 1
Variation in NSAG Recruitment of Foreign Fighters (Adults and Children)

	HEAVY RECRUITMENT	SOME RECRUITMENT	LITTLE TO NONE
Ahrar al-Sham (AS)		•	
Free Syrian Army (FSA)		•	
Hizbullah		•	
Islamic State (IS)	•		
Jaysh al-Islam (JI)			•
National Defense Forces (NDF)			•
Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)			•
Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS)		•	
Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)	•		

105 Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq", December 2015. Available from http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate_FINAL3.pdf.

106 Al Jazeera, "أبو محمد الجولاني أمير جبهة النصرة" video, 27 May 2015. Available from www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hwQT43vFZA.

107 Mousab Alhamadee, "Recalling a Syrian Leader Who Helped Jihadis Grow Prominent in Rebellion", McClatchy DC Bureau, 30 September 2014. Available from www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24773947.html.

108 AFP, "Hezbollah Says 'Thousands' of Fighters to Respond if Israel Attacks", Al-Monitor, 23 June 2017. Available from www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/06/israel-palestinians-conflict-quds-hezbollah.html.

109 Paraszczuk, "Yazidi Militias Fight IS in Iraq".

110 Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS and the Lonely Young American", *New York Times*, 27 June 2015. Available from www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html.

111 Mercy Corps, "From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups", 28 September 2015. Available from www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/From%20Jordan%20to%20Jihad_0.pdf.

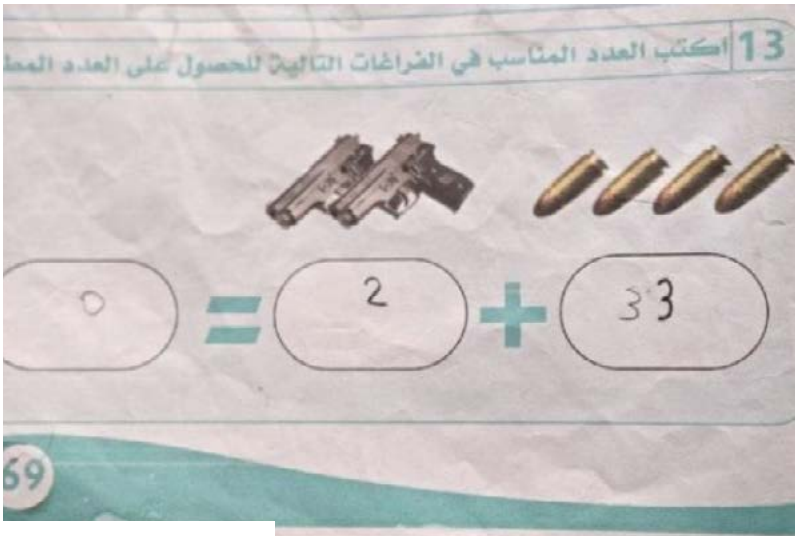


FIGURE 1
An IS Math Textbook from Mosul

LOCAL RECRUITMENT: Patterns of local recruitment differ significantly from those of transnational recruitment and are heavily influenced by on-the-ground conditions of coercion, real-life social networks, material incentives, and NSAG-controlled institutions (particularly schools). State-building NSAGs – those that successfully hold and govern territory – control not only the means of violence but also the local economy, and thus can employ physical and economic coercion to recruit members. NSAGs that recruit from territory under their control tend to recruit children through their existing familial and social networks.

NSAGs also use material incentives – salaries, food, cell phones, and other benefits – to attract recruits. In Raqqa, IS has provided financial assistance selectively – only to families that do not have a fighting-age male at home.[114] This policy rewards families who send their men (and boys) into battle. The need for food security is an important motivation in areas of Syria where sieges and the destruction of agricultural infrastructure have led to widespread starvation.[115] One Syrian interviewee who became responsible for supporting his family at the age of 14, after the death of his father, cited the promise of regular, high-quality meals as one of his reasons for joining the FSA.[116] In opposition-held areas where in 2013 grain and electricity shortages resulted in days-long bread lines, FSA fighters were allowed to cut to the front of the line.[117] A Syrian boy recruited by JN at the age of 14 said that the group had offered food and medicine to his family as an incentive.[118]

NSAGs that control territory may use schools to spread their ideology to the next generation and facilitate recruitment. An official IS document describes education as "the foundational brick on which Islamic society is built".[119] For NSAGs with state-building projects, education is essential to ensuring the transmission of the group's ideology to its next generation. The YBS and other Yazidi militias provide new recruits with several months of education in the movement's history, language, and philosophy,[120] while children recruited by the YPG/YPJ undergo military and ideological training for between 20 and 45 days.[121] Several NSAGs have operated schools with curricula that implicitly or explicitly encourage children to take up arms or support the group's cause in non-military ways. As early as 2014, JN was providing free educational programmes that included weapons training.[122] IS has taken over existing school systems and introduced new curricula that are clearly aimed at preparing students for military service. According to a school principal from Deir Ezzor who continued working in her local primary school for several months after IS took over, "classrooms are pipelines to the battlefield". When IS arrived in 2014, members forced teachers to undergo "sharia training" courses and introduced new textbooks with violence-based lessons, including arithmetic problems that required students to count guns and bullets (Figure 1)[123]. Over time, however, school enrolment rates in IS-controlled areas declined precipitously as parents withdrew children from school to protect them from indoctrination, and IS – under growing pressure from territorial losses and casualties – deprioritized education and other non-military institutions.[124] One school in Mosul saw enrolment decline from 700 to 100 during the three years that IS ruled the city. Most of the remaining students were children of fighters.[125] Of the

114 Khaberni, "شروط توزيع الزكاة في داعش" 25 June 2016. Available from www.khaberni.com/news/168593.

115 Maha El Dahan, "Syrian Food Crisis Deepens as War Chokes Farming", Reuters, 26 April 2016. Available from www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-wheat-idUSKCN0XN0G0.

116 Interview with Marwan (19, former FSA and JN combatant from Aleppo) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

117 Kelly McEvers, "Jihadi Fighters Win Hearts and Minds by Easing Syria's Bread Crisis", National Public Radio, 16 June 2013. Available from www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/01/18/169516308/as-syrian-rebels-reopen-bakeries-bread-crisis-starts-to-ease.

118 Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

119 Shiv Malik, "The Isis Papers: Leaked Documents Show How Isis Is Building Its State", *Guardian*, 7 December 2015. Available from www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/07/leaked-isis-document-reveals-plan-building-state-syria.

120 Email correspondence with Fréderike Geerdink, 16 April 2017.

121 Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

122 Human Rights Watch, "Maybe We Live".

123 Mark Molloy, "Islamic State Textbooks Featuring Guns and Tanks 'Used to Teach Children Maths' in School", *Telegraph*, 16 February 2017. Available from www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/16/isis-textbooks-featuring-guns-tanks-used-teach-children-maths.

124 Kinana Qaddour, "Inside ISIS' Dysfunctional Schools", *Foreign Affairs*, 13 October 2017. Available from www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-13/inside-isis-dysfunctional-schools.

125 Interview with Mustafa (45, principal of an elementary school in Mosul) in Mosul, Iraq, 15 April 2017.

FIGURE 2
An Islamic State "Media Point" in Raqqa

45 children detained on IS-related charges who were surveyed for this study, only two admitted to attending an IS-controlled school; the others had dropped out.[126] In IS-controlled areas, multi-year gaps in education are a bigger problem for many children than indoctrination.

In addition to operating schools, some NSAGs disseminate audiovisual propaganda both over the Internet, to attract foreign recruits, and on the ground in areas they control. For example, IS created "media points" ("naqtat i'alamiyya") that distributed printed pamphlets and flash drives containing PDFs of the latest publications, and projected videos on large screens (Figure 2).[127]

According to interviewees who observed these "media points" on the ground in Syria, the majority of their users were children who were attracted to the flashy audiovisual displays. One interviewee noted that IS appeared to staff these centres with recruiters who are specifically trained to appeal to children, including one man in Raqqa who previously hosted a children's television programme.[128] A teacher from Deir Ezzor observed, "The children watch these videos for entertainment because they don't understand what violence is. [They] are being trained to think that violence is normal."[129]

5 What Individual, Social, and Structural Factors Influence Child Trajectories into NSAGs?

The processes through which children become engaged with NSAGs are multi-causal and influenced by variables on several different conceptual levels: (1) individual, pertaining to the individual and his or her personal experiences and beliefs; (2) social, pertaining to intermediary forms of social organization such as a tribe, village, or district; and (3) structural, pertaining to macro historical, economic, and environmental forces.

126 Survey Respondent #26 (17, from Kirkuk, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 18 April 2017; Survey Respondent #27 (18, from Ninewa, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 18 April 2017.

127 Official photograph issued by Islamic State in Raqqa, March 2016. Available from https://web.archive.org/web/20170927082514/https://examplewordpresscom38019.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/1921.jpg?w=640.

128 Interview with Wael (29, construction worker from Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

129 Interview with Karima (34, teacher from Deir Ezzor), in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 20 September 2016.

A. INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL FACTORS

Children who become engaged with NSAGs in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts often exhibit one or more of the following distinctive traits: (1) the pursuit of a meaningful future, or what is sometimes referred to by psychologists as a "quest for significance";[130] (2) a desire for agency and control over one's environment; (3) grievance- or revenge-based motivations; or (4) the need for survival. These traits are not mutually exclusive and often coexist in the same individual.

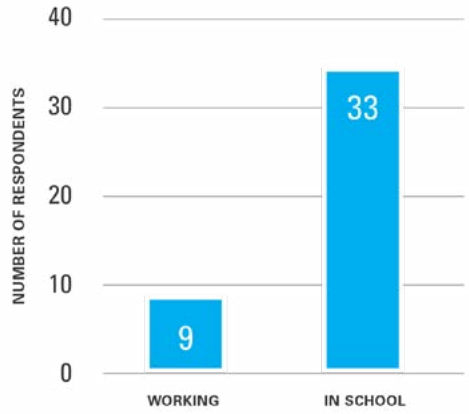


FIGURE 3
Juvenile Detainees in Kurdistan: Status Prior to Arrest

QUEST FOR SIGNIFICANCE: A significant percentage of children interviewed and surveyed for this chapter who became associated with NSAGs in Syria or Iraq had previously dropped out of school and were engaged in low-wage, unfulfilling, and often dangerous forms of child labour at the time of their recruitment. Of 45 Iraqi children imprisoned on charges of joining IS who were surveyed for this study, nine had previously been working full-time in low-wage jobs including carpentry, farming, steelmaking, and construction (Figure 3). One 16-year-old detainee who had dropped out of school at the age of nine to sell chickens with his family asked his father's permission to move to Kirkuk for a better job. When his father refused, he joined IS to escape what he saw as a dead-end career with "no future".[131] The father of a Syrian boy who was recruited by HTS and later by IS in Raqqa said that recruiters often targeted children working as day labourers or in markets, knowing that they would be susceptible to the promise of a higher salary and a more "honourable" job.[132] A child protection specialist in Gaziantep observed that children often believe that "it is more dignified to be a fighter than to work in a degrading civilian job. Weapons are a status symbol."[133] There is also evidence that some children are attracted to NSAGs by the opportunity to acquire new skills and education. For example, a 14-year-old Yazidi girl working on a female Yazidi militia base as a cook and cleaner reported that she was "so excited" to begin an "ideological course of three to four months to get educated for the first time in her life".[134]

AGENCY AND CONTROL: Children living in conflict areas often feel powerless, and NSAGs offer them a sense of control in a chaotic and unpredictable environment. A 16-year-old Syrian boy who worked for two years as a checkpoint guard for IS before eventually fleeing to Turkey said that he liked the job because "it made me feel like I was in control for the first time in my life".[135] Some children reported that the ability to wield violence made them feel safer. Karam, who joined AS in Idlib when he was 16 years old, said that he did so in order to protect himself from other armed groups and criminals.[136] Girls have reported joining Kurdish and Yazidi militias to empower themselves and escape traditional values. A 16-year-old girl said she joined the YPG/YPJ's female unit in the Syrian region of Afrin specifically to avoid early marriage: "My father told me it would be better for me to get a boyfriend and marry than join the army. In just one day here, I learned more than I had in all my life – about [Ocalan's] ideology, how to liberate women and free Yazidis."[137]

REVENGE: Many children who become engaged with NSAGs are motivated by the desire to avenge the death of a family member or by a personal experience with injustice or violence. In the Kurdish governorate of Dohuk, a 15-year-old boy left an IDP camp there and later called his family to announce that he had joined YBS to fight "for revenge" against IS.[138] Samer said that he joined the FSA at the age of 15 to avenge the death of his brother, who was killed by Syrian government forces in 2013.[139] Karam, who joined AS at the age of 16, wanted to avenge the death of a close friend who had been killed in a shelling attack by the Syrian government in Idlib.[140]

130 Arie W. Kruglanski, Xiaoyan Chen, Mark Dechesne, Shira Fishman, and Edward Orehek, "Fully Committed: Suicide Bombers' Motivation and the Quest for Personal Significance", *Political Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2009).

131 Survey Respondent #34 (16, from Kirkuk, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 17 April 2017.

132 Interview with Fares (48, power plant worker from Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

133 Interview with a child protection specialist in Gaziantep, Turkey, 22 February 2017.

134 Anecdote related by Fréderike Geerdink (journalist reporting from Syria) in email correspondence, 16 April 2017.

135 Interview with Ali (16, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Istanbul, 15 September 2016.

136 Interview with Karam (19, former AS combatant from Idlib) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

137 Dominique Soguel, "Military Training Offers Yazidi Women Chance to Fight Back, Taste of Freedom", *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 October 2015. Available from www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/1002/Military-training-offers-Yazidi-women-chance-to-fight-back-taste-of-freedom.

138 Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Armed Groups Using Child Soldiers", 22 December 2016. Available from www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/22/iraq-armed-groups-using-child-soldiers-0.

QAYYARA, IRAQ
Children bring food to firefighters as they try to extinguish oil wells set alight by ISIS members as they retreated.
—March 2017

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SURVIVAL: Finally, some children join NSAGs in order to stay alive, often under conditions of extreme duress and coercion. Children already fighting for one armed group who are captured by an enemy armed group may face detention or execution if they do not defect to the other side. One 17-year-old Iraqi boy with a heart condition joined IS in exchange for the promise of a free surgery that he could not otherwise afford.[141] Relatedly, parents may push their children to join NSAGs to improve their own health or safety. According to a senior surgeon in Mosul's main hospital, IS offered a breast cancer patient a monthly stipend of $40 to cover the cost of her treatment if one of her sons would join the group.[142] Children have also joined armed groups to protect themselves and their families from harassment by other armed groups believed to be more dangerous. For example, Karam joined AS at the age of 16 at the suggestion of his father, who believed that his son would be safer with AS than with the local branch of the FSA, which was notoriously "full of thieves and bad guys".[143] In these cases, joining an armed group was a self-preservation strategy. A paradox of civil wars is that it is often safer to align oneself with a violent group than to remain unaffiliated.

B. SOCIAL-LEVEL FACTORS

FAMILIAL AND SOCIAL NETWORKS: Individual decisions to join armed groups are rarely made in a vacuum, but are heavily influenced by pre-existing social and familial networks. Anas joined JI at the age of 14 because his older brother and cousin were already fighting for the group. When asked what he would do if his relatives defected to a different NSAG, he said, "Of course I would follow them because I trust them."[144] Sometimes, adults who already belong to a NSAG will encourage their children to join in order to enhance their perceived loyalty and status within the organization. Dalia, the mother of a Syrian boy who joined IS at the age of 12 and was later killed in combat in Iraq, said that her husband, already a member of the group, had asked his son to join "so that his commanders would think he was more committed and promote him to a higher rank". He encouraged one of his daughters, under the age of 18, to marry an IS fighter for the same career-advancing reasons.[145]

NSAGs deliberately drive a wedge between children and their families to facilitate recruitment.

Groups of friends often join together, or a child who joins alone may encourage friends to follow suit. Tribes often join – or switch allegiances – collectively, as do brigades. Samer, a member of the Raqqa-based al-Wilda tribe, initially joined the FSA in 2013 (at the age of 15) with a brigade of his fellow tribesmen. When his brigade switched allegiance to JN, he followed the group, not because he was attracted to its jihadist ideology but because "I wanted to stay with my tribe". Later, his brigade again switched sides to IS when the group began to take over Raqqa. According to Samer, IS initially focused its recruitment efforts on tribal leaders, knowing that once they pledged allegiance, "their tribesmen would follow them".[146]

GENERATIONAL CONFLICTS: Children who join NSAGs are sometimes reacting to generational conflicts with their parents. Abdallah, an adult FSA officer, described how the conflict has destabilized families: "Parents have lost the ability to control their children as a result of poverty, lack of education, a constant state of emergency, or a combination of these factors."[147] One 17-year-old Iraqi boy said that he joined IS specifically in order to get married after his father had refused to give permission.[148] A resident of Mosul said that a young boy in his neighbourhood was frustrated by his father's refusal to allow him to learn how to drive. The boy eventually joined IS, which not only taught him how to drive but also gave him a car.[149]

141 Survey Respondent #41 (17, from Erbil, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 13 August 2017.
142 Interview with Dr. Ayad al-Ramadhani in Mosul, Iraq, 19 April 2017.
143 Interview with Karam (19, former AS combatant from Idlib) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.
144 Interview with Anas (17, former JI fighter from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, 19 February 2017.
145 Interview with Dalia (41, teacher from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.
146 Interview with Samer (19, former combatant with FSA, JN, and IS from Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.
147 Interview with Abdallah (41, FSA combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.
148 Survey Respondent #2 (18, from Salah ad-Din, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 15 May 2017.
149 Interview with Omar (33, clothing store cashier from Mosul) in East Mosul, 15 April 2017.


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TALL KAYSUMAH, IRAQ

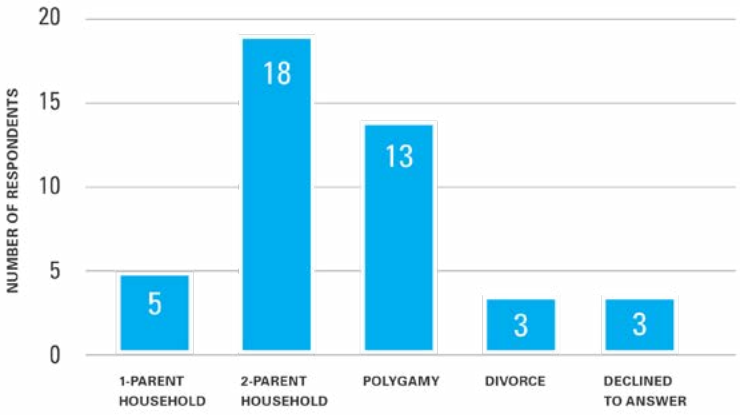
Children and adults displaced by fighting between ISIS and Iraqi security forces are transported in an Iraqi military vehicle to an identification centre on the western outskirts of Mosul.

—March 2017

There is some evidence that NSAGs deliberately exacerbate such conflicts to drive a wedge between children and their families. An IS recruiter told one former fighter who had joined the group at age 15 in defiance of his parents, "You have a religious duty to disobey your parents if they try to discourage you from participating in jihad."[150] The father of a boy who joined IS at the age of 13 said that his son reported him to the religious police for smoking. When the police came to the man's house to arrest him, they praised his son for faithfully following the doctrine of "Al-wala' wa-l-bara'", (literally, "loyalty and disavowal"), which IS interprets to require absolute fidelity to sharia, "even if it means hurting your family."[151] Similar cases have been reported on social media, including one in which a child reported his father to IS for refusing to let him join.[152] IS even promotes such conflicts in its education materials: A teacher who worked in an IS-controlled school reported that the group distributed a storybook used to teach basic reading skills that highlighted conflict between children and their parents: "The protagonist was a boy from a rich family who recognizes that his parents are morally corrupt. The boy decides to leave his family to join jihad and becomes the hero of the story."[153]

ORPHANHOOD: The high rate of orphanhood in both Syria and Iraq appears to be a contributing factor to NSAG recruitment. In 2015, UNICEF estimated that more than four million Iraqi children had lost at least one parent.[154] The Iraqi government runs only 23 orphanages across the whole country that, in 2014, were caring for 500 children – a tiny fraction of those in need.[155] The director of an Iraqi NGO warned, "The increasing numbers of orphans in the country with the lack of proper care will put them at the mercy of armed militias."[156] The absence of a father or both parents forces children to assume the role of provider and protector of sisters and younger siblings. A young woman from Damascus reported that one of her male friends there had joined the NDF at the age of 14 because his father had died in a car accident and he needed to support his mother and sisters.[157] A refugee from Mosul reported that IS members had been visiting orphanages in the city for the purpose of recruiting children there.[158] One orphanage in Mosul's Zohour neighbourhood was actually converted into a training camp for juvenile combatants.[159]

FIGURE 4
Juvenile Detainees: Family Situation.



DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE, AND POLYGAMY: The destabilization of the nuclear family unit, through divorce, remarriage, or polygamy, can create conditions of neglect and insecurity that push children towards armed groups. For example, a YBS fighter reportedly asked an all-female Yazidi militia to take care of his 14-year-old daughter after her mother had been enslaved by IS and he married a second wife who was not interested in taking care of a girl who is not her biological daughter.[160] In many cases, armed groups function as adoptive parents for children whose actual parents are either unable or unwilling to care for them.

Polygamy tends to create competition for the father's attention and resources among children born to different wives, leading – in some cases – to children's feeling neglected and deprived, which may make them more vulnerable to NSAG recruitment. Polygamous parents, who tend to have larger families than non-polygamous parents, may also be more likely to encourage children to join NSAGs in order to be relieved

150 Interview with Ali (16, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Istanbul, Turkey, 15 September 2016.
151 Interview with Jamal (48, water company employee from Aleppo) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 28 February 2017.
152 @DeirEzzor24, "طفل من ريف دير الزور الغربي يرفع شكوى ضد أبيه لدى تنظيم #داعش , وذلك بسبب منع الأب للطفل بالإلتحاق بالتنظيم" Twitter, 24 March 2017. Available at https://twitter.com/DeirEzzor24/status/845388806178131972.
153 Interview with Zainab (40, school principal from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 18 February 2017.
154 UNICEF, "14 Million Children Impacted by Conflict in Syria and Iraq", press release, 12 March 2015. Available from www.unicef.org/media/media_81172.html.
155 "أعدادهم ازدياد لخطر الانتباه الحكومة على :سابقون ونواب للأيتام داراً 23 امتلاكها تعلن العمل" accessed 10 June 2017. Available from www.almadapress.com/ar/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=36314.
156 Salam Khoder, "Iraq's Child Soldiers: 'What Happened to Our Boys?'", Al Jazeera, 8 June 2016. Available from www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/iraq-child-soldiers-happened-boys-160523122213988.html.
157 Interview with Laila (17, student from Damascus) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.
158 Interview with Adeel (55, public transportation worker from Mosul) in Khazir IDP Camp near Erbil, Iraq, 27 February 2017.
159 Khalid al Mousily, "How ISIS Groomed Iraqi Orphans into Becoming Child Soldiers", Reuters, 17 February 2017. Available from www.newsweek.com/isis-groomed-orphans-child-soldiers-557803.
160 Email correspondence with Fréderike Geerdink.

of the responsibility of caring for them, or to increase the number of household breadwinners. Anas, who joined JI at the age of 14, described one such case of an adult member of his unit who was married to two different women and struggling to feed his many children. The man decided to defect to JN, which offered a monthly salary nearly twice that of JI in addition to food and fuel benefits, and he also recruited one of his underage sons into the group to help provide for the family.[161] Of the 45 Iraqi children surveyed for this study, 14 were from polygamous households, and the average number of siblings was 7 (higher than the national average fertility rate of 4.5 births per woman).[162] Jihadist NSAGs, notably HTS and IS, have specifically promoted the practice of polygamy both for ideological reasons (the Qur'an authorizes up to four wives)[163] and demographic reasons (to increase birth rates and encourage remarriage of war widows). In Idlib, HTS offers cash subsidies of 100,000 Syrian pounds ($467) to men who marry widows and assume responsibility for their children.[164] This anecdotal evidence suggests that polygamy may, in some cases, contribute to economic stress that, in turn, encourages child recruitment.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: Domestic violence, which is associated with many of the unstable family situations described above, may encourage recruitment by making children feel unsafe in their own homes and therefore more inclined to join NSAGs for protection. An interviewee from Homs attributed high levels of domestic violence there to a rapid increase in widowhood during the war. Widows face pressure to remarry for physical and economic protection, but their new husbands often refuse to provide for stepchildren, forcing them to turn to child labour or NSAGs for subsistence. "Even if the new husbands do take stepchildren into their homes, they are often resentful or even violent toward them", he said.[165] Domestic violence is also correlated with unemployment. According to an NGO officer in Gaziantep, "unemployed fathers may feel emasculated and take out their frustration, either verbally or violently, on their wives and children".[166] In some cases, joining armed groups may be a strategy for self-protection. An NGO officer in Erbil described cases in which Kurdish girls had joined militias, including the YPG/YPJ, in order to escape domestic violence.[167]

c. STRUCTURAL-LEVEL FACTORS

CULTURE AND HISTORY: It is important to recognize that child recruitment has deep historical roots in Syria and neighbouring Iraq, as do the related phenomena of child labour and child marriage. Definitions of "adulthood" are culturally relative, and local understandings of the age at which it is appropriate for young people to enter the workforce, begin military service, or marry have long deviated from the international standard of 18. In Lebanon, children are growing up in what one child protection specialist described as a "warrior culture", where "fighting for one's cause or group is considered noble".[168] Although mandatory military service in Syria begins at age 18, the country has a long tradition of paramilitary youth organizations.[169] In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's government began organizing child soldier units in the 1970s.[170] Major General Najim al-Jubouri of the Iraqi Army, who led the offensive against IS in Mosul, described parallels between this group's recruiting practices and the earlier Iraqi insurgency from which it emerged in the 2000s:

> *At that time, Al-Qaida was using a process of gradual, incremental recruitment to involve children in its operations. At first, they offered children money in exchange for simple tasks such as sending signals, through flags or cell phones, of the presence of American and Iraqi convoys. Then, they started asking them to place IEDs in the path of these conveys. Eventually, they were recruiting children to be fighters and to serve as suicide bombers.*[171]

According to al-Jubouri, IS is using all of the same methods practiced by Al-Qaida, with the additional benefit of territorial control. "Since Al-Qaida did not control Tel Afar, they relied primarily on money to recruit children. Since the Islamic State controls territory, coercion rather than money is the main driver of recruitment."[172]

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161 Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

162 World Bank, "Fertility Rate, Total (Births per Woman)", accessed 27 September 2017. Available from http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN.

163 See article by the female Islamic State propagandist Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, "Two, Three or Four", *Dabiq*, Vol. 12 (November 2015), p. 19, citing [An-Nisaa : 3].

164 Radio Rozana, "تعدد الزوجات في ريف إدلب.. من يشجع على ذلك؟" 13 March 2016. Available from goo.gl/hSXUJt.

165 Interview with Adel (33, electrical engineer from Homs), in Homs by phone from Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 22 February 2017.

166 Interview with an NGO officer in Gaziantep, Turkey, 22 February 2017.

167 Interview with an NGO officer in Erbil, Iraq, 24 February 2017.

168 Interview with an NGO officer in Saida, Lebanon, 22 March 2017.

169 In the 1980s, the government organized the "the Baathist Vanguards", a group in which school-aged girls and boys received paramilitary training and lessons in civil duty. Wasim Shamdin, "'Be Prepared': First Scouting Troop in Opposition Territory Educating Latakia's Youth", Syrian Voice, 10 October 2016. Available from http://syrianvoice.org/be-prepared-first-scouting-troop-in-opposition-territory-educating-latakias-youth/?lang=en. See also Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1991), p. 25.

170 "Ashbal Saddam" trained boys between the ages of 10 and 15 in small arms and infantry tactics for up to 14 hours per day. Peter Singer, "Facing Saddam's Child Soldiers", Brookings Institution, 14 January 2003.

In addition to a history of child recruitment, high rates of child labour and child marriage facilitate the exploitation of children by NSAGs. Before the outbreak of the conflict, an estimated 8 per cent of Syrian children between the ages of 5 and 14 were involved in child labour.[173] In 2000, an estimated 25 per cent of Syrian girls between the ages of 15 and 19 were already married.[174] While the minimum legal age for marriage in Syria is 17 for boys and 16 for girls, exceptions are made for children as young as 15 if a judge determines that both parties are "physically mature" and their fathers or grandfathers consent.[175] Although these practices are longstanding, anecdotal evidence suggests that they have grown more common in the current conflict because conditions of perpetual instability and violence tend to force children into adult roles prematurely. In addition, interviewees cited the sharp decline in interest and opportunity for university-level education (associated with delayed marriage) as a factor in increasing child marriage among boys and girls, sometimes to members of NSAGs.[176]

"Fighting was normal, my brother had already taught me how to use a gun at a young age, and everyone I knew was joining one faction or another."

— ANAS, 17 FORMER JI COMBATANT IN RAQQA, SYRIA.

IDEOLOGY AND RELIGION: Children who become engaged with NSAGs often cite ideology and religion as important motivations. Although the conventional understanding of "radicalization" generally assumes a linear and unidirectional process in which exposure to extreme ideology causes an individual to join a violent group, research on the conflicts in Syria and Iraq suggests that the role of ideology in child recruitment is significantly more complex.[177] Children often join NSAGs for non-ideological reasons – for example, to earn a living or protect their families – but over time, they may reframe their motivations in terms of ideology as a result of constant exposure to NSAG propaganda and the peer effects of living among "true believers".[178] In many cases, ideology is a post hoc rationalization for joining rather than the proximate cause.

Anas, who joined JI at the age of 14, said that he initially decided to enlist because "fighting was normal, my brother had already taught me how to use a gun at a young age, and everyone I knew was joining one faction or another". However, after joining the group, "I learned that fighting was 'jihad', and I started using that word a lot".[179] The intake forms of over 4,000 foreign fighters who travelled to Syria to join IS indicate that a significant majority – 70 per cent – claimed only "basic" knowledge of sharia, while a mere 5 per cent claimed to have "advanced" knowledge, suggesting that many were not particularly religious or well-versed in the group's ideology prior to joining.[180]

SECTARIANISM: Although the Syrian uprising began with non-sectarian pro-democracy protests in 2011,[181] over time, religious differences between the primarily Sunni opposition and Alawite-dominated Syrian government have become increasingly salient. The sectarian character of the conflict has been inflamed by the intervention of regional powers on both sides (Shiite allies of the Assad government – Iran and Hizbullah[182] – as well as Sunni supporters of the rebels, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar).[183] In Iraq, IS's massacres of Shia,[184] whom the group regards as apostates, prompted Shiite militias to perpetrate retaliatory massacres of Sunni civilians in areas recaptured from the group.[185] Given these dynamics, it is unsurprising that some children recruited by armed groups cite sectarian motivations. A 17-year-old Lebanese Hizbullah fighter who has been deployed several times to Syria said that he views the conflict as "a repetition of what happened over 1,000 years ago during the battle of Karbala, which ended with the killing of [Imam] Hussein [often cited as the origin of the Sunni-Shiite schism] … We

173 Based on data collected by UNICEF between 1999 and 2005. UNICEF, "The State of the World's Children", (2007), p. 135.

174 UNICEF, "Early Marriage", *Innocenti Digest*, No. 7 (March 2001), p. 4. Available from www.unicef.org/childrenandislam/downloads/early_marriage_eng.pdf.

175 U.S. Department of State, "Syria: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016", 2017, p. 50. Available from www.state.gov/documents/organization/265732.pdf.

176 Interview with Adel (33, electrical engineer from Homs), in Homs by phone from Sanliurfa, 22 February 2017.

177 Mara Revkin, "Does ISIS Need Territory to Survive?", *New York Times*, 21 October 2016. Available from www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/10/21/does-isis-need-territory-to-survive.

178 Ben Oppenheim, Abbey Steele, Juan F. Vargas, and Michael Weintraub, "True Believers, Deserters, and Traitors: Who Leaves Insurgent Groups and Why," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (2015).

179 Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

180 Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, "The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail", Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 18 April 2016, p. 18. Available from https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/Caliphates-Global-Workforce1.pdf.

181 Katharine Zoepf, "New Grievances Broaden Syria's Protest Movement", *New York Times*, 13 April 2011. Available from www.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/world/middleeast/14syria.html.

182 Sarah El Deeb, "Syria, Iraq Troops Link at Border for First Time in Years", Associated Press, 18 June 2017. Available from www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-06-18/syria-iraq-troops-link-at-border-for-first-time-in-years. A PMF leader has stated that the militia has received Assad's permission to operate inside Syrian territory. Ammar Alsawad, "After Mosul Battle, Is Syria Next for PMU?", Al-Monitor, 24 November 2016. Available from www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/pmu-iraq-syria-asad-mosul.html.

183 Nancy Youssef, "Syrian Rebels Describe U.S.-Backed Training in Qatar", PBS, 26 May 2014. Available from https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/syrian-rebels-describe-u-s-backed-training-in-qatar/.

184 Tim Arango, "Escaping Death in Northern Iraq", *New York Times*, 3 September 2014, Available from www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/world/middleeast/surviving-isis-massacre-iraq-video.html.

will not allow that to happen another time."[186] Even children who are not recruited by NSAGs may view the conflict through a sectarian lens, often adopting the prejudices of parents and older relatives.[187]

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS: Syria's national unemployment rate – estimated to be around 60 per cent in 2016 – is the highest in the Arab world, and the local unemployment rates in contested areas are even higher than the national average.[188] Although Iraq's unemployment rate of 14.8 per cent is comparatively low,[189] the local unemployment rate in areas controlled or contested by IS is much higher.[190] In many areas of Syria and Iraq, NSAGs are or were the only source of employment. In addition to providing salaries, many NSAGs also provide more and better-quality food than is otherwise available to civilians. Marwan joined the FSA in 2012 at the age of 14 and later switched sides to JN because it was the highest-paying armed group in his area (Idlib). "I didn't care about the ideology of either group. It was always just business", he said, adding that many parents in besieged Aleppo encouraged their children to attend JN's indoctrination courses in order to receive free food that the group provided to students. Many of the students went on to enlist as fighters with JN, either because they started to believe in the group's ideology or because "they just wanted food and money", Marwan said.[191] Since many NSAGs including Hizbullah, HTS, and the FSA provide some form of compensation to a fighter's dependents, including funeral expenses if he is killed in combat, joining a NSAG is in some cases the functional equivalent of taking out a life insurance policy.

> "I didn't care about the ideology of either group. It was always just business."
>
> — **MARWAN, 19** FORMER FSA AND JN COMBATANT IN ALEPPO, SYRIA.

EDUCATION: The quality and quantity of education that children receive affects their propensity to join NSAGs. Schools in areas affected by the Syrian conflict are usually closed, controlled by an armed group, or no longer accredited. The same problems afflicted Iraqi schools in territory previously controlled by IS. Children not enrolled in school are more likely to take on full-time jobs or spend their free time in the streets or other places frequented by recruiters. Dalia, whose son was recruited by IS at the age of 12, said, "The most dangerous place is the street and the safest place is the home. As soon as children go outside, they are exposed to recruiting activities from all directions".[192] In Deir Ezzor, after local schools closed, children who felt bored and lonely at home began congregating in mosques, where IS-affiliated preachers encouraged them to join the group.[193] One Syrian boy who joined AS at the age of 16 identified a lack of educational opportunities, in addition to financial incentives and the need to defend himself and his family, as motivation for taking up arms.[194]

Children who manage to stay in school face new dangers in the classroom and on their commute. IS and JN have taken over or interfered with existing school systems and introduced new militaristic curricula designed to facilitate recruitment.[195] Other NSAGs, including the FSA, have occupied schools and used them as barracks or command centres.[196] Even when schools remain nominally independent and are not directly controlled by NSAGs, teachers and curricula may still be influenced by them. Akram, a FSA commander whose son joined his brigade at the age of 13, said that many of the teachers in the local school system were fighting part-time for rebel brigades and would bring their guns to class.[197]

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186 Mona Alami, "Meet One of Hizbullah's Teen Fighters", Al-Monitor, 28 January 2016. Available from www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/lebanon-hezbollah-teenagers-jihad-syria.html.

187 For example, an 11-year-old Syrian girl interviewed at a Jordanian refugee camp in 2012 said, "I hate the Alawites and the Shiites. We are going to kill them with our knives, just like they killed us." David Kirkpatrick, "Syrian Children Offer Glimpse of a Future of Reprisals", *New York Times*, 3 September 2012. Available from www.nytimes.com/2012/09/04/world/middleeast/in-syrian-conflict-children-speak-of-revenge-against-alawites.html.

188 Jeanne Gobat and Kristina Kostial, "Syria's Conflict Economy", IMF Working Paper, International Monetary Fund, June 2016. Available from www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16123.pdf.

189 World Bank, "Unemployment, total (% of total labor force)", March 2017. Available from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS.

190 The unemployment rate in East Mosul was estimated to be 56 per cent in September 2017, shortly after the city was retaken from IS. The unemployment rate in West Mosul, which experienced greater collateral damage, is likely to be even higher. International Rescue Committee, "East Mosul, Iraq Labor Market Assessment", September 2017. Available from https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IRC_East%20Mosul%20Iraq%20Labor%20Market%20Assessment_211117.pdf.

191 Interview with Marwan (19, former FSA and JN combatant from Aleppo) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

192 Interview with Dalia (41, teacher from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

193 Interview with Firas (46, lawyer from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 20 February 2017.

194 Mais Katt, "In Syrian War, All Sides Using Child Soldiers", UPI, 27 June 2016. Available from www.upi.com/In-Syrian-war-all-sides-using-child-soldiers/4501466538098.

195 Hadia Mansour, "Syria: Confusion Reigns in Kfar Nabel's School System", *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 19 June 2015. Available from https://iwpr.net/global-voices/syria-confusion-reigns-kfar-nabels-school.

196 Human Rights Watch, "Safe No More: Students and Schools Under Attack in Syria", June 2013, p. 26. Available from www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria0613webwcover.pdf.

197 Interview with Akram (44, FSA officer from Aleppo and father of a 13-year-old FSA recruit) Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

HOMS, SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC
A street lined with rubble and destroyed buildings in the Old City area of Homs, the Syrian Arab Republic.
—May 2014

ACCESS TO INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA: While less important for children recruited in areas where NSAGs are active, children who have travelled to Syria or Iraq from other countries were almost always influenced by information or communities that they found online. Of the four children interviewed for this study who have been detained by Jordanian authorities on terrorism-related charges, only one is accused of first making contact with a NSAG (IS) through real-life acquaintances. A second detainee initially communicated with an IS recruiter over the Internet, which allegedly led to contact with an IS operative on the ground in Jordan, while the remaining two detainees are accused only of engaging with IS over social media and claim never to have met any of its members or engaged in any terrorist activities offline.[198]

6 What Are the Experiences of and Roles for Children in NSAGs?

Children's experiences in NSAGs vary greatly depending on the group's organizational culture, its strategic and ideological objectives, and individual reasons for joining. However, several patterns are evident across many of the NSAGs covered in this chapter.

A. RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY

All of the NSAGs engaged in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq purport to offer their members a new collective identity, but the nature of that identity varies. For some groups, religion is central to the identity being offered (Yazidi and Islamist NSAGs), while others, such as the FSA, define their identity primarily in terms of political objectives (in this case, the establishment of a democracy in Syria). In order to forge these collective identities, NSAGs often try to separate new recruits from their previous networks, affiliations, and allegiances. In the extreme case of IS, which claims to be creating a pan-Islamic community that transcends national borders and ethnolinguistic divisions, the group has implemented numerous policies that require its supporters and members to cut ties, actually or symbolically, to the outside world, including travel bans[199] and restrictions on Internet and satellite usage.[200] In one example focused on children in particular, IS issued a directive requiring all schools in the Iraqi governorate of Salah ad-Din to "remove the expression 'Republic of Iraq' wherever it is found and replace it with 'Islamic State' on buildings and in textbooks".[201]

Many of the NSAGs involved in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have made deliberate efforts to break and replace children's ties to their families. One Syrian boy recruited by JN at the age of 14 said that an instructor in his training course told him, "We are your family now."[202] When the parents of a Syrian boy who joined the YPG without their permission went to his training camp in an attempt to retrieve their son, they were told by a YPG commander, "You need to forget about this boy. He has become a son of the cause and is no longer your son."[203]

B. TRAINING AND INDOCTRINATION

NSAGs engaged in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have taken different approaches to the training and indoctrination of child recruits. Some provide extensive training on rules, beliefs, and organizational objectives to enforce discipline and conformity.[204] Other groups provide minimal or no training. Some groups segregate children from adults for specialized training, but others do not distinguish between age groups. The type and amount of training that children receive affects their relationships with other NSAG members, roles and trajectories, and physical safety.

198 Interviews with four juvenile detainees (three Jordanians and one Syrian between the ages of 16 and 17) at a facility in Jordan, 2 March 2017.

199 Erem News, "داعش يمنع السفر الى خارج محافظة نينوى" 13 February 2015. Available from www.eremnews.com/news/arab-world/205570.

200 Al Arabiya, "داعش يمنع "الواي فاي" بالرقة ويحصر الإنترنت بالمقاهي" 19 July 2015. Available from http://ara.tv/7njpe.

201 Islamic State, Diwan of Education, archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi, 14 January 2015. Available from www.aymennjawad.org/jawad/pics/large/512.jpg.

202 Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

203 Dirar Khatab, "أبناء القضية"، قصص أطفال مجندين في صفوف وحدات حماية الشعب"" *Northern Syria Observer*, 17 June 2017.

204 For example, Adnan, who joined JN in Idlib at the age of 14, was caught violating the group's ban on smoking. His punishment was to carry rocks that were needed to fortify military positions. Interview with Adnan (18, former combatant with JN, from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

CHILD-SPECIFIC TRAINING: Some NSAGs, notably IS, Hizbullah, and the PMF, have created training programmes specifically for children. In July 2015, the PMF was operating a "summer camp" in Baghdad for hundreds of primarily underage recruits, some as young as 15.[205] Some NSAGs systematically expose children to violence – both before and after recruitment – with the apparent intent of desensitizing them to fear. IS has encouraged children to observe public decapitations of criminals and traitors. Fares, whose son was recruited by IS in Raqqa, described one instance in which an executioner gave children a severed head to use as a soccer ball. "IS makes death into a game so that blood starts to seem normal and even fun to children", he said.[206] Children recruited by IS are also exposed to violence as a part of their training. In Deir Ezzor, juvenile recruits were required to sleep in windowless rooms where they would be woken up for dawn prayers by the sound of gunfire "so that they learn to be unafraid of bullets", according to one former adult IS combatant.[207] In al-Tabqa, IS reportedly trained children to decapitate chickens in preparation for eventual beheadings of people.[208] The director of an FSA-affiliated "military academy" for children in Aleppo described the effects of the training: "When they arrive here, they are children. By the time they leave, they are killing machines. I train them not to be scared of war and not to hesitate when the time comes to kill."[209]

AGE-INTEGRATED TRAINING: Other NSAGs provide the same training to all of their fighters, regardless of age, indicating that they view children and adults as functionally interchangeable. In some cases, NSAGs may integrate children into groups of adults in an effort to accelerate their physical and emotional development. A Syrian boy who joined HTS in Idlib at the age of 14 said that the group deliberately mixed children and adults in training programmes so that younger recruits would overcompensate and "try harder to prove that they could keep up with the grown men".[210]

MINIMAL TRAINING: Many armed groups provide minimal or no training to underage recruits, often because of time and resource constraints. Samer, who joined the FSA from Raqqa when he was 15, said that he was issued a Kalashnikov rifle but received no training.[211] Other groups that normally provide training to children will drastically reduce the amount of training in times of necessity or crisis. When IS was at the peak of its expansion in 2014, all new recruits, including children, were required to complete 30 to 50 days of military training. However, as IS suffered military and territorial losses, the group significantly abbreviated these training courses – sometimes to only a few days – to shorten the pipeline to the battlefield.[212]

Poorly trained fighters are more susceptible to injury and death. One former adult IS combatant reported that his 17-year-old brother, who also joined the group, was sent to the front lines in Deir Ezzor without any training and, as a result, "he died the first day because he didn't know how to fight".[213] According to a senior Iraqi army officer who was involved in the campaign to liberate Mosul, although many of the underage IS fighters showed enthusiasm in combat, others appeared to be poorly trained, afraid, reluctant to fight offensively, and unable to defend themselves effectively when attacked. He believes that, as a result, underage fighters "are killed at higher rates" than their adult peers.[214]

c. ROLES

The roles performed by children engaged with NSAGs are fluid and evolve over time. Children are often recruited into supporting roles and transition into combat roles as they grow older. For example, when Tarek first joined JN at the age of 14, he took a three-month indoctrination course, after which he worked as a cook for eight months. He was then assigned to a checkpoint for six months, and finally "promoted" to the rank of fighter and sent into combat.[215] As Tarek's trajectory illustrates, children may perform many different types of services and functions for

205 Associated Press, "Is the U.S. Paying to Train Child Soldiers in Iraq?".
206 Interview with Fares (48, power plant worker from Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.
207 Interview with Nizar (38, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 18 September 2016.
208 Interview with Abbas (42, engineer from al-Tabqa) in Gaziantep, Turkey, 11 July 2015.
209 AFP, "Rebels Train Syrian Teens".
210 Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.
211 Interview with Samer (19, former combatant with FSA, JN, and IS from Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 22 February 2017.
212 Revkin and Mhidi, "Quitting ISIS".
213 Interview with Elias (20, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Istanbul, Turkey, 15 September 2016.
214 Interview with a senior Iraqi Army officer in Mosul, Iraq, 19 April 2017.
215 Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

the group with which they are affiliated. Most roles can be described as one of the following: (1) support functions, (2) policing, (3) combat, (4) espionage, (5) smuggling, (6) politics and propaganda, and (7) forced marriage and/or sexual exploitation.

SUPPORT FUNCTIONS: Children are often recruited to perform supporting roles including cooking, cleaning weapons, digging trenches, or carrying injured fighters and corpses. Children who perform primarily supporting roles are often working in close proximity to fighting and can easily transition into combat roles. Furthermore, some supporting roles may be just as dangerous as combat. A FSA officer from Deir Ezzor reported that two boys recruited by IS were assigned to work in a munitions factory, where they later died after accidentally causing an explosion.[216]

POLICING: NSAGs that engage in policing of civilian populations often recruit children to work as guards, spies, or checkpoint personnel. Such jobs require less training and physical fitness than fighting, but often expose children to violence and may be stepping stones to combat roles. For example, children employed by IS as guards in detention facilities have interrogated and tortured prisoners.[217]

COMBAT: Children who perform combat roles are directly involved in conventional fighting or other violent operations such as suicide bombings and executions. Some groups seem to prefer children for particular combat roles because of their unique physical and psychological traits. A lawyer from Raqqa, observing that IS frequently uses children for suicide operations, suggested two possible explanations: (1) Children's susceptibility to indoctrination makes them enthusiastic about the prospect of martyrdom, and (2) they often lack the skill or strength to be useful in other operational roles.[218] Out of 89 documented underage IS fighters killed in combat in 2015, at least 19 died in suicide operations.[219] An 18-year-old Iraqi boy who joined Islamic State also reported that trainers seemed to view children as ideal candidates for suicide missions because of their enthusiasm.[220] IS deploys a disproportionate number of children to the front lines for use as "cannon fodder", according to a former fighter.[221] Another former IS fighter explained, "Since children are usually the most enthusiastic and least skilled, IS uses them to test the enemy at the beginning of battles. Since children are not very valuable as fighters, IS would rather sacrifice them than adults."[222]

FIGURE 5
Drawings about Forced Marriage by a 15-Year-Old Syrian Girl

ESPIONAGE: Children are often recruited to spy on other civilians, including family members, friends, and neighbours. The mother of a 13-year-old boy who was recruited by IS said that the group "likes to use kids as spies because no one pays attention to them". She was caught selling contraband cigarettes by a child who reported her to the religious police.[223] Interviewees reported that IS had offered small cash rewards to children for intelligence tips.[224] As with other non-combat roles, espionage is often a gateway to more violent and dangerous work. One child who joined IS at the age of 13 worked as a spy before "graduating" to weapons training.[225]

SMUGGLING: Many NSAGs use children to smuggle contraband goods. The FSA has used children as young as 10 to carry supplies, munitions, and weapons from Turkey into Syria. Several NSAGs – the FSA, HTS, and AS – were all using children to smuggle supplies through a particular government checkpoint in Homs because they

216 Interview with Abdullah (41, FSA combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.
217 Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".
218 Interview with Majd (27, lawyer from Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 20 September 2016.
219 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "استمرار استغلال مأساة الأطفال السوريين وتجنيدهم وزجهم في العمليات العسكرية" 25 September 2015. Available from goo.gl/NK39hT.
220 Survey Respondent #44 (18, from Salah ad-Din, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 10 August 2017.
221 Interview with Halil (28, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Istanbul, Turkey, 15 September 2016.
222 Interview with Elias (20, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Istanbul, Turkey, 15 September 2016.
223 Interview with Fatima (42, housewife from Deir Ezzor and mother of a child recruited by IS), in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.
224 Interview with Faisal (40, teacher from Deir Ezzor), in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 18 February 2017.
225 Marcia Biggs, "One Syrian Child Soldier's Desperate Struggle to Escape ISIS", PBS News Hour, 5 August 2016. Available from www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/one-syrian-child-soldiers-desperate-struggle-escape-isis.

FIGURE 5
Drawings about Forced Marriage by a 15-Year-Old Syrian Girl

were less likely to be stopped than adults.[226] Smuggling may be as dangerous as combat.[227] Karam, who joined AS at the age of 16, reported that three children who were being used to smuggle goods across the Syrian border were killed by the Turkish army in 2016 near the village of Khirbet al-Joz.[228]

POLITICS AND PROPAGANDA: NSAGs may involve children in protests or use their images in propaganda to make political or ideological statements. Child combatants have been used as bargaining chips in prisoner exchanges.[229] In the Syrian town of Khan Shaykhun, HTS fighters leading a march to protest U.S. and Russian airstrikes "were unable to convince the 'wise men' of the town to follow them, so they exploited children."[230] In Lebanon, Hizbullah and other NSAGs have systemically used children to increase turnout for military parades and protests, where they often wear uniforms and carry weapons. Although such demonstrations usually begin peacefully, they sometimes turn violent.[231] Some NSAGs have used images or videos of children to score political points against rivals. In 2015, JN released footage of the tearful confessions of two captured 13-year-old IS fighters in an effort to embarrass and shame IS for using "material incentives" to recruit children, although JN has used similar tactics. As this video indicates, NSAGs instrumentalize children for both physical and informational warfare.[232]

FORCED MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE: Many armed groups, particularly those with multigenerational state-building projects for whom population growth is necessary for long-term survival, promote marriage and reproduction. Major General Naim al-Jubouri of the Iraqi Army said of IS, "They are not only interested in the present; they have a vision for the future, and children are the key to that vision."[233] Accordingly, Syrian and Iraqi women and girls face pressure to marry IS fighters and bear children.[234] One official IS publication states that "it is considered legitimate for a girl to be married at the age of nine",[235] and another describes the role of women this way: "As for you, O mother of lion cubs … She is the teacher of generations and the producer of men".[236] In Deir Ezzor, the group reportedly enlisted a local Syrian woman to conduct a "survey" of households to identify good candidates for marriage to fighters.[237] According to a civilian from IS-controlled Manbij, "Many parents felt that it was important for at least one of their daughters to marry an IS member as a kind of protection bargain."[238] In Idlib, where HTS and the FSA are active, child marriage has been linked with a suicide epidemic among underage girls.[239] A 15-year-old Syrian refugee in Lebanon had attempted to poison herself after her family began pressuring her to marry a NSAG member in Syria, an experience she illustrated in drawings (Figure 5). In addition to underage and coerced marriage, boys and girls face the dangers of sexual assault and rape by NSAG members, although such violations are severely underreported because victims fear they will be stigmatized.[240]

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226 Interview with Adel (33, electrical engineer from Homs), in Homs by phone from Sanliurfa, Turkey, 22 February 2017.

227 In one case, a 12-year-old boy was shot from behind while fleeing Turkish forces near the border, sustaining a permanent leg injury. Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Opposition Using Children in Conflict", 29 November 2012. Available from www.hrw.org/news/2012/11/29/syria-opposition-using-children-conflict.

228 Interview with Karam (19, former AS combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

229 Ellen Francis, "Syrian Government, Rebels Swap More Than 100 Prisoners in Hama", Reuters, 7 February 2017. Available from www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-prisoners-idUSKBN15M29G.

230 Video shows Tahrir al-Sham fighters in a pickup truck leading a procession of children waving banners with slogans including, "U.S.A. and Russia [are in an] alliance to kill us." @sahwaji1, "فاستغلوا هؤلاء الأطفال في مظاهراتهم ملئموا #هيئة تحرير الشام في #خان شيخون لم يستطيعوا إقناع الرجال "العقلاء" بإتباعهم"، Twitter, 4 February 2017. Available from https://web.archive.org/web/20170702173321/https://twitter.com/sahwaji1/status/827903429330792448.

231 Interviews with a UNICEF child protection officer in Beirut, Lebanon, 22 March 2017, and two NGO staff members in Beirut and Saida, Lebanon, 23–24 March 2017. See also Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, 24 August 2017, A/72/361–S/2017/821, para. 98. Available from https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1726811.pdf.

232 Shaam Network, "جبهة النصرة.. تبث تسجيلاً لطفلين جندهما تنظيم الدولة لاستهدافها" 13 May 2015. Available from goo.gl/DF9LNY.

233 Interview with Major General Najim al-Jubouri in Mosul, Iraq, 19 April 2017.

234 Mara Revkin and Elisabeth Wood, "The Islamic State's Pattern of Sexual Violence", paper presented at the American Political Science Association, August 2017.

235 Islamic State, "Women in the Islamic State", January 2015, p. 30. Available from https://therinjfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf.

236 Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirhah, "A Jihad Without Fighting", *Dabiq*, Vol. 11 (August 2015), p. 44.

237 Interview with Dalia (41, school teacher from Deir Ezzor) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

238 Interview with Mahmoud (24, civilian from IS-controlled Manbij) in Gaziantep, Turkey, 8 July 2015.

239 Hadya Yahya and Hasan Arfah, "The Link between Suicide among Girls in Rural Idlib and Underage Marriages", Syria Deeply, 28 July 2017. Available from www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/07/28/the-link-between-suicide-among-girls-in-rural-idlib-and-underage-marriages.

240 Interviews with two child protection specialists in Gaziantep, 22 March 2017.

7 How and Why Do Children Exit NSAGs?

Pathways out of NSAGs are as complex and multi-causal as pathways to recruitment. Children who exit armed groups do so for reasons that depend both on their individual experiences and on structural and environmental conditions to which they are exposed. The following individual-, social-, and structural-level factors influence patterns of exit from NSAGs.

A. INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL FACTORS

At the individual level, children may voluntarily disengage from NSAGs for a number of reasons. Some become disillusioned with an armed group's ideology or feel that their experience is not what was promised. An Iraqi child who joined IS at the age of 16, at the suggestion of friends, attended a training camp for only one day before changing his mind and fleeing to a refugee camp near Mosul. Despite the brevity of his engagement with the group, he was detained by Kurdish security forces and is now facing terrorism charges.[241]

Sometimes, children disengage from one NSAG in order to join another. Of the eight Syrian children interviewed for this study who had previously joined a NSAG, four had been engaged with two or more groups. "Side-switching" may be driven by ideological, social, or material reasons.

Another common individual-level pathway out of NSAGs is to seek medical treatment for injuries suffered as a result of engagement. Tarek, who joined JN at the age of 14, temporarily disengaged from the group in 2016 to undergo surgery in Turkey for a significant leg injury that he had sustained in combat.[242] Disengagement for medical reasons, however, is often temporary.

B. SOCIAL-LEVEL FACTORS

At the social level, familial, community, and group dynamics may create conditions favourable to disengagement. Some children have left NSAGs as a result of intervention by family members. Parents may try to remove their children from the conflict theatre by taking them to neighbouring countries or sending them away with older siblings or relatives. In such cases, children may be disengaged physically but still identify with the NSAG, and they will often look for opportunities to return to the conflict. One Syrian boy who joined IS at the age of 13 was taken across the border into Turkey by his mother, who wanted to extract him from the group, but after two months, he announced his intention to return to Syria, where he eventually reenlisted and signed up to be a suicide bomber.[243]

While many children join NSAGs to support their families economically, the desire to support or protect family members may also be a motivation for disengagement. Marwan, who joined the FSA at the age of 14 and later switched sides to JN, left Syria in 2016 after his younger brother was injured in an airstrike and needed to be taken to Turkey for medical treatment.[244]

C. STRUCTURAL-LEVEL FACTORS

Structural, economic, military, and political conditions may lead children to disengage from NSAGs.

Many children have disengaged involuntarily from NSAGs when they are detained by Syrian or Iraqi security forces or by enemy NSAGs, often in the context of the retreat or defeat of their group. Sometimes, children have already made the decision to desert and lay down their weapons when they are arrested. Of the 45 Iraqi children detained on charges of joining IS who were surveyed for this chapter, 30 were arrested in IDP camps, where many claimed to have fled after voluntarily deserting the group (Figure 6).

241 Survey Respondent #29 (16, from Salah ad-Din, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 18 April 2017.
242 Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.
243 Biggs, "One Syrian Child Soldier's Desperate Struggle".
244 Interview with Marwan (19, former FSA and JN combatant from Aleppo) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

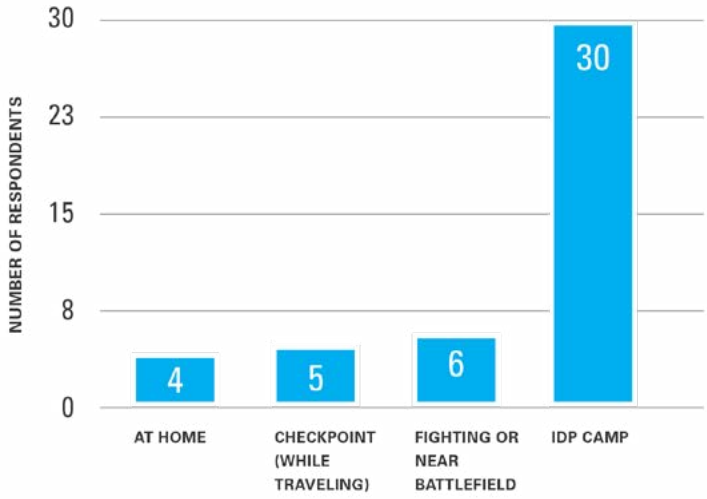


FIGURE 6
Drawings about Forced Marriage by a 15-Year-Old Syrian Girl

Children sometimes disengage from NSAGs if outside opportunities in the civilian world become more attractive than continued membership in the group. In one of the best-case scenarios, children may decide to disengage from the conflict entirely to pursue educational or employment opportunities outside of Syria. Karam left AS after fighting for the group for three years (since joining at the age of 16) in order to continue his education in Turkey after an uncle there offered to take him in. Having friends or relatives in areas removed from the conflict decreases the costs and uncertainties of exit.[245]

Children may also disengage from NSAGs as a result of local or international pressure on their group to demobilize underage fighters. Several NSAGs, under scrutiny from international NGOs or local stakeholders, have adopted child-protective policies, including minimum-age requirements. In July 2014, the YPG signed a Deed of Commitment with Geneva Call, pledging to refrain from using children under the age of 18 in combat roles.[246] The agreement resulted in the demobilization of 149 underage combatants, although the YPG has continued to recruit children.[247] In 2017, a delegation of tribal leaders met with YPG commanders in Aleppo and asked them to stop recruiting underage fighters. The YPG commanders agreed in order to avoid "tension with locals".[248]

Children sometimes disengage from NSAGs if outside opportunities in the civilian world become more attractive than continued membership in the group.

The FSA is another example of a group that has adopted child-protective policies in response to local and international pressure. After Human Rights Watch published a report in 2014 that documented instances of child recruitment by the FSA,[249] its leadership issued a statement affirming the FSA's commitment to "combating this despicable practice", citing the 2002 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.[250] Later, in June 2017, four FSA-affiliated brigades based in northern Syria signed a Deed of Commitment with Geneva Call pledging to refrain from recruiting children under age 18, to facilitate medical care and education for children, and to ban all acts of sexual violence.[251] In November 2017, four more FSA-affiliated brigades signed similar Deeds of Commitment, three of which pledged to prohibit the recruitment of children under age 18.[252]

Additionally, Geneva Call has been working with JI and other Islamist NSAGs to develop a draft statement that contains "15 key IHL [international humanitarian law] rules and their congruence with Islamic law to be respected in armed conflict".[253] Although the statement has not been adopted yet, JI has made other public commitments to respect IHL principles, including the prohibition of the use of medical facilities for military purposes.[254] As these examples indicate, direct engagement with NSAGs has in some cases led to the adoption of child-protective policies that facilitate disengagement, although non-compliance with these policies is widespread.

245 Interview with Karam (19, former AS combatant from Idlib) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

246 Geneva Call, Deed of Commitment Under Geneva Call for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict, 5 July 2014. Available from https://genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2014//07/2014-5july-YPG-YPJ-syria-children.pdf.

247 Geneva Call, "Syria: Kurdish Armed Forces Demobilize 149 Child Soldiers", 7 July 2014. Available from https://genevacall.org/syria-kurdish-armed-forces-demobilize-149-child-soldiers.

248 Dirar Khatab, ""أبناء القضية"، قصص أطفال مجندين في صفوف وحدات حماية الشعب", *Northern Syria Observer*, 17 June 2017.

249 Human Rights Watch, "Maybe We Live".

250 Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army, "A Statement about the Recruitment of Child Soldiers", 26 June 2014. Available from www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/A%20statement%20about%20the%20recruitment%20of%20child%20soldiers%20.pdf.

251 Geneva Call, "Syria: 4 Brigades of the Free Syrian Army Commit to Prohibit Sexual Violence and the Use of Child Soldiers", 3 July 2017. Available from https://genevacall.org/syria-4-brigades-free-syrian-army-commit-prohibit-sexual-violence-use-child-soldiers.

252 Geneva Call, "Syria: General Commanders of Four Free Syrian Army Brigades Make Humanitarian Commitments in Geneva", 15 November 2017. Available from https://genevacall.org/syria-general-commanders-four-free-syrian-army-brigades-make-humanitarian-commitments-geneva.

253 Geneva Call, "Syria", accessed 2 January 2018. Available from https://genevacall.org/country-page/syria.

8 Obstacles to Disengagement and Reintegration

The potential for reintegration of any particular child is dependent on his or her individual motivations for engagement and experiences within the group, as well as the reasons for and circumstances of disengagement. Children reintegrate into many different contexts – other areas of Syria, neighbouring countries, or destinations farther removed from the conflict – and the challenges associated with these particular settings and the resources available therein have a significant impact on a child's trajectory. Disengagement and reintegration appear to be nonlinear processes with high rates of recidivism. Even children who have physically disengaged from armed groups face steep psychological, social, economic, security, and legal barriers to reintegration. Those who remain in close proximity to the Syrian conflict are particularly at risk for recidivism and reengagement. In general, children who are learning to be civilians again, often for the first time in years, face the following obstacles and challenges.

LIMITED ACCESS: Many children are recruited by NSAGs in active conflict areas that are not accessible to the United Nations and other international interveners. Local actors who try to extract children from NSAGs, including parents, may face reprisals. This is particularly true in the case of ideologically motivated NSAGs that regard military service as a moral or religious obligation. Parents who try to extract their children from Islamist NSAGs are frequently accused of apostasy. One man from Raqqa who visited an IS recruiting centre to inquire about the whereabouts of his son, who had joined the group without his permission, was arrested and detained for three days. Upon release, he was warned that if he asked about his son again, he would be executed for "interfering with the obligation of jihad".[255] Parents of children recruited by the YPG have faced similar challenges, including punishment for "treason", imprisonment for months on false charges of "collaborating with IS",[256] and the extortion of payments of up to $4,000 for the release of their children.[257]

FIGURE 7A
A Child's Drawing Depicting Public Executions in Mosul

NO EXIT: The process of exiting NSAGs and the territory they control may be equally or more dangerous than continued engagement. Some NSAGs, notably IS, impose severe punishments on deserters, including death.[258] Additionally, members of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States or other countries may be targeted by smugglers and bounty hunters hoping to trade them in for a profit. For example, Gulf states have reportedly paid large sums in exchange for the return of captured IS fighters.[259]

PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS: Children who have been engaged with NSAGs have been socialized to self-identify as adults and are often unwilling to resume activities that they associate with childhood (e.g., school and sports). Additionally, in the case of children who initially joined NSAGs in pursuit of a meaningful and dignified life, some of those who disengage struggle with feelings of worthlessness and disempowerment, particularly if they are unable to find social and vocational fulfilment among civilians. Tarek, who joined JN at the age of 14 and was interviewed in southern Turkey while temporarily disengaged in order to receive medical treatment for a leg injury, reported feeing "lost", as if his life had "no purpose", saying, "I am nothing without a weapon."[260]

255 Interview with Nizar (38, former IS combatant from Deir Ezzor) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 18 September 2016 (recounting the experience of a friend from Raqqa).

256 Dirar Khatab, "'أبناء القضية'، قصص أطفال مجندين في صفوف وحدات حماية الشعب" *Northern Syria Observer*, 17 June 2017.

257 Syria MRM, "Summary of MRM4Syria Verification".

258 Yasser Allawi and Jalal Zein al-Deen, "One Fighter's Recruitment – and Escape – from ISIS", Syria Deeply, 12 May 2016. Available from www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/05/12/one-fighters-recruitment-and-escape-from-isis.

259 Erika Solomon and Ahmad Mhidi, "The Black Market Trade in Isis Fighters", *Financial Times*, 8 January 2017. Available from www.ft.com/content/c7a7d804-d357-11e6-b06b-680c49b4b4c0?mhq5j=e1.

260 Interview with Tarek (17, current JN combatant from Idlib) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 26 February 2017.

FIGURE 7B
A Child's Drawing Depicting Public Executions in Mosul

Children formerly engaged with NSAGs have experienced a range of traumas. Triggers for these painful memories are diverse and unpredictable. A UNICEF programme officer in Lebanon related the case of a 12-year-old boy from Idlib who refused to join in a sports rehabilitation activity because he had witnessed incidents in which IS had decapitated prisoners and encouraged children to play soccer with the severed heads.[261] In Figures 7a and 7b, drawings by children from Mosul illustrate their memories of public executions, which persist long after their exposure to violence.[262]

SOCIAL BARRIERS: Some children have difficulty reintegrating into civilian communities, either as IDPs in Syria or refugees in other countries, because of stigmas attached to former combatants or other prejudices. Anas, who disengaged from JI in 2015, has found it difficult to adjust to civilian life in Turkey due to a combination of underemployment and discrimination against Syrian refugees. He tried working for two different businesses owned by Turks – a butcher shop and a hardware store – but eventually quit both jobs because his "Turkish coworkers would say bad things about Syrians, and I felt embarrassed and angry".[263] In Iraq, tribes have formally banished individuals who are believed to have supported or joined IS, often publishing lists of their names.[264] Under tribal law, these alleged collaborators can be killed if they return.

Another feature of tribal law, both in Syria and Iraq, is the attribution of collective guilt to the family or tribe of the perpetrator, such that the relatives of an IS member can be held vicariously responsible for crimes that he or she committed individually.[265] As a result, women and girls who married members of NSAGs—and their children—often have difficulty returning to their former communities after the cessation of conflict, even if their husbands or parents are dead or missing. In Iraq's Hajj Ali IDP camp, widows of IS members interviewed in December 2017 said that they hoped to stay in the camp indefinitely because they believed that they and their children would be safer there than in their former homes in Hawija, where family members of IS members are vulnerable to retaliatory violence. One widow of an IS member, whose brother's house in their village near Hawija was attacked with grenades as a result of his family ties to the group, said, "I am afraid that if I return, my neighbours would kill me in my sleep."[266]

Another social barrier to the reintegration of children is that collective identities formed during engagement with NSAGs tend to persist in programming settings. A UNICEF officer in Lebanon reported that children formerly engaged with rival NSAGs do not mix well and sometimes fight.[267]

ECONOMIC BARRIERS: Children who are too old or unwilling to return to school often turn to low-wage employment. Such jobs usually do not present opportunities for capacity-building or upward mobility, and in many cases may expose children to exploitation by employers. Those who are unable to earn a living or find themselves in unfulfilling or dangerous jobs often second-guess their decisions to leave armed groups and may look for opportunities to reengage.

Marwan, who joined the FSA at the age of 14 and later fought for JN, eventually fled in 2016 to Turkey, where he found a job at a vegetable oil factory in the city of Sanlıurfa. He dislikes the job and complained about a cheating boss who underpays him, saying, "I would rather be fighting in Syria because at least there, I could protect myself and my rights. Now, I am powerless and taken advantage of every day."[268]

261 Interview with a UNICEF programme officer in Tripoli, Lebanon, 24 March 2017.

262 The left-hand drawing was made by an IDP from Mosul at a school in Khazir Camp. The right-hand drawing was made by an elementary school student in a Mosul neighbourhood recently liberated from Islamic State.

263 Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

264 For example, in the Iraqi Governorate of Salah ad-Din, several tribes published a list of the names of 113 individuals who are accused of association with IS and therefore banished from the community. Hashim al-Hashimi, "انضموا لداعش وترفض عودتهم الى منازلهم عشائر اليوطعمة الجبورية في صلاح الدين تعلن البراءة من 113 شخص", Twitter, 12 January 2018, Available from https://twitter.com/hushamalhashimi/status/951763690784743424.

265 Nabih Bulos, "In Iraq, Punishing Family Ties to Islamic State and Compensating Victims of the Violence", *Los Angeles Times*, 9 October 2016. Available from http://beta.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iraq-qayyarah- snap-story.html.

266 Interview with Laila (40, widow of an IS combatant from a village near Hawija) in the Hajj Ali IDP camp in Ninewa, Iraq, 14 December 2017.

267 Interview with a UNICEF officer in Tripoli, Lebanon, 24 March 2017.

268 Interview with Marwan (19, former FSA and JN combatant from Aleppo) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 25 February 2017.

LEGAL BARRIERS: Children may face legal barriers to reintegration, whether as IDPs inside Syria or as migrants to other countries. The Syrian government, which enacted a sweeping counter-terrorism law in 2012,[269] engages in mass arrests of people fleeing besieged and contested areas, and systematically detains fighting-age males, especially Sunni, who are believed to be associated with opposition groups.[270] Torture of detainees, including children, is widespread in Syrian prisons[271] and has also been alleged in Iraq as well.[272] In northern Syria, the PYD has imprisoned individuals accused of having ties to IS for up to a year without a trial or even formal charges, based on thin evidence.[273] The Iraqi government has detained more than 7,000 individuals on IS-related charges since 2014, including hundreds of children,[274] some as young as 13.[275] In the absence of amnesty guarantees, children who want to disengage from NSAGs risk harsh treatment under domestic criminal or antiterrorism laws.

Even if children are not arrested or prosecuted, they may face legal difficulties as a result of their lack of valid identification or personal-status documents. Thousands of children have been born and marriages officiated in areas of Syria and Iraq controlled by NSAGs. Although IS issued its own birth certificates[276] and marriage contracts,[277] these documents are not recognized as valid by the Syrian or Iraqi governments. Lack of documentation makes it difficult for children to access health care and education and, if their nationality cannot be established, renders them vulnerable to statelessness.[278]

Many Syrian children find it impossible to imagine a non-violent future as long as they are confronted with daily reminders of the conflict.

An additional layer of legal difficulties awaits children who leave Syria and Iraq. Those who cross borders illegally and do not register as refugees may not be able to obtain lawful employment, enrol in public schools, or access health care.[279]

PROXIMITY TO CONFLICT: Many Syrian children find it impossible to imagine a non-violent future as long as the conflict is ongoing. Anas, who has been working in Turkey since disengaging from JI at the age of 15, was at a loss for words when asked what he hopes to accomplish in his life. "It's pointless to think about my future now. As long as the war is still going on, my only goal is to return to Syria to fight alongside my brothers", he said, adding that he is actively looking for a new brigade to join, either with JI or the FSA.[280] In Mosul and other areas previously controlled by IS, schools have reopened, but children are confronted with daily reminders of the conflict. Behind one elementary school is a makeshift cemetery where at least 11 bodies were buried during the liberation offensive because the road to the real cemetery was closed (Figure 8). One teacher estimated that it will take 20 years "for this neighbourhood to feel normal again".[281]

Even refugee camps, where civilians supposedly go to escape the dangers of armed conflict, are not safe from predation by NSAGs. In Damascus, the Palestinian-majority Yarmouk neighbourhood has been the site of intense fighting between NSAGs including IS, HTS, the FSA, and Palestinian factions aligned with the Syrian government. IS has recruited children as young as 12 from the neighbourhood.[282] NSAGs are also able to project their influence transnationally into refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Operatives sent from Syria by IS and JN/HTS have recruited hundreds of young people in Lebanese refugee camps.[283] Children in refugee camps are vulnerable not

269 Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Counterterrorism Court Used to Stifle Dissent", 25 June 2013. Available from www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/25/syria-counterterrorism-court-used-stifle-dissent.

270 U.S. Department of State, "Syria: 2016 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices", 3 March 2017, pp. 4–5. Available from www.state.gov/documents/organization/265732.pdf.

271 United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, 27 January 2014, S/2014/31, p. 6. Available from https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N13/627/07/PDF/N1362707.pdf?OpenElement.

272 Human Rights Watch, "KRG: Children Allege Torture by Security Forces", 29 January 2017. Available from www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/29/krg-children-allege-torture-security-forces.

273 Amnesty International, "Syria: Arbitrary Detentions and Blatantly Unfair Trials Mar PYD Fight Against Terrorism", 7 September 2015. Available from www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/09/syria-abuses-mar-pyd-fight-against-terrorism.

274 Human Rights Watch, "Flawed Justice: Accountability for ISIS Crimes in Iraq", 5 December 2017. Available from www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/iraq1217web.pdf.

275 Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Hundreds Detained in Degrading Conditions", 13 March 2017. Available from https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/13/iraq-hundreds-detained-degrading-conditions.

276 Photograph of a birth certificate issued by the Islamic State in Ninewa Province, archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi. Available from www.aymennjawad.org/jawad/pics/large/893.jpg.

277 Photograph of a marriage contract issued by the Islamic State in Mosul, archived by Aymenn al-Tamimi. Available from www.aymennjawad.org/jawad/pics/large/894.jpg.

278 International Rescue Committee, "Identify Me: The Documentation Crisis in Northern Syria", July 2016, p. 2. Available from https://www.rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/document/1207/identify-me-july-2016-irc.pdf.

279 Syria Needs Analysis Project, "Legal Status of Individuals Fleeing Syria", June 2013, p. 2. Available from http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/legal_status_of_individuals_fleeing_syria.pdf.

280 Interview with Anas (17, former JI combatant from Deir Ezzor and Raqqa) in Sanlıurfa, Turkey, 19 February 2017.

281 Interview with Sara (41, teacher from Mosul) in Mosul, Iraq, 15 April 2017.

282 In May 2017, IS was reportedly posting flyers in the camp encouraging children between the ages of 12 and 14 to enrol in its "military school" to help "build a unified jihadist generation". Ghassan Nasir, "النظام يقصف مخيم اليرموك و(داعش) يواصل تجنيد أطفال" *Geroun*, 28 May 2017. Available from www.geroun.net/archives/84236.

283 Jack Khoury, "ISIS, Nusra Front Recruiting in Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon", Haaretz, 26 July 2016. Available from www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/isis/1.733250.

FIGURE 8
Makeshift Cemetery Behind an Elementary School in Mosul

only to recruitment but also to early marriage. Adnan, who joined JN at the age of 14, said that at the time of his association with the group, fighters regularly visited several refugee camps in northern Syria near the border with Turkey to look for wives. According to Adnan, JN was paying women in refugee camps to "scout" for girls with particular traits desired by fighters and to negotiate with their parents.[284]

9 Conclusions

The patterns identified in this chapter suggest several broad conclusions with implications for the design and implementation of evidence-based programmes and policies.

The first is that the recruitment of children by NSAGs is **highly correlated with other forms of exploitation**, including child labour, early marriage, sexual abuse, and trafficking. Since these different practices frequently interact with and amplify each other, a child who experiences one is likely to experience others.

A second conclusion is that while the phenomenon of child recruitment and use by NSAGs has been exacerbated by the current conflict, it has **deep historical and cultural roots** in Syria and neighbouring countries. Definitions of adulthood are culturally relative and may deviate significantly from the international standard of 18. Furthermore, the Levant region has a long history of organized child recruitment by both state and non-state actors. Policies and programmes designed to address child recruitment in the current conflict must take into account these path dependencies between past and present.

A third finding is that the **absence of education, or the appropriation of educational systems by NSAGs**, can be an important factor in recruitment. Widespread closure of schools leads children to spend more time in the streets or enter the civilian workforce, where they are vulnerable to recruitment. Even when schools remain open, most in opposition-held areas are no longer accredited by the Syrian government. As a result, "children have no incentive to continue education beyond the level of basic literacy, because their degrees are worthless".[285] Some armed groups have taken control of school systems and introduced curricula designed to indoctrinate children and

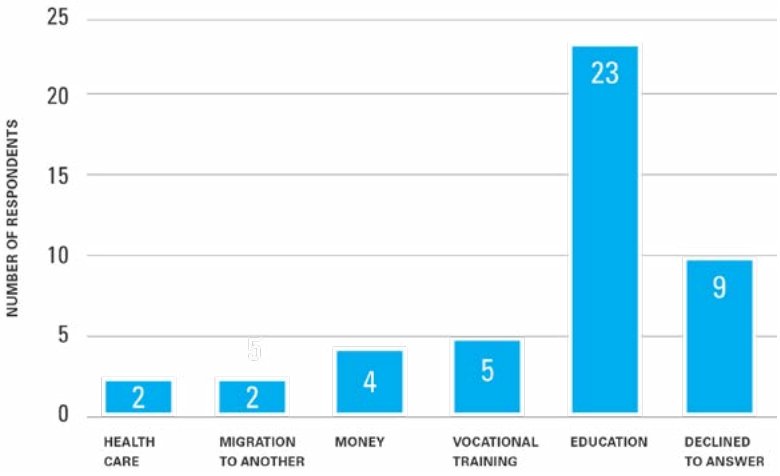
284 Interview with Adnan (18, former combatant with JN, from Homs) in Sanliurfa, Turkey, 25 February2017.
285 Interview with a child psychosocial support specialist in Gaziantep, Turkey, 23 February 2017.

prepare them for combat or supporting roles. In other cases, schools have been converted into "military academies" or training camps. Sometimes, children who disengage from armed groups are uninterested in resuming their education because they have been trained to think of themselves as adults, or because multi-year gaps in education are difficult to overcome. But others are eager to resume their education. Of the 45 children detained in Iraq on charges of joining IS who were surveyed for this chapter, 64 per cent of those who responded to the question said that if released, education was the most important resource they would need to achieve their life goals, and another 15 per cent identified vocational training as the most important resource (Figure 9).

Fourth is the significance of **family and social networks**. For children living in areas controlled by NSAGs, the decision to join is rarely made in a vacuum, but is heavily influenced by pre-existing social and familial networks. Groups of friends often join together, or a child who joins a group will encourage friends to follow suit. Tribes often join or switch allegiance between groups collectively, as do brigades. One positive implication of these social dynamics is that the decision to disengage from an armed group is also influenced and facilitated by peers. Deserters remain in contact with friends still in the armed group who may be looking for a way out and who will turn to them for advice about outside opportunities and exit strategies.

A fifth conclusion is that it is important to **distinguish between patterns of foreign and local recruitment**. Dynamics of recruiting vary greatly between areas that are controlled by armed groups and areas that are far removed from conflict theatres. Whereas recruitment in the former contexts involves coercion and real-life social networks, recruitment in the latter contexts is usually an individual process that involves clandestine engagement (often without the knowledge of family and friends) with a virtual community of militants, typically through social media. The experiences and needs of children recruited from within Syria or Iraq differ significantly from those of children recruited from beyond its borders, and programmes should be tailored accordingly.

FIGURE 9
Juvenile Detainees in Kurdistan: "What would you need to achieve your life goals?"



Sixth, **child recruitment, while pervasive, is not necessarily an inevitable feature of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq**. Although all NSAGs have recruited children, their policies and practices vary significantly. Some NSAGs, under pressure from international NGOs or local stakeholders, have adopted child-protective policies such as minimum-age requirements and incentives to return to school. As these examples indicate, direct engagement with NSAGs has proven to be a successful strategy for promoting the adoption of child-protective norms and policies.

A seventh finding is that **states overwhelmingly treat children recruited by NSAGs as security threats rather than victims of exploitation**. Children who join or support NSAGs often do so under conditions of extreme manipulation, coercion, and duress. State security forces, acting on the basis of sweeping counter-terrorism laws, do not properly differentiate between children and adults, nor do they adequately prioritize the prosecution of more serious offenses (directly participating in terrorism or armed conflict) over lesser ones (for example, providing logistical support). And regardless of the severity of their alleged offenses, children are entitled to due process and other minimum human rights guarantees by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which the Iraqi and Syrian governments are signatories. Finally, existing counter-terrorism approaches do not take into account the circumstances of duress and coercion that lead many children to become associated with NSAG – for example, the 17-year-old Iraqi boy surveyed for this chapter who joined IS for the sole purpose of receiving free medical treatment for his heart condition.[286] Another 16-year-old Iraqi boy who joined IS because "my family was starving" deserted as soon as the battle for Mosul began, after receiving only one month of weapons training. After voluntarily surrendering to Kurdish forces, he was convicted

[286] Survey Respondent #41 (17, from Erbil, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 13 August 2017.

FIGURE 10
Drawing by an Iraqi Elementary School Student in Mosul.

of terrorism charges and is now serving a prison sentence that will seriously impact his future.[287] Decisions to disengage from NSAGs are often punished rather than incentivized. An additional concern is that many children fleeing conflict areas have been falsely accused and wrongfully detained because mere proximity to a NSAG has tainted them with suspicion.

Iraq, Syria, and the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey are struggling to process and accommodate large populations of refugees and IDPs. In an effort to identify and contain persons who are believed to pose a threat to national security, regional governments have imposed over-inclusive "screening" procedures that authorize the detention and interrogation of IDPs and refugees fleeing areas where NSAGs are active. For example, during the battle for Mosul, Iraqi and Kurdish authorities were blanket-quarantining all "fighting-age" men and boys entering nearby IDP camps until cleared of any ties to IS. Screening decisions are often arbitrary and based on little concrete evidence. These findings suggest the importance of revising legal frameworks that collectively punish individuals from NSAG-controlled areas and do not adequately differentiate between perpetrators and victims.

The final conclusion is that the **difficulty of maintaining neutrality in conflict areas creates intense pressures and incentives for children to align with NSAGs**. For many children (and adults), neutrality is not an option. In areas controlled by armed groups, membership or at least cooperation is necessary for survival, employment, and protection of one's family. Civil wars are polarizing, and even those who try to remain "neutral" will be perceived by others as choosing one side or the other. The Syrian government assumes that every fighting-age male in Aleppo is a member of an opposition group on the basis of geographical and demographic traits rather than evidence of membership. The impossibility of neutrality creates strong incentives to join a faction. When civilians are treated as combatants, there is no benefit to maintaining neutrality.

Even when children successfully disengage from armed groups, or the groups withdraw from their communities, the shadow of war continues to loom large. Figure 10, drawn by an elementary school student in a neighbourhood of Mosul recently liberated from IS, depicts an Iraqi soldier comforting a young boy in a landscape littered with corpses, debris, and weapons. These experiences are not easily forgotten when the conflict continues to rage on in nearby regions of Iraq and Syria. Although beyond the scope and mandate of child protection advocates, peacebuilding is a necessary background condition for the successful implementation of the recommendations outlined above.

287 Survey Respondent #42 (16, from Salah ad-Din, detained on IS-related charges in Iraq), 8 August 2017.