



Combating Terrorism Center

AT WEST POINT



# HOMECOMING

CONSIDERATIONS FOR REHABILITATING AND  
REINTEGRATING ISLAMIC STATE-AFFILIATED  
MINORS

Liesbeth van der Heide and Audrey Alexander | June 2020



# Homecoming: Considerations for Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.

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Cover Photo: Boys walk at Al Hol displacement camp in Hasaka governorate, Syria, on March 8, 2019. (Issam Abdallah/Reuters)

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## Executive Summary

More than a year since the Islamic State lost control over the town of Baghouz, Syria—the organization’s last pocket of territory—facilities housing Islamic State-affiliated adults and minors continue to hold a sizable contingent of the group, including many of those who emerged from Baghouz in February 2019. Today, although a trickle of foreigners have returned home, many Islamic State affiliates remain in limbo. Minors, both accompanied and unaccompanied, continue to live in volatile and dangerous conditions as countries determine their roles and responsibilities in stemming the refugee, detention, and humanitarian crisis in the region. Although nations are right to assess the potential risks associated with returning Islamic State-affiliated minors, the costs of delayed action are high. In an effort to support stakeholders tasked with weighing such tradeoffs, the first half of this report uses a range of primary and secondary sources to review the experiences some foreign minors have during and after life in the Islamic State. The report suggests that such circumstances can create barriers to a minor’s rehabilitation and reintegration, but argues that addressing key issue areas may improve programming for returning minors. With that rationale in mind, the second half of this report lays out four focus areas and draws from research about children in other adverse contexts, including those affected by conflict, displacement, deprivation, or abuse, to raise considerations for stakeholders developing rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returning minors.

Since foreign minors’ paths to, and experiences in, the Islamic State are likely to affect this demographic in the short-, medium-, and long-term, it is useful to review some key takeaways. First and foremost, the Islamic State’s emphasis on minors was a critical part of securing the organization’s future, and particularly at its height, the group dedicated efforts to engage and enable its younger generations. Generally speaking, minors became affiliated with the group in different ways: though some minors joined out of their own volition, many became associated through family connections or were born under the Islamic State’s rule. Additionally, the experiences of foreign children in the Islamic State are not monolithic, but rather, shaped by a range of factors including the minor’s age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and family status. Such variables can influence an individual’s place in the Islamic State’s bureaucracy. Age, for instance, can affect a child’s awareness of their surroundings, as can the level of education they attained, the training they received, and the roles they filled. Such characteristics may also alter, but not necessarily determine, a minor’s exposure to violence. Even after the fall of the territorial caliphate, such factors may continue to affect these minors.

In that vein, increased awareness of the pathways for foreign minors away from the Islamic State can also help clarify the needs for rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives. Though some minors are believed to be killed or missing, some foreign children have already been repatriated and returned to their countries. Whether separated or accompanied, however, many remain in displacement camps and detention facilities for extended periods, in environments that are especially dangerous to children, with no opportunity to change their situation. The conditions in such places continue to deteriorate, which is especially troubling since existing accounts already cite concerns about diseases, parasites, contaminated drinking water, overcrowding, malnutrition, neglect, and multiple forms of violence and abuse. Given these dynamics, policymakers and practitioners must account for the myriad ways in which life after the Islamic State may also affect a child in the short-, medium-, and long-term, particularly without some form of intervention. Realistically, some Islamic State-affiliated minors may spend more time in displacement or detention facilities than they did living under the Islamic State’s rule. This adds to the complexity of circumstances where, for example, a foreign child spends more time in Syria than their country of birth or nationality, distancing them from the culture, community, or family to which they could eventually return.

Taken altogether, these challenges should direct the search for guidelines to support minors transitioning to life after the Islamic State, possibly away from displacement and detention facilities, while allowing policymakers and practitioners to both assess risks and promote security. Failure to be con-

scious of, and responsive to, the needs of returning minors will ultimately lead to ineffective policy and potentially counter-productive interventions. Consequently, this report focuses on four overlapping issue areas that require specific attention because of the barriers they pose to rehabilitation and reintegration for Islamic State-affiliated minors. These areas include the minor's well-being, indoctrination, identity, and vulnerability to stigmatization.

This report argues that policymakers and practitioners should help overcome these obstacles and enhance efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate minors associated with the Islamic State. The report suggests that doing so requires stakeholders to prioritize the following actions: address a minor's physical and psychological well-being, develop a context-based approach to matters concerning indoctrination, support the development of a minor's identity, and safeguard against the effects of stigmatization and discrimination. Discussions concerning the four focus areas, which are motivated by literature relevant to each topic, may serve as useful references for those seeking to rehabilitate and reintegrate foreign minors associated with the Islamic State.

## Introduction

In August 2017, the Islamic State released a propaganda video featuring a 10-year-old boy called “Yusuf,” who claimed to be an American living with his mother in Raqqa, Syria.<sup>1</sup> In the video, the boy spoke English and threatened Western targets, and then loaded magazines for a rifle, supposedly preparing for the path ahead of him as a member of the Islamic State.<sup>2</sup> Yusuf is also seen playing with another child—who reports later revealed to be a Yazidi boy kidnapped by the Islamic State in Iraq—against the backdrops of rubble, an abandoned building, and an empty playground.<sup>3</sup> The video drew international media attention, which raised more questions about the identities of the children.<sup>4</sup> In January 2018, the Yazidi boy appeared in an interview with CNN, explaining that he lived with an American family in Raqqa for over two years under the care of a woman named “Sam.”<sup>5</sup> After stopping the family, Syrian Kurdish forces separated the Yazidi boy from the others in the family and returned the boy to his uncle in Iraq.<sup>6</sup> By April 2018, the next time Yusuf appeared on camera, the American family was living in a detention camp in northeastern Syria, where Yusuf helped his mother, Samantha Elhassani, care for his three younger biological siblings.<sup>7</sup> In separate media interviews, both boys indicated that the Islamic State forced them to participate in the production of the aforementioned propaganda video, and Elhassani also claimed that she was threatened by the Islamic State and beaten by her husband for resisting demands to feature the children.<sup>8</sup> By mid-2018, the American family returned to the United States, and Elhassani faced charges from federal authorities for lying to the FBI and for providing and conspiring to provide material support to the Islamic State.<sup>9</sup> After her arrest, the Department of Justice announced that Elhassani’s four biological children were in the care of Indiana’s Department of Child Services, which would “make any necessary determinations regarding their custody, safety, and wellbeing.”<sup>10</sup>

While the case of the Elhassani family is complicated and disconcerting, particularly given that Samantha Elhassani and her husband purchased the aforementioned Yazidi boy and two Yazidi girls,<sup>11</sup> it shows a range of experiences children might encounter during and after life in the Islamic State.<sup>12</sup> For instance, though two of Elhassani’s biological children were brought to Syria, the other two were born in Islamic State-controlled territory.<sup>13</sup> Multiple sources indicate that the children, particularly the older boy and girl, were regularly exposed to violence, albeit varying types.<sup>14</sup> Elhassani’s husband, the biological father of the three younger children, was reportedly abusive. He died in a rocket

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1 Ken Dilanian and Tracy Connor, “U.S. Trying to Identify ‘American’ Boy in ISIS Video,” NBC News, August 24, 2017.

2 Ibid.

3 Salma Abdelaziz, Arwa Daymon, Muwafar Mohammed, and Brice Laine, “Kidnapped boy raised by American ISIS woman in Raqqa,” CNN, January 23, 2018.

4 Ibid.; Dilanian and Connor.

5 Abdelaziz, Daymon, Mohammed, and Laine.

6 Ibid.

7 Nick Walsh and Salma Abdelaziz, “Beaten, tortured, sexually abused: An American ISIS widow looks for a way home,” CNN, April 20, 2018; Sarah Childress and Joshua Baker, “An American mom who lived under IS rule speaks out,” PBS Frontline, April 11, 2020.

8 Abdelaziz, Daymon, Mohammed, and Laine; Walsh and Abdelaziz.

9 Childress and Baker. See also “Superseding Indictment,” *USA v. Samantha Elhassani*, United States District Court, Northern District of Indiana, Case: 2:18-cr-00033, 2018.

10 “Press Statement Regarding Samantha Elhassani,” U.S. Department of Justice, July 24, 2018.

11 Please note that while in Islamic State-controlled territory, Samantha Elhassani and her husband purchased two Yazidi girls as slaves, in addition to the boy discussed in the introduction. Walsh and Abdelaziz.

12 For more information about the case of Samantha Elhassani and her family, see Jessica Roy, “Two Sisters and the Terrorist Who Came Between Them,” *ELLE*, August 27, 2019.

13 To read court filings pertaining to the case for more details, see “Elhassani, Samantha” under “The Cases” tab on the George Washington University’s Program on Extremism site at <https://extremism.gwu.edu/cases>. See also Roy.

14 Ibid.



attack.<sup>15</sup> Several accounts detailing the children's livelihood in Syria suggest that they were visibly malnourished and weak; her younger son, a toddler, reportedly contracted hepatitis during the family's time in the detention camp.<sup>16</sup> After returning to the United States, media reports and courtroom transcripts indicated that the oldest boy eventually went to live with his own biological father, and the younger children, who remained under the care of Child Services for a time, were likely placed with Elhassani's parents.<sup>17</sup> Although this overview does not sufficiently summarize all of the children's experiences, increased awareness of their circumstances can help inform policymakers' and practitioners' approaches to rehabilitating and reintegrating returning Islamic State-affiliated minors like the Elhassani children.

Today, despite garnering less media attention than before, many foreign and local Islamic State-affiliated minors, whether isolated or accompanied, remain unsafe and unsettled in detention camps, prisons, and other facilities. The issue of what to do with the remaining contingent of Islamic State supporters still warrants attention.<sup>18</sup> As the humanitarian, refugee, and detention crisis persists in Iraq and Syria, there is a narrowing window of opportunity for countries to take accountability for their citizens and provide an alternative course of action by repatriating their nationals, whether adults or minors. As conditions continue deteriorating, time only seems to add more complicating factors that can interfere with the repatriation of minors, including the Turkish incursion into Syria and now the spread of the novel coronavirus.<sup>19</sup> Enduring health, safety, and security problems in facilities holding alleged Islamic State affiliates make it challenging to trace the well-being and whereabouts of minors, which might also disrupt repatriation efforts.<sup>20</sup>

Although adults returning from Islamic State-controlled territory may pose the most prominent and immediate security risks, states that fail to repatriate and reintegrate minors will face repercussions in the short-, medium-, and long-term. Though officials and the public are more likely to regard these children as victims of circumstance rather than perpetrators, particularly compared to their adult counterparts, minors' exposure to indoctrination efforts and traumatic events are cause for concern.<sup>21</sup> Some countries have been "proponents for repatriating" their nationals from detention facilities in northeastern Syria, and "tend to put forward a mix of humanitarian, security and practical arguments" to support this approach.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, however, despite acknowledging these tradeoffs as rationales for repatriation, such views do not reliably translate into official policy.<sup>23</sup>

While many policymakers, practitioners, and researchers continue to emphasize the importance of bringing Islamic State-affiliated minors home, the explicit actions governments take to address this demographic of returnees are not always clear or standardized.<sup>24</sup> To a degree, a scarcity of knowledge

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15 Roy.

16 Ibid.

17 For more information about the case of Samantha Elhassani and her family, see Roy. See also "Transcript of Detention Hearing," *USA v. Samantha Elhassani*, United States District Court, Northern District of Indiana, Case: 2:18-cr-00033, 2018.

18 Liesbeth van der Heide and Jip Geenen, "Children of the Caliphate: Young IS Returnees and the Reintegration Challenges," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, August 2017, p. 3.

19 Elizabeth Tsurkov and Dareen Khalifa, "An Unnerving Fate for the Families of Syria's Northeast," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 31, 2020; "Virus Fears Spread at Camps for ISIS Families in Syria's North East," International Crisis Group, April 7, 2020.

20 Nisan Ahmado and Mutlu Civiroglu, "IS Foreign Women Smuggled Out of Northeastern Syria Camp," Voice of America, October 1, 2019.

21 Francesca Capone, "'Worse' than Child Soldiers? A Critical Analysis of Foreign Children in the Ranks of ISIL," *International Criminal Law Review* 17:1 (2017): pp. 161-185.

22 "Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS," International Crisis Group, November 2019, p. 10.

23 Ibid.

24 Roxana Barbulescu and Jean Gruge, "Unaccompanied minors, migration control and human rights at the EU's southern border: The role and limits of civil society activism," *Migration Studies* 4:2 (2016): pp. 253-272; "British Children: Syria," House of Commons Hansard, UK Parliament, Volume 666, Column 813, October 2019.

and data about minors who lived in Islamic State-controlled territory hinders the process of developing rehabilitation- and reintegration-oriented responses to the problem. Even still, some excellent work by scholars and practitioners helps to paint a picture of children's experiences.<sup>25</sup> Particularly at its height, the Islamic State invested in its young members, catering to their needs and potential.<sup>26</sup> At least anecdotally, the attention the Islamic State dedicated to minors—in educational instruction, tactical training, and beyond—offers some indication of the commitment it might take to rehabilitate and reintegrate them. Nonetheless, although the body of research is growing, few studies discuss the challenges these children face in the aftermath of the caliphate and how governments should respond when minors come home.

This report draws from a range of primary and secondary sources to add to a small but growing body of literature about the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign minors. It references publications by policymakers, practitioners, and researchers from academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and government agencies. It occasionally points to specific cases and illustrative examples using sources like Islamic State propaganda, news products, and official documents.

The first half of the report clarifies some important terminology, then traces the contours of children's lives during and after their time in the Islamic State. After piecing together the circumstances Islamic State-affiliated foreign minors might face, the report discusses how such experiences could negatively affect an individual in ways that create barriers to rehabilitation and reintegration. Living in unsafe and unsettling conditions for prolonged periods after the Islamic State, for instance, which is a reality for many foreign Islamic State-affiliated minors, may exacerbate issues created by the Islamic State, inviting more challenges to rehabilitation and reintegration. The report suggests that overcoming these mounting obstacles requires policymakers and practitioners to focus on four issue areas related to a minor's 1) physical and psychological well-being; 2) experience with indoctrination; 3) sense of identity; and 4) vulnerability to stigmatization and discrimination. The second half of the report delves into each of the four issue areas and discusses considerations emerging from research about children in other adverse circumstances, including those affected by conflict, displacement, deprivation, or abuse.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, by drawing upon research from similar contexts, this report aims to highlight some ideas and resources for policymakers and practitioners tasked with developing short-, medium-, and long-term responses to returning Islamic State-affiliated minors.

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25 Mia Bloom with John Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); John Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom, and Charlie Winter, "From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into Islamic State," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40:7 (2016); Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018; Gina Vale, "Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, July 2018; Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, "The Children of Islamic State," Quilliam Foundation, March 2016.

26 For greater detail on the lives and experiences of minors in Islamic State-controlled territory, see the following works: Bloom with Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*; Vale, "Cubs in the Lions' Den"; Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 12:6 (2019); Daniel Milton and Don Rassler, *Minor Misery: What an Islamic State Registry Says About the Challenges of Minors in the Conflict Zone* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2019).

27 To reiterate, the first three address the minor's physical and psychological well-being, indoctrination, and identity while the fourth focuses on the compromising effects of stigmatization and discrimination.

## Clarifying Terminology, Context, and Scope

Before reviewing trends concerning foreign Islamic State-affiliated minors and identifying barriers and considerations for rehabilitation and reintegration, some terminology and context require further clarification. To begin, although individuals grow and mature at different rates, governments conventionally rely on legal definitions to differentiate between children and adults. Laws concerning the age a person becomes an adult can differ from country to country, and similarly, what constitutes a minor is not always consistent. For clarity, this report defers to the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years."<sup>28</sup> In this report, the term "minor" is also a reference to people under the age of 18.

Despite defaulting to some homogenous vocabulary in reference to minors affiliated with the Islamic State, it is important to highlight the reality that children living in Islamic State-controlled territory likely experienced different events. For starters, the age a child becomes an adult within the Islamic State does not appear to be entirely discrete, and a range of evidence suggests that boys and girls took on an array of responsibilities at different ages.<sup>29</sup> Beyond age bracket and maturity, factors like a child's gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, social position, and legal status can also impact their experiences.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, it is necessary to highlight one final caveat before delving further into this discussion: estimates on the number of foreign minors affiliated with the Islamic State are rough. It is exceptionally difficult to gauge the number of people associated with the Islamic State, let alone trace subsets of the group, such as foreign nationals who traveled to join the Islamic State.<sup>31</sup> Narrowing focus to foreign children affiliated with the Islamic State is even more challenging, especially since several factors complicate efforts to study this demographic.<sup>32</sup> As changing conditions on the ground make it hard to track figures concerning the birth and survival of minors, information originating from the group itself can be unreliable, unverifiable, and incomplete.<sup>33</sup> To complicate matters more, the metrics government officials share with the public, if recorded at all, are not necessarily standardized, disaggregated by organizational affiliation, comprehensive, or inclusive of variables like gender and age.<sup>34</sup> Despite the barriers to assembling data on children with experience living under the Islamic State's rule, various governmental and non-governmental sources strive to document this information.<sup>35</sup>

### Contours of a Minor's Life in the Caliphate

In this section, a brief review of the Islamic State's disposition toward minors helps contextualize the

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28 In full, Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." See "Convention on the Rights of the Child," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), 1989.

29 Milton and Rassler.

30 Ibid.

31 Capone; Dakota Foster and Daniel Milton, "Children at War: Foreign Children Recruits of the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 11:6 (2018).

32 As an added note, given that states often afford different rights and protections to individuals under legally determined majority ages, some governments also protect information concerning minors more than adults by taking steps such as sealing records, withholding the full legal names of minors, or anonymizing individuals so that data concerning minors is often less accessible and publicly available. Van der Heide and Geenen, p. 2; Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State," p. 50; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter, pp. 645-664.

33 Milton and Rassler.

34 For a more extensive discussion on the limitations of data collected by countries, see Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State."

35 Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate." To review additional details on Cook and Vale's data collection and research methodology, see also Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State," pp. 3-4. Additionally, see Capone.

organization's efforts to cultivate its young members. Although the Islamic State's approach to minors has some distinct characteristics, the presence of children in armed groups and conflict is not novel.<sup>36</sup> A range of research examines this dark legacy under the banner of child soldiers, combatants, and militants.<sup>37</sup> To a degree, this literature helps explain some of the conditions in which an organization might benefit from or prefer a child's participation in lieu of their adult counterparts.<sup>38</sup> Though minors might offer groups advantages in some scenarios, the recruitment of children can also echo hopelessness. When circumstances are dire and a group struggles to recruit the necessary manpower, they may defer to the recruitment or conscription of minors for various roles and operations.<sup>39</sup> Since militant groups' use of juveniles in conflict can be a sign of desperation, some are reluctant to advertise children's participation in the conflict.<sup>40</sup> The Islamic State, however, appears to have fewer reservations about showcasing its use of minors in its strategic communications.<sup>41</sup> In fact, some research indicates that the Islamic State featured this demographic in propaganda more prominently at its height of territorial and administrative control, though multiple factors might contribute to this trend.<sup>42</sup>

On the contrary, minors associated with the Islamic State share commonalities with children affiliated with other groups, but the Islamic State's views on this demographic extend beyond those of an organization merely focused on growing its numbers.<sup>43</sup> Children are an integral part of the Islamic State's short-, medium-, and long-term plans, and so the Islamic State invests in them to help secure its future.<sup>44</sup> While many groups regard child soldiers as an expendable resource, the Islamic State envisions minors as the next wave of leaders and fighters.<sup>45</sup> A 2014 speech by the late Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani illustrates this perspective. Adnani reportedly threatened, "We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women ... If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it ..."<sup>46</sup> One scholar synthesizes this approach explaining that the Islamic State essentially regards minors, namely boys, as a tactical investment rather than a last-ditch resource.<sup>47</sup>

Likely as a result of this logic, the Islamic State's approach to minors manifests significant amounts of institutionalization designed to cultivate, not squander, its minor population.<sup>48</sup> This is partly illustrated by the range of source materials produced by the Islamic State that pertain to minors, including propaganda, educational materials, training camp records, and even personnel files with demographic

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36 Mark Drumbl, *Reimagining Child Soldier in International Law and Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 28; Benotman and Malik, p. 14; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter.

37 Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter.

38 Peter Singer, *Children at War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Bloom with Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*; Kara Anderson, "Cubs of the Caliphate: the Systematic Recruitment Training, and Use of Children in the Islamic State," International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2016.

39 Capone.

40 Anderson.

41 Amy-Louise Watkin and Seán Looney, "The Lions of Tomorrow: A News Value Analysis of Child Images in Jihadi Magazines," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42:1-2 (2019); Wojciech Kaczkowski, "Qualitative content analysis of images of children in Islamic State's Dabiq and Rumiyah magazines," *Contemporary Voices: St. Andrews Journal of International Relations* 1:2 (2019).

42 Mia Bloom, John Horgan, and Charlie Winter, "Depictions of Children and Youth in the Islamic State's Martyrdom Propaganda, 2015-2016," *CTC Sentinel* 9:2 (2016). For more discussion, see also Vale, "Cubs in the Lions' Den," p. 9.

43 Capone; Watkin and Looney.

44 James Morris and Tristan Dunning, "Rearing Cubs of the Caliphate: An Examination of Child Soldier Recruitment by Da'esh," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018), p. 2; Watkin and Looney; Anderson.

45 Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter; Morris and Dunning, p. 11; Capone; Anderson.

46 Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *Atlantic*, March 2015.

47 Capone.

48 Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter.

data.<sup>49</sup> Although the Islamic State's infrastructure concerning children receives more attention in the following sections, it is prudent to recognize the intentionality behind the group's efforts to support minors' development.<sup>50</sup> By leveraging various recruitment, training, and indoctrination methods, the Islamic State fostered a strong generation of devotees, possibly minimizing the likelihood that juveniles would embrace other ideologies and lifestyles.<sup>51</sup>

### *Recruitment and Mobilization*

Deconstructing the ways minors join the Islamic State can give policymakers, researchers, and practitioners a clearer picture of the problem and reveal some of the mechanisms involved.<sup>52</sup> While the pathways of foreign minors affiliated with the Islamic State vary, a rough categorization can be made of teenagers traveling independently, with peers or with family,<sup>53</sup> children taken to the region by adults,<sup>54</sup> and infants born in Islamic State-controlled territory.<sup>55</sup> In some cases, it is hard to discern whether a child's connection to the organization was voluntary, coerced, or something in between. Overall, however, the Islamic State's ability to mobilize foreign minors, particularly willing participants, is especially notable.<sup>56</sup>

The Islamic State excelled at recruiting minors, but it is crucial to remember that this demographic is relatively vulnerable and susceptible to the Islamic State's tactics.<sup>57</sup> In short, the Islamic State used "a complex and multi-layered process" to recruit, enlist, train, and deploy children in its ranks.<sup>58</sup> Though trends arise, the methods used to mobilize minors can vary from case to case. The tactics used to recruit locals and foreigners may differ, and factors like the age of a subject and the status of their family also influence the organization's approach to an individual.<sup>59</sup> Even among foreign minors, the tactics used to recruit a 16-year-old abroad can drastically differ from the methods the Islamic State might use to persuade a six-year-old brought to Islamic State-controlled territory by a parent. Depending on the situation, recruiters may leverage things like material goods, personal connections, social rewards, identity appeals, and a variety of other psychological methods to compel the participation of minors.<sup>60</sup>

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49 For examples and analysis of such materials, see Milton and Rassler; Watkin and Looney; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents (cont.) - Specimen 18C: Another personnel list for a camp in Homs province," [aymennjawad.org](http://aymennjawad.org), January 11, 2016.

50 Milton and Rassler.

51 Cole Pinheiro, "The Role of Child Soldiers in a Multigenerational Movement," *CTC Sentinel* 8:2 (2015): p. 12.

52 Please note that another useful resource that uses this approach to inform policy recommendations is the following report: Jessica Trisko Darden, "Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth," American Enterprise Institute, May 2019.

53 Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State," pp. 31-32; For the example of the three teenagers who traveled to Islamic State-controlled territory from East London, see Frances Perraudin, "Shamima Begum tells of fate since joining ISIS during half-term," *Guardian*, February 14, 2019.

54 "The Children of ISIS, The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory," National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) and the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), April 26, 2017. For more context, see Carlotta Gall, "'Her Eyes Were Full of Fear,' Turkey Repatriates Children of ISIS Followers," *New York Times*, July 27, 2019.

55 Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State;" Milton and Rassler.

56 Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter; Anderson; Vale, "Cubs in the Lions' Den;" Asaad Almoammad, "ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, and Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), February 2018.

57 Alice Oppetit, Nicolas Campelo, Laura Bouzar, Hugues Pellerin, Serge Hafez, Guillaume Bronsard, Dounia Bouzar, and David Cohen, "Do Radicalized Minors Have Different Social and Psychological Profiles From Radicalized Adults?" *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10:644 (2019).

58 Almoammad.

59 For more on this topic, see "The Children in Daesh: 'Future Flag Bearers' of the 'Caliphate,'" Carter Center, January 2017.

60 "'Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die': Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria," Human Rights Watch, June 24, 2014; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter, p. 657. For more on this topic, see "The Children in Daesh: 'Future Flag Bearers' of the 'Caliphate'" and also Anderson.

Online, the Islamic State advanced countless messages to appeal to foreign minors, particularly teens, and encouraged them to migrate to Islamic State-controlled territory and contribute to its goals.<sup>61</sup> In addition to disseminating propaganda videos tailored to different audiences across various social media platforms, Islamic State members also leveraged one-on-one communications to connect with and engage foreign minors.<sup>62</sup> Motivated by the perceived benefits and opportunities associated with joining the Islamic State, the group attracted foreign sympathizers of different ages, genders, nationalities, and backgrounds.<sup>63</sup>

### *Socialization*

Transitioning to a discussion about the socialization of minors, it is useful to highlight the bureaucratic apparatus the Islamic State built to cater to its members and their dependents.<sup>64</sup> The group's emphasis on families and children is evident at multiple levels, ranging from the Islamic State's organizational structure and publication of educational materials for adults and children to compensation schematics for its members.<sup>65</sup> Accounts suggest, for example, that the Islamic State offered a higher standard of living to families with children by increasing their payments and access to education and healthcare services.<sup>66</sup> Such coordinated efforts demonstrate how vital serving children, families, and communities were to the organization's strategy and goals, at least for a time.

Regarding the socialization of minors, instilling a specific worldview and normalizing violence are believed to be essential aspects of the Islamic State's efforts to prepare future generations of members.<sup>67</sup> Scholarship and research products dedicated to this topic offer a more comprehensive and insightful conceptualization of how socialization occurs in this environment.<sup>68</sup> For example, one framework identifies a six-stage process that engages minors through "seduction, schooling, selection, subjugation, specialization, and stationing."<sup>69</sup> For the Islamic State, this involves a multi-prong approach targeting minors in both private and public spheres. Experts explain that "individual pathways through this process" are ultimately "contingent on circumstance" and affected by factors like the characteristics associated with the child and the environment within which they mature.<sup>70</sup> To some degree, the Islamic State tailored its approach to different subsets of the population while simultaneously creating norms and standards among those living in Islamic State-controlled territory. Unpacking critical trends concerning minors helps show what foreign minors might learn and see during their time in the group, but it also raises concerns about the potential effects of such experiences.

At home, family members affiliated with the Islamic State began influencing children at a young age.<sup>71</sup>

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61 "The Children in Daesh: 'Future Flag Bearers' of the 'Caliphate,'" Capone.

62 Janet Reitman, "The Children of ISIS," *Rolling Stone*, March 25, 2015; "The Children in Daesh: 'Future Flag Bearers' of the 'Caliphate.'"

63 Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter.

64 Milton and Rassler; Vale, "Cubs in the Lions' Den."

65 Jacob Olidort, "Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature, and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 2016; Milton and Rassler; Vale, "Cubs in the Lions' Den;" Almohammad.

66 Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter. Additionally, reports by human rights groups and researchers note that the Islamic State managed recruitment centers, kiosks, and faith-based gatherings to target minors living close to Islamic State territory. See "IS Organization Continues in Attracting Children, and Recruit More Than 400 Children from 'Ashbal al- Khilafah,'" Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 24, 2015; Almohammad.

67 Morris and Dunning; Jessica Stern and JM Berger, "'Raising tomorrow's mujahideen': the horrific world of ISIS's child soldiers," *Guardian*, March 10, 2015; Anderson.

68 For reference, see Bloom with Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter.

69 Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter; Vale, "Cubs in the Lions' Den;" Almohammad.

70 Bloom with Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*.

71 Majid Bozorgmehri, "Recruitment of Foreign Members by Islamic State (Daesh): Tools and Methods," *Journal of Politics and Law* 11:4 (2018): p. 59.

This is unsurprising, given that raising devoted sons and daughters was a critical role for women in the self-declared caliphate, among other contributions.<sup>72</sup> Although some aspects of indoctrination may have occurred naturally, as family members articulated their worldviews in front of minors, accounts also suggest that parents received explicit instructions from the organization on how to raise jihadi children.<sup>73</sup> For instance, a guide called “Sister’s Role in Jihad” tells mothers how to direct their child’s anger toward the enemy, enhance their son’s preparedness for battle, and expose their child to various military videos, online sources, and books.<sup>74</sup> While the day-to-day experiences of minors vary, at least in part due to some sex-segregation practices, many were obliged to study the Qur’an and the Hadith and receive Arabic language lessons.<sup>75</sup>

Delving further into the socialization process, it is crucial to discuss the prospective gender dimensions of minors’ experiences in the Islamic State.<sup>76</sup> The Islamic State prescribes the role of women, and similar practices extend to children, too.<sup>77</sup> Strict dress and behavioral codes for women and girls, for instance, were one mechanism the group used to uphold female members as symbols of “purity, modesty and chastity.”<sup>78</sup> Additionally, numerous accounts indicate that the Islamic State’s gender-based segregation practices can manifest in educational and training experiences for minors.<sup>79</sup> Though some exceptions arise, girls were conventionally limited to more domestic educational opportunities after a certain age.<sup>80</sup> Boys, meanwhile, appeared to have greater access to tactical, physical, and religious education, but expectations of their responsibilities are commensurate.<sup>81</sup> Though this is not the full extent of how gender influenced a child’s life in the Islamic State, a topic that receives more attention later on in this report, it is a noteworthy factor.

Despite some efforts to require children to enroll in school, with different standard levels of education for boys and girls, “it is unlikely that all children in [Islamic State]-held territory” actually attended school for sustained periods, especially as security concerns and pressure on the Islamic State mounted.<sup>82</sup> For those who attended, the Islamic State’s educational system encouraged children to act according to the group’s ideology and values.<sup>83</sup> As part of this objective, the curriculum aimed to normalize and justify violence and foster the sentiments of superiority, heroism, and loyalty to the group.<sup>84</sup> The Islamic State also pushed families to send their sons to training camps for further education, depending on the child’s age.<sup>85</sup> This step gave the Islamic State even more control over boys by increasing

72 Morris and Dunning, p. 12.

73 For more, see Gina Vale, “Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, October 2019; Capone, p. 179; Benotman and Malik, pp. 35-36.

74 For more on this text, see Adam Withnall, “ISIS booklet issues guidelines to mothers on how to raise ‘jihadi babies,’” *Independent*, January 1, 2015.

75 Capone; “The Children of ISIS, The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory,” p. 7.

76 For more on this topic, and how to account for dimensions of gender in policy responses, see “Gender Dimensions of the Response to Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters,” United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UN CTED) - Research Perspectives, February 2019.

77 Gina Vale, “Piety Is in the Eye of the Bureaucrat: The Islamic State’s Strategy of Civilian Control,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:1 (2020); Nelly Lahoud, “Empowerment or Subjugation: An analysis of ISIL’s gendered messaging,” UN Women, June 2018.

78 Benotman and Malik, p. 37; Watkin and Looney.

79 A report by AIVD, for instance, explains that “boys and girls attended mixed school classes until the age of six. From that age onwards, they are taught separately in different rooms.” For more information, see “The Children of ISIS, The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory,” Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State,” p. 33; Benotman and Malik, p. 37.

80 “The Children of ISIS, The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory;” Vale, “Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps.”

81 Vale, “Cubs in the Lions’ Den,” pp. 13, 23-24; Watkin and Looney.

82 “The Children of ISIS, The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory;” Almohammad.

83 Morris and Dunning, p. 9.

84 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 9.

85 “The Children of ISIS, The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory;” Anderson; Almohammad.

their socialization and indoctrination while isolating them from potentially “countervailing influences and information.”<sup>86</sup> Though the nature and duration of training regimens for minors varied, examples of instruction include lessons in driving, hand-to-hand combat, the production of suicide vests, and marksmanship, among other topics.<sup>87</sup> According to some accounts, the length of the training differed, spanning from three weeks to five months.<sup>88</sup> After training, minors matriculated to their roles in the organization, both on and off the battlefield.<sup>89</sup>

### *Positioning Minors Within the Organization*

Children, namely boys, often served in a range of positions that do not necessarily require robust military training, such as messengers, cleaners, cooks, photographers, and weapon carriers.<sup>90</sup> The Islamic State also used minors for other non-violent activities. For instance, some accounts suggest that boys with the potential to influence their peers may have assumed responsibilities as preachers and spokespeople.<sup>91</sup> Some minors, particularly teenagers, were encouraged to proselytize the Islamic State’s worldview, “motivating recruitment and allegiance of other minors through peer pressure or the formation of friendship groups.”<sup>92</sup> Scholars believe that recruiters in this demographic can be especially influential because minors might trust their peers more than adult recruiters.<sup>93</sup>

Some children assumed more dangerous roles within the organization, such as border guards and spies.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, adopting tactics employed by other terrorist groups, evidence suggests that the Islamic State also used minors in capacities ranging from suicide bombers to human shields.<sup>95</sup> In these circumstances, scholars indicate that minors were either forced to participate or compelled to serve by the promises concerning the rewards of martyrdom.<sup>96</sup> While situations vary, a child’s family or guardian might also have encouraged a minor to conduct a suicide operation in exchange for material compensation and social capital.<sup>97</sup>

One function that appears less common among other child soldier populations but represents a trend among minors in Islamic State propaganda is serving as the abuser and executioner of prisoners.<sup>98</sup> Sadly, accounts reveal boys as young as four years old participating in executions.<sup>99</sup> Although propaganda videos highlight some of these events, likely intending to shock the audience, it is hard to know the scope of violent operations involving children as perpetrators. Generally, as the Dutch report by the AIVD noted, boys aged nine and older are more likely to have experience with training for combat or

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86 Vale, “Cubs in the Lions’ Den,” p. 17.

87 Capone; Almohammad.

88 Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Vale, “Cubs in the Lions’ Den,” pp. 19-21.

92 Ibid.

93 Bloom with Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*.

94 Pinheiro; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter.

95 “‘Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die’: Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria;” Pinheiro; Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State,” p. 33; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter.

96 Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter.

97 Anderson.

98 Colleen McCue, Joseph T. Massengill, Dorothy Milbrandt, John Gaughan, and Meghan Cumpston, “The Islamic State Long Game: A Tripartite Analysis of Youth Radicalization and Indoctrination,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:8 (2017); Almohammad.

99 Morris and Dunning, p. 11; Benotman and Malik, pp. 37-40; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter; Gordon Rayner and Gregory Walton, “‘Jihadi Junior’ confirmed to be Isa Dare,” *Telegraph*, January 4, 2016.



carrying out acts of physical violence.<sup>100</sup> The Islamic State's efforts to indoctrinate children and desensitize them to violence put some children in a precarious place where they are simultaneously victims and perpetrators of the Islamic State's campaign. The agency of minors who engage in activities on behalf of the group is an important consideration. Still, in some cases, a child's agency may be difficult to disentangle from the Islamic State's efforts to cultivate this demographic.

Before transitioning into a discussion about the contours of children's lives after the caliphate, it is essential to touch on a few points about how life under Islamic State rule might affect children. In both the private and public domains, minors in Islamic State-controlled territory are likely to have experiences with violence and deprivation.<sup>101</sup> In addition to their proximity and exposure to violence, children might also suffer from the effects of inconsistent access to essential goods and services like food and medical care.<sup>102</sup> Besides psychological consequences, sustained exposure to unsafe and unhealthy living conditions, and links to the group, have broader implications for a child's physical, social, and economic health.<sup>103</sup>

The matter of gender-based and sexual violence against Islamic State-affiliated minors is another topic that demands attention. The Islamic State is notorious for its employment of tactics such as "rape, forced marriages, human trafficking for sexual purposes, body inspections, and forced birth control," particularly against Yazidi women and girls.<sup>104</sup> Propaganda produced by the Islamic State's all-women al-Khanssaa brigade indicated that nine-year-old girls were suitable for marriage and suggested that "most pure girls will be married by sixteen or seventeen, while they are still young and active."<sup>105</sup> Though some of the Islamic State's offenses in this domain appear to be relatively systematic, like human trafficking,<sup>106</sup> abuse experiences by children affiliated with the Islamic State could also be less systematized and publicized, like domestic violence.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, girls and women were not the only demographics experiencing gender-based and sexual violence. Boys and men "have also been targeted for sexual violence," though "less is known about their experience or their access to [support] services."<sup>108</sup> Though it is hard to gauge the full scope of these abuses, particularly against female and male minors affiliated with the Islamic State, multiple reports highlight the pervasiveness of sexual violence during and after the Islamic State's territorial rule.<sup>109</sup>

Adding to the fragility of these circumstances, the journey away from the Islamic State is also perilous. Over a year ago, in March 2019, the Islamic State lost control over its last remaining holdout, the

100 "The Children of ISIS, The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory."

101 Bloom with Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*, pp. 145-146; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter; "The Children of ISIS, The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory;" Anderson.

102 James Longman, "The last ISIS families -- and the American children still trapped: Reporter's Notebook," ABC News, March 13, 2019; Richard Hall, "In Syria, thousands flee last ISIS territory with tales of horror: 'We were starving there,'" *Independent*, January 29, 2019.

103 Benotman and Malik, pp. 50-51.

104 "The prosecution at national level of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," EUROJUST - Genocide Network Secretariat, July 2017, p. 6; "They came to destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis," United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Council (A/HRC/32/CRP.2), June 15, 2016.

105 Charlie Winter, "Women of the Islamic State: A manifesto on women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade," Quilliam Foundation, February 2015, p. 24.

106 Nikita Malik, "Trafficking Terror: How Modern Slavery and Sexual Violence Fund Terrorism," Henry Jackson Society, 2017.

107 While speculative, gender-based and sexual violence against minors could be targeted or opportunistic, and perpetrators might include marital partners, relatives, community members, or strangers. Children may also experience or witness multiple types of abuse. The case of the Elhassani family discussed in the introduction of this report provides an illustration of this phenomenon. See also "Transcript of Detention Hearing," *USA v. Samantha Elhassani*.

108 Sarah Chynoweth, "Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys in the Syria Crisis," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, October 2017, p. 11. See also Khalifa al-Khuder, "Sexual Violence is a Crime No One is Addressing in Syria," Atlantic Council blog, March 20, 2018.

109 "The prosecution at national level of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," EUROJUST - Genocide Network Secretariat; "They came to destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis," Human Rights Council; Nikita Malik, "Trafficking Terror: How Modern Slavery and Sexual Violence Fund Terrorism."

Syrian village of Baghouz.<sup>110</sup> Many commentators viewed this battle as a milestone achievement in the fight against the Islamic State, but few indicated that this event signified the end of the problems posed by the Islamic State and its members. On the contrary, as the Islamic State lost Baghouz, thousands of its remaining affiliates, including many minors, arrived in makeshift detention facilities, adding strain to an already dire situation.<sup>111</sup> As a result of this reality, it is crucial to trace the lives of children after the Islamic State, too.

### Contours of a Minor's Life After the Caliphate

With the fall of the territorial caliphate, and the international community struggling to cope with the effects of the conflict, the futures of minors with links to the Islamic State are bleak. Arguably, in the eyes of entities tasked with developing rehabilitation and reintegration programs, the contours of minors' lives after the Islamic State are just as important as their experiences with the group. This is especially true given the notion that certain living conditions and experiences may exacerbate the adverse effects of life in the Islamic State, even after a minor leaves territory controlled by the group.

In short, the whereabouts and status of these children fall into three overlapping categories: they may be deceased or missing, living in detention or transitional facilities, or back home. Much like the difficulties tracing the number of minors who traveled to, joined, or were born into the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, it is hard to collect reliable data delineating the status of local and foreign minors associated with the group. Many children are stateless or lack recognized forms of documentation to prove their identity and age.<sup>112</sup> This makes it difficult to determine the nationality (or nationalities) of minors, particularly those who are unaccompanied or orphaned.<sup>113</sup> The dynamism of current events affecting the region adds to the sense of confusion and uncertainty regarding the broader detention crisis. The reluctance of states in responding to these issues and devising short-, medium-, and long-term solutions worsens the problem.<sup>114</sup>

### Deceased or Missing Children

Though deeply troubling, one segment of the Islamic State's population of minors that receives little recognition is that of children who are dead, missing, and unidentified. It is hard to garner information about children who died in Islamic State-controlled territory or confirm the whereabouts and livelihood of countless others.<sup>115</sup> Despite the overwhelming lack of information about the morbidity and mortality of children affiliated with the Islamic State, numerous reports reference circumstances where minors sustain illnesses and injuries, some of which are ultimately terminal.<sup>116</sup> Often, leaving Islamic State-controlled territory provided children affiliated with the Islamic State no promise of safety and security. On the contrary, the journey away from the Islamic State was and is dangerous. According to a report by the United Nations' Human Rights Council, for example, "at least 390 pre-

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110 Ben Hubbard, "Explosion in Syria Kills Driver for NBC News Team," *New York Times*, March 24, 2019; Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Caliphate Crumbles as Last Village in Syria Falls," *New York Times*, March 23, 2019.

111 Devorah Margolin, Joana Cook, and Charlie Winter, "In Syria, the Women and Children of ISIS Have Been Forgotten," *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2019; Ben Hubbard, "'What Is Going to Happen to Us?' Inside ISIS Prison, Children Ask Their Fate," *New York Times*, October 23, 2019; "UN report on Syria conflict highlights inhumane detention of women and children," UN News, September 11, 2019.

112 Bloom with Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*, p. 165; Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate."

113 "Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS."

114 Margolin, Cook, and Winter.

115 Sara Elizabeth Williams and Josie Ensor, "British orphans missing in northern Syria after mass escape of Islamic State families," *Telegraph*, October 13, 2019; Ben Hubbard, "2 American Children May Be Trapped in the Last ISIS Village," *New York Times*, March 4, 2019; Azadeh Moaveni, "'I'm Going to Be Honest, This Baby Is Going to Die,'" *New York Times*, September 5, 2019.

116 "The Children of ISIS, The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory."

ventable deaths were recorded, mostly due to pneumonia, dehydration or malnutrition, primarily affecting boys and girls as young as 5 years old, either en route to al-Hol, a displacement camp managed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), or shortly after arrival.<sup>117</sup> A report by Save the Children describes similar circumstances, noting that between January and February 2019, at least 50 children died from medical conditions including hypothermia and malnutrition on their way to facilities housing Islamic State families.<sup>118</sup>

### *Minors Living in Detention or Transitional Facilities*

After the Islamic State, minors may face different procedures based on factors like their location, nationality, perceived age, gender, and whether or not they are accompanied. Across the board, concerns arise from the treatment of minors and adults with suspected links to the Islamic State, including arbitrary arrests, detention, and prosecution, as well as torture.<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, the various entities responding to individuals affiliated with the Islamic State have different authorities and capabilities determining their actions.<sup>120</sup> Beyond encountering different legal measures, children may also receive different services during their time in and after detention.<sup>121</sup> For better or worse, the treatment of minors during this transition period may affect whether they turn toward or away from violent extremism.

To date, thousands of foreign minors affiliated with the Islamic State reside in displacement camps and detention facilities in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and other countries.<sup>122</sup> Many juveniles affiliated with the Islamic State are stuck in the personal, political, and legal limbo plaguing many in the conflict. While some arrived at the camps alone, older individuals, including parents, siblings, friends, and even kidnappers, also accompanied children to these facilities. In terms of age, reports show that minors living in these circumstances range from infants and toddlers to foreign teens with their own children.<sup>123</sup> A serious problem affecting many minors, which receives attention throughout this report, is the lack of identity documents proving an individual's age. Ultimately, a lack of documentation "jeopardizes" a minor's "rights to a nationality, hinders family reunification processes and puts them at higher risk of exploitation and abuse."<sup>124</sup>

It is unfortunate but unsurprising that information concerning the makeup of populations living in detention camps is inadequate.<sup>125</sup> Even at the level of individual camps, it is hard to collect and maintain information about the population of detainees, including foreign Islamic State-affiliated

117 "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations Human Rights Council, September 2019.

118 "More than 2,500 Foreign Children are Living in Camps in North-East Syria," Save the Children, February 2019.

119 "'Everyone Must Confess': Abuses against Children Suspected of ISIS Affiliation in Iraq," Human Rights Watch, March 6, 2019.

120 The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces controlling many of the camps and detention facilities in northeastern Syria, for example, are not part of an internationally recognized government, and "they are generally neither willing nor able to prosecute" individuals affiliated with the Islamic State. Tanya Mehra and Christophe Paulussen, "The Repatriation of Foreign Fighters and Their Families: Options, Obligations, Morality, and Long-Term Thinking," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), March 6, 2019. See also Hwaida Saad and Rod Nordland, "Kurdish Fighters Discuss Releasing Almost 3,200 ISIS Prisoners," *New York Times*, December 20, 2018.

121 Jo Becker, "Some child soldiers get rehabilitation, others get prison," Atlantic Council, March 4, 2019; Eric Rosand, B. Heidi Ellis, and Stevan Weine, "Minding the gap: How to provide more comprehensive support to the children of ISIS," Brookings, January 28, 2020.

122 "Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS," Margolin, Cook, and Winter.

123 "As the international silence continues against the tragedy and humanitarian disaster in the 'death mini-state,' about 410 children have died since the beginning of 2019 in al-Hol camp," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 4, 2019.

124 "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic;" "More than 2,500 Foreign Children are Living in Camps in North-East Syria."

125 Moaveni.

minors.<sup>126</sup> One analyst articulates how such challenges manifest in al-Hol, noting that “hiding children and changing their names is easy.”<sup>127</sup> To make matters worse, “the camp prisoner lists are incomplete and do not align with governments’ lists of their citizens; there are people in the camp who are not on any list, and people on lists who do not appear in the camp at all.”<sup>128</sup> Precarious security conditions can make it difficult to keep track of Islamic State-affiliated adults and minors. Between accounts of runaways and the use of human smugglers, it is hard to guess how many foreign minors might slip away undetected.<sup>129</sup>

In camps holding Islamic State affiliates in northeastern Syria alone, foreign children subsist in dire circumstances. Though some facilities are reportedly better off than others, various accounts indicate that they are affected by issues like overcrowding, extreme weather, contaminated drinking water, the spread of disease, and inconsistent access to humanitarian assistance (including food and health-care).<sup>130</sup> Additionally, the threat of the novel coronavirus pandemic also looms large in these facilities because it is virtually impossible to implement preventative measures such as social distancing and robust hygiene.<sup>131</sup> The distribution, or lack thereof, of already-limited supplies and medical care reportedly “stokes anger and tension” among populations like the Islamic State-affiliated foreigners living in the annexed section of al-Hol.<sup>132</sup> For children, this situation is a double-edged sword because they are negatively affected by the lack of aid and the fallout from this issue. Events like the Turkish incursion into Syria, and more recently, factors like the novel coronavirus pandemic, can aggravate such problems within facilities by reducing the SDF’s security presence, disrupting the movement of essential supplies, and fueling discord.<sup>133</sup>

Within the camps, ideologically motivated attacks by committed Islamic State members are an issue. Recent reports detail how ongoing support for the Islamic State has led some adherents to make threats and take actions against others in the camps, particularly in al-Hol.<sup>134</sup> Of several brutal accounts, one example showed how violence perpetrated by Islamic State members may affect children: In July 2019, a pregnant Indonesian woman, and mother of three, was reportedly beaten, tortured, and killed by other women in the camp who maintained their allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>135</sup> Humanitarian workers and security forces have also been the targets of attacks, causing more “inter-camp friction” in these facilities.<sup>136</sup> Continued violence in the name of the Islamic State can affect foreign children in multiple ways, whether it threatens the safety of minors directly, instigates a stress response, or instills the normalcy of extreme violence against perceived adversaries. Given reports of foreign minors making threats toward, and throwing rocks at, security forces, aid workers, journalists,

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126 To see how policymakers, practitioners, and researchers might triangulate research to paint a more realistic portrait of a camp’s makeup, see Aaron Zelin, “Wilayat al-Hawl: ‘Remaining’ and Incubating the Next Islamic State Generation,” Washington Institute, October 2019, p. 3.

127 Moaveni. For a more thorough discussion of this dynamic, see Zelin.

128 Moaveni.

129 Glenn A. Fine, “Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019,” Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, February 4, 2020, p. 47; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Free the Female Prisoners’: A Campaign to Free Women Held in SDF Camps,” aymennjawad.org, October 15, 2019; Zelin.

130 “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic;” “Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS.”

131 “Virus Fears Spread at Camps for ISIS Families in Syria’s North East;” Shirin Jaafari, “ISIS families held in Syrian camps face uncertain futures. Now, the coronavirus also looms,” *World*, April 20, 2020.

132 “Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS,” p. 3.

133 Tsurkov and Khalifa; “Virus Fears Spread at Camps for ISIS Families in Syria’s North East.”

134 Zelin; Vale, “Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps.”

135 Zelin. For the original citation, see “Indonesia Probing Report of Pregnant Woman’s Death in Syrian Refugee Camp for IS Members,” Channel News Asia, August 1, 2019.

136 Elizabeth Tsurkov, “Uncertainty, violence, and the fear of fostering extremism in Syria’s al-Hol camp,” *New Humanitarian*, August 27, 2019.

and researchers, it is clear that the environment remains conducive to indoctrination and further radicalization.<sup>137</sup>

On top of ongoing safety and security issues, there is little accountability ensuring that security personnel within detention facilities behave appropriately toward those under their care. Numerous accounts suggest that the children of foreign families associated with the Islamic State, who live in the “annexed” part of al-Hol camp, experience disparate treatment and discrimination at the hand of authorities and others in the detention facility.<sup>138</sup> Although these dynamics are not entirely surprising, it is crucial to consider how they affect minors affiliated with the group by isolating them from others in the camp and limiting their access to aid, food, education, and other services.<sup>139</sup> In short, life in detention camps like al-Hol, and the persistent experience of fear and intimidation minors might encounter in such facilities, exacerbates the trauma of minors. These circumstances are untenable because the environment invites many risks ranging from human rights abuses and the spread of disease to the resurgence of extremist ideologies and further conflict.<sup>140</sup>

In addition to the camps, foreign and local minors affiliated with the Islamic State also turn up in other types of detention facilities and prisons in the region and elsewhere. Consistent with the trend of insufficient data, it is hard to confirm how many minors affiliated with the Islamic State are in prisons.<sup>141</sup> Like the camps, the environment in prisons can be dangerous for juveniles. Adding to the reports of minors’ exposure to abuse mentioned above,<sup>142</sup> children in prisons have limited access to medical care and experience hardships such as extreme temperatures, malnutrition, and scabies infestations.<sup>143</sup> There are also indications that children are vulnerable to sexual violence in detention facilities.<sup>144</sup> According to some accounts, minors have died during their time in Iraqi custody,<sup>145</sup> though similar losses likely occur in other jails, too. One journalist reporting on detention facilities in northeastern Syria, namely two prisons run by Kurdish forces for individuals who lived in Islamic State-controlled territory, describes dire circumstances for both minors and adults.<sup>146</sup> The journalist notes that “little about the minors’ conditions in the Kurdish-run prison appeared to meet international standards that, even for suspected criminals, prioritize children’s wellbeing, consider detention a last resort and require specialized physical and emotional care.”<sup>147</sup> Ultimately, life for children in displacement camps, prisons, and other detention facilities compounds their experiences with isolation, deprivation, and traumatization, potentially reinforcing minors’ identification with the Islamic State.<sup>148</sup>

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137 Tsurkov; Bethan McKernan, “Inside al-Hawl camp, the incubator for Islamic State’s resurgence,” *Guardian*, August 31, 2019.

138 Tsurkov; “Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects’ Families,” Human Rights Watch, July 2019; “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.”

139 “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic;” “More than 2,500 Foreign Children are Living in Camps in North-East Syria.”

140 Richard Hall, “Tunnels, knives and riots: This Syrian camp holding thousands of ISIS wives is at a breaking point,” *Independent*, December 9, 2019.

141 One factor complicating estimates is that reports about minors and foreigners in detention by governments, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations do not always parse out figures from the various types of facilities, such as camps or prisons.

142 “‘Everyone Must Confess’: Abuses against Children Suspected of ISIS Affiliation in Iraq.”

143 Raya Jalabi, “Forgotten Victims: The children of Islamic State,” Reuters, March 21, 2019.

144 Please note, sexual violence against children has also been reported in al-Hol. For more on these issues, see al-Khuder; “Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS.”

145 Jalabi.

146 Hubbard, “‘What Is Going to Happen to Us?’ Inside ISIS Prison, Children Ask Their Fate.”

147 Ibid.

148 Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State,” p. 53.

### *Minors Back Home*

Today, discourse about how to address the remaining contingent of foreigners affiliated with the Islamic State in the region continues.<sup>149</sup> Perspectives on the most desirable policy response to this demographic vary, but each approach has its merits and drawbacks.<sup>150</sup> Even before the Islamic State lost territorial control over its last remaining stronghold, some foreigners who traveled to the region to join the Islamic State returned to their country of origin.<sup>151</sup> In some cases, this transition happens because of government-facilitated repatriation efforts, where minors are likely to have subsequent interactions with law enforcement and care providers.<sup>152</sup> In other scenarios, child returnees may come back without coordination by the government, which could influence their interactions with government officials and services.<sup>153</sup> Distinguishing between these paths can be important because the experiences associated with such circumstances might affect a minor in different ways.<sup>154</sup>

Compared to the number of foreign minors with links to the Islamic State who remain in displacement camps and detention facilities, only a small percentage have been repatriated by their countries of origin.<sup>155</sup> Underlining this trend, an October 2019 report by Save the Children stated that “fewer than 350 children living in three camps in northeast Syria and born to parents from a nationality other than Syrian or Iraqi are known to have been repatriated to their home country since January 2019 out of more than 9,800.”<sup>156</sup> Only a handful of states have taken proactive measures to repatriate minors and foreign adults affiliated with the Islamic State. By 2019, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkey were believed to be the front-runners in bringing home minors.<sup>157</sup>

While most governments regard minors as the victims of their circumstances, as opposed to violent offenders, political leaders seem to face relatively little pressure to address children with links to the Islamic State. Various moral, security-minded, logistical, and legal considerations shape the debate about whether states should bring back Islamic State affiliates. Still, public opinion has a tremendous impact on policymaking, particularly in Western countries.<sup>158</sup> One article about European countries’ policies regarding the Islamic State notes that “bringing back the children of fighters is unpopular.”<sup>159</sup> Several countries adopt an ad hoc approach to repatriating adults and minors, deciding to bring in-

149 Brian Michael Jenkins, “Options for Dealing with Islamic State Foreign Fighters Currently Detained in Syria,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:5 (2019); Mehra and Paulussen; “Up for Debate: ISIS detainees,” Middle East Institute.

150 Mehra and Paulussen.

151 Rik Coolsaet and Thomas Renard, “Returnees: who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them? Assessing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands,” Egmont-Royal Institute for International Relations, 2018; Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenge Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate.”

152 For more specifics, see Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenge Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate.”

153 Ibid.

154 For more specifics, see Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenge Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate.”

155 According to a July 2019 update on a dataset maintained by Joana Cook and Gina Vale at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, “1,460-1,525 minors have now returned to their country of departure (or the country of their parents.” See Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenge Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate.”

156 “A Tiny Proportion of Foreign Children in Northeast Syria Camps Repatriated in 2019,” Save the Children, October 16, 2019.

157 Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenge Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate;” Jalabi; Coolsaet and Renard.

158 Coolsaet and Renard; Mehra and Paulussen; Anthony Dworkin, “Beyond Good and Evil: Why Europe Should Bring ISIS Foreign Fighters Home,” European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2019; Elian Peltier, “France Repatriates Several Orphan Children Who Were Stranded in Syria,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2019.

159 Michael Birnbaum, “Months after the fall of ISIS, Europe has done little to take back its fighters,” *Washington Post*, June 20, 2019. To reinforce this point and illustrate the unpopularity of returning Islamic State affiliates to their home countries, consider results for the following public opinion poll conducted in France by Odoxa in February 2019: <http://www.odoxa.fr/sondage/djihadistes-francais-approuvent-massivement-jugement-lirak-ne-veulent-voir-leurs-enfants-revenir/>

dividuals back on a case-by-case basis.<sup>160</sup> France, for example, appears to show a preference toward unaccompanied minors and orphans over children accompanied by parents.<sup>161</sup> Though anecdotal, the ad hoc approach adopted by many countries seems to add to the uncertainty and unrest, doing little to alleviate the displacement and detention crisis.<sup>162</sup> These themes are discussed further in the following section, as they create barriers to rehabilitation and reintegration by validating facets of the Islamic State's worldview.

While it is a complicated endeavor to anticipate the challenges that the reintegration of minors might bring, as one scholar poignantly notes, "imperfect and uncertain knowledge about the scale and nature is no excuse for inaction."<sup>163</sup> If left unaddressed, foreign minors may remain stuck in limbo, and long-term security challenges may arise.<sup>164</sup> Indeed, children affiliated with the Islamic State who grow up without better prospects, particularly those in displacement camps and detention facilities, may foster a generation of resentful and frustrated minors. As it stands, the current situation is ripe for the proliferation of crime, violence, and extremism.<sup>165</sup>

### Resulting Barriers to Rehabilitation and Reintegration

With the basic contours of foreign minors' lives during and after the Islamic State established, this report considers how experiences associated with these periods may affect rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. Although there is some utility in evaluating the distinct impact of events in the Islamic State, particularly regarding trauma, evidence indicates that a minor's departure from Islamic State-controlled territory, whether voluntary or forced, does not necessarily remove them from adverse circumstances. In light of trends emerging from the literature, this report argues that there are four overlapping issue areas that require specific attention because they represent barriers to rehabilitation and reintegration for foreign Islamic State-affiliated minors. The main challenges facing this demographic concern their 1) physical and psychological well-being; 2) indoctrination; 3) identity; and 4) vulnerability to stigmatization and discrimination. For added context, the scope of each issue area is briefly summarized below.

First, circumstances during and after time in Islamic State-controlled territory can have tremendous and compounding effects on a minor's physical and psychological well-being. Although situations vary due to a range of factors, this demographic is not guaranteed reliable access to necessities like clean water, food, and a safe place to live. Foreign children affiliated with the Islamic State suffer from a range of illnesses and injuries, and with limited access to healthcare, this predisposes them to other health conditions. Next, minors associated with the Islamic State might experience or witness a variety of traumatizing circumstances during and after living in the caliphate, including murder, abduction, torture, sexual assault, domestic violence, coercion, neglect, abandonment, and separation from or loss of a loved one. The dynamics associated with each event, like the duration, proximity, and identity of the actors involved, may affect a child in different ways. Ultimately, although it is hard to counteract all aspects of a minor's exposure to harmful conditions, their physical and psychological well-being can affect their development into adulthood. Consequently, these factors are an integral part of rehabilitation and reintegration.

Next, the beliefs of minors recruited by the Islamic State may reflect the organization's efforts to indoctrinate this demographic and normalize extreme violence. Particularly without intervention and

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160 Jalabi; Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenge Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate."

161 Peltier, "France Repatriates Several Orphan Children Who Were Stranded in Syria."

162 "Voices from Syria 2019: Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview," UNFPA, 2019, p. 35.

163 Bloom with Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*, p. 180.

164 Coolsaet and Renard, p. 3.

165 Ibid.

## NAVIGATING THE BARRIERS TO REHABILITATING AND REINTEGRATING FOREIGN MINORS AFFILIATED WITH THE ISLAMIC STATE

This report identifies four issue areas that require specific attention because of the barriers they pose to rehabilitation and reintegration. Then, it discusses these four areas in-depth to help inform approaches to support returning Islamic State-affiliated minors.



exposure to other perspectives in a safe environment, minors' experiences after the Islamic State might validate some of the views instilled by the Islamic State. At its height, the organization invested in minors and developed a relatively bureaucratic approach to recruiting, educating, and training this demographic. The Islamic State's indoctrination and socialization for children occurred across multiple fronts, involving familial ties, community relations, religious classes, and other forms of educational and tactical instruction. After the Islamic State, many minors that already lack exposure to alternative perspectives are further isolated in detention facilities for Islamic State affiliates. With relatively limited access to educational programming or organized activities in the camps, for example, many foreign minors spend their time unoccupied, with their belief systems unaltered and unchallenged by educational material or exposure to non-Islamic State affiliates. This environment, if left unmitigated, may have grave consequences for further radicalization and indoctrination.

Determining the identities of minors affiliated with the Islamic State is a process that has logistical and social implications that affect the rehabilitation and reintegration of minors. Concerning the former, children who are not registered at birth or lack identity documents showing their date of birth are likely to experience numerous challenges, including delays in acquiring travel documents. Regarding other aspects of identity, socialization into the Islamic State's worldviews can also influence a minor's sense of self as an individual, family member, and community member. Depending on the age of the child, some may know only life in the Islamic State, or detention facilities for Islamic State-affiliated persons. At the same time, other foreign minors might remember life before migrating to Islamic State-controlled territory. Since childhood encompasses such a pivotal time in an individual's development, it is crucial to consider the effects of spending one's formative years in such conditions. While younger children grapple with developing self-esteem and healthy connections with family and friends, older juveniles also wrestle with their sense of purpose and power. After officials separate individuals from their situation in Islamic State-controlled territory or detention facilities, some minors may continue to embrace their identity and affiliation with the Islamic State. In contrast, others may reject, question, or struggle to comprehend their connection with the group. During their time in or after the Islamic State, some minors assumed responsibilities beyond their years, or developed a degree of status and power that life after these periods cannot naturally substitute. In addition to some of the most problematic perspectives Islamic State advances in the treatment of adversaries and



minorities, attitudes on gender taught by the Islamic State may be incompatible with the societies with which they are supposed to reintegrate. This may make it difficult for returning children to fit in and establish a sense of self after the Islamic State.

Minors with links to the Islamic State are likely to experience stigmatization and discrimination before and after returning to their countries of origin. These challenges might manifest in different ways in the short-, medium-, and long-term, ranging from disparate treatment by security forces within detention facilities to difficulty finding employment after reaching adulthood. Public support for repatriating, rehabilitating, and reintegrating minors affiliated with the Islamic State is limited, and this appears to affect the treatment of this demographic judicially and socially. When minors are repatriated, regardless of the results of a risk assessment, members of society might perceive children as lost causes, potential terrorists, traitors, or war criminals. This environment is not especially conducive to rehabilitation or reintegration, as communities might retaliate against or ostracize minors, isolating them and making them feel like outsiders. These conditions may also affect the child's chance for reintegration by winnowing the quantity and quality of social connections, support services, and developmental opportunities available to the minor.

All in all, these themes represent the main hurdles returning minors affiliated with the Islamic State must overcome for successful rehabilitation and reintegration. They are interconnected, so failing to address one of them adequately could harm the overall process. In the following sections, literature as well as research drawn from other contexts adverse to children, including conflict, displacement, deprivation, and abuse, help inform practices for rehabilitating and reintegrating foreign minors with links to the Islamic State.

## Policy Considerations and Implications for Reintegrating Islamic State-Affiliated Minors

In order to support policymakers and practitioners responsible for developing programs to rehabilitate and reintegrate minors with experience living under Islamic State rule, this report delves further into a research-based discussion of what a short-, medium-, and long-term approach might entail. Since a minor's well-being, indoctrination, identity, and ability to cope with stigmatization and discrimination might affect their reintegration, these interrelated topics require further consideration. Most importantly, failing to address any one of these issues may further stunt childhood development or lead to more harmful and delinquent behaviors as the child matures. As such, the main risk is not so much that returning children from the caliphate are 'ticking time bombs' destined for a life in terrorism. Instead, the point here is that neglecting a minor's struggles with trauma, identity issues, and stigmatization can make the individual more unhealthy, vulnerable, and isolated. Consequently, this section pulls from a range of research about conflict-affected and traumatized minors, particularly child soldiers, to help policymakers and practitioners learn from past experiences to inform responses to the four challenges introduced above.

However, before discussing what rehabilitation and reintegration efforts for minors affiliated with the Islamic State might consider, it is necessary first to underline the notion that context matters at all stages of an intervention, before, during, and after they return. There are a lot of different program models for war-affected and displaced children, but depending on the circumstances, some may be more appropriate than others.<sup>166</sup> While oversimplified, variance tends to arise from the level at which an intervention occurs (i.e., individual, family, community), the aim of the intervention (i.e., prevention, treatment, maintenance), the methods an intervention uses (i.e., psychotherapy, group therapy, vocational training), and the entity facilitating the intervention (i.e., governments, non-governmental organizations, psychologists, trained community members).<sup>167</sup> Beyond evaluating risks for security reasons, assessments of returning minors are a necessary part of rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives because they help practitioners account for context and identify the needs of children and their networks.<sup>168</sup>

Second, while foreign minors affiliated with the Islamic State represent only a segment of the entire displaced population, states' responses to address this demographic are currently insufficient. States should consider developing policies and capabilities that will allow them to repatriate, assess, and reintegrate minors affiliated with the Islamic State. Such steps require programming that accounts for and subsequently responds to minors' range of experiences and degrees of association with the Islamic State. Third and finally, although the legal aspects of repatriation are not the focus of this article, it undoubtedly remains the first step of the rehabilitation and reintegration process. Many Islamic State-affiliated children do not have identity documents with their birth date or were simply not registered at birth. Though some minors are accompanied by a guardian, other potential classi-

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166 For an overview of various programs and results, see Theresa Betancourt, Sarah Meyers-Ohki, Alexandra Charrow, and Wietse Tol, "Interventions for Children Affected by War: An Ecological Perspective of Psychosocial Support and Mental Health Care," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 21:2 (2013).

167 Please note that these examples are largely inspired by the framework the Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow, and Tol article uses to categorize and discuss intervention programs for children affected by war.

168 In a recent article, scholars explain that many researchers are skeptical about the counter-extremism community's emphasis on identifying "risk factors," as little empirical evidence links these indicators to terrorism. While acknowledging the legitimacy of such concerns, the authors of the article argue there is still tremendous utility in developing and using assessment tools. For more on this discussion, see Daniel Koehler and Verena Fiebig, "Knowing What to Do: Academic and Practitioner Understanding of How to Counter Violent Radicalization," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:3 (2017); Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, "Providing Psychological Care to Child Soldiers Lining in Post-IS Iraq," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), May 2019.

fications might include separated children, unaccompanied minors, and orphans.<sup>169</sup> Regardless of status, practitioners must work to identify, document, trace, and reunify children with appropriate care-providers to the best of their ability. Failure to take these steps and provide protections along the way puts children “at high risk for abuse, exploitation, forced labor, abduction, or recruitment.”<sup>170</sup> In the context of rehabilitation, this matter can have tremendous effects on the futures of Islamic State-affiliated children.<sup>171</sup>

### Addressing Physical and Psychological Well-Being

Since the physical, social, and psychological well-being of minors returning from Islamic State-controlled territory can vary from case to case, states reintegrating minors should prepare to cope with such nuances. In addition to children’s repeated exposure to hardship and traumatizing events in Iraq and Syria, which could already affect their development, the process of returning to their country of origin may also herald adverse effects. For example, procedures like questioning, psychological evaluation, and medical treatment might stoke emotions like fear and anxiety.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, conditions like relative isolation, uncertainty, and temporary or prolonged separation from loved ones could be especially stressful for minors. To mitigate the risk of further traumatization, which might create more obstacles for a minor’s rehabilitation and reintegration, practitioners should strive to foster a safe and accommodating transitional environment.<sup>173</sup>

As one priority, practitioners who interact with minors who lived in Islamic State-controlled territory should have some fundamental awareness about the effects of deprivation and trauma on children. Ideally, this knowledge base would help practitioners identify the unique needs of minors; account for their age, gender, and maturity; and then coordinate and deliver the appropriate intervention for that individual. Although many minors require specialized psychological care, or other tailored measures, practitioners’ ability to appropriately provide those services at the individual level is not universal. Even if programs happen at the community-level or family-level, a deprivation- and trauma-informed approach may better equip stakeholders to address multiple dimensions of a child’s experience. Since some governments already produce resources to help their communities better support minors with trauma, these tools may serve as useful references.<sup>174</sup>

It is essential for front-line practitioners and caseworkers that interact with Islamic State-affiliated minors to detect signs of trauma. Since minors’ cope with their experiences in different ways, it is tough to succinctly articulate or anticipate what practitioners might encounter in the field. The body of research examining trauma in children is overwhelming, as it encompasses studies of minors’ experiences with armed conflict, genocide, displacement, poverty, domestic violence, sexual violence,

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169 For more information on these classifications, see Amy Hepburn, Jan Williamson, and Tanya Wolfram, “Separated Children: A Field Guide,” Save the Children, 2004.

170 Ibid.

171 For guidelines and further information on the legal challenges and avenues regarding minors, see sections about the “Convention on the Rights of the Child - Article 7” and “Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness - Article 9” in the following report: “IBelong: Minority Children and Statelessness,” UNHCR, UNICEF, and the Coalition of Every Child’s Right to a Nationality, 2018.

172 Karen Saywitz and Lorinda Camparo, “Interviewing child witnesses: A developmental perspective,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 22:8 (1998): pp. 825-843.

173 “Child returnees from conflict zones,” RAN Centre of Excellence, November 2016.

174 Examples include “Talking to children and young people about trauma,” Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss, and Grief Network; Vargas; “Factsheet: Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma,” Children’s Bureau - Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014; Christine Christie, “A Trauma-informed Health and Care Approach for responding to Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Current knowledge report,” Report Funded by Department of Health and Social Care published on gov.uk, 2018; and “Talking to Children and Youth After Traumatic Events: A Guide for Parents and Educators,” Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

neglect, and beyond, in places around the world.<sup>175</sup> Many Islamic State-affiliated minors witnessed or experienced these forms of abuse and trauma, and some were encouraged to participate in violence against others. While undoubtedly overgeneralizing, infants and younger children affected by trauma tend to exhibit clinginess and fussiness, setbacks in development, and regressive behaviors like bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, and difficulties with speech.<sup>176</sup> School-aged children may also demonstrate regressive behaviors, but other indications of trauma include trouble-making, inattentiveness, and problems managing their emotions and relationships with others.<sup>177</sup> In teens, signs of trauma might include ruminating over mortality and death, isolating oneself, and behaving destructively by breaking the rules, taking risks, bullying, and fighting.<sup>178</sup>

Across all ages, children affected by trauma may experience headaches and stomachaches, nightmares, and other sleeping problems, or incorporate the traumatic event(s) into recreational time, such as imaginary play or drawing.<sup>179</sup> In disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) camps for former child soldiers, for instance, children created games featuring a warlord and battalion, military parades, and pretend weapons made of wood.<sup>180</sup> Minors targeted by and affiliated with the Islamic State show similar signs of trauma.<sup>181</sup> According to Dr. Jan Kizilhan, a Kurdish-German psychologist with experience treating Yazidi women and children affected by the conflict: “Aggression is one of the main problems” along with “nightmares, sleeping problems, concentration” and “possibly some neurological problems.”<sup>182</sup> Confronting these challenges requires dedicated attention and intervention from specialists so that minors do not carry such burdens into adulthood.

In some cases, Islamic State-affiliated minors may present chronic illnesses, trauma disorders, or handicaps after their time living in Islamic State-controlled territory, displacement camps, or detention facilities. In addition to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is associated with a range of symptoms that might disrupt a child’s daily life,<sup>183</sup> conditions in Iraq and Syria affect Islamic State-affiliated minors in other ways. Poverty and food insecurity, for example, can have long-term

175 Ayesha Kadir, Sherry Shenoda, Jeffrey Goldhagen, and Shelly Pitterman, “The Effects of Armed Conflict on Children,” *Pediatrics* 144:5 (2019).

176 “Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Disasters and Other Traumatic Events: What Parents, Rescue Workers, and the Community Can Do,” National Institute of Mental Health; Claudia Maria Vargas, “War Trauma in Refugees: Red Flags and Clinical Principles,” *Visions Journal* 3:3 (2007).

177 Theresa Betancourt, Elizabeth Newnham, Christopher Layne, Soeun Kim, Alan Steinberg, B. Heidi Ellis, and Dina Birman, “Trauma history and psychopathology in war-affected refugee children referred for trauma-related mental health services in the United States,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 25:6 (2012): pp. 682-690. See also “Factsheet: Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma;” Vargas; “Signs of Trauma in Children,” Child Mind Institute.

178 Tina Christensen and Tore Bjorgo, “How to Manage Returned Foreign Fighters and Other Syria Travellers: Measures for Safeguarding and Follow-Up,” C-REX, 2017. See also “Factsheet: Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma;” Vargas; “Signs of Trauma in Children.”

179 “Factsheet: Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma;” Vargas.

180 Marie-Laure Daxhelet and Louis Brunet, “Le vécu des enfants soldats: Cheminements psychiques et transformations identitaires,” *La Psychiatrie de l’enfant* 56:1 (2013).

181 Rosand, Ellis, and Weine; “An Unbearable Reality: The impact of war and displacement on children’s mental health in Iraq,” Save the Children, 2017.

182 For clarity, the article explains, “Jan Kizilhan, a Kurdish-German psychologist, has seen firsthand the damage the Islamic State’s indoctrination can inflict. He treats child soldiers in Iraq and boys from the Yazidi minority who were taken as refugees to Germany after being conscripted by the Islamic State.” Charlotte McDonald-Gibson, “What Should Europe Do With the Children of ISIS?” *New York Times*, July 23, 2017.

183 For instance, symptoms might include distress, anxiety, hyper arousal, changes in eating or sleeping habits, difficulty with basic tasks like concentrating in school or making friends, detachment, irritability, and/or frequent headaches or stomachaches. For more information, see Kizilhan. See also “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in Children,” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, March 2019.

effects on a developing child's mental, physical, and social health.<sup>184</sup> Additionally, many studies observe nuances in conflict-affected boys' and girls' experiences with traumatic stress, though several factors may influence this finding.<sup>185</sup>

Recognizing and mitigating risks are vital parts of addressing a minor's well-being. The wealth of literature offering psychological and criminological perspectives on minors with trauma, along with research about childhood delinquency, can also help policymakers and practitioners identify some risk factors. For instance, research shows that children with strong, frequent, or prolonged exposure to adverse childhood experiences like abuse, violence, and neglect "are at risk of permanent changes to brain architecture," among other organ systems, which can have long-term implications for an individual's health and development.<sup>186</sup> Evidence also suggests that fear and trauma are challenging to address when experienced in childhood and adolescence compared to later stages of life.<sup>187</sup> As a result, lasting experiences with trauma may progressively undermine the development of a minor's socialization skills and sense of morality.<sup>188</sup> Among children under the age of six, some early indicators of problems include irritability, avoidance, and regressive behaviors.<sup>189</sup> Should these indicators arise among children returning from Islamic State-controlled territory, and even detention facilities, practitioners must recognize the signs and work to address the underlying causes promptly.

If left unaddressed, these problems, and unhealthy or prolonged responses to stress, can affect development and lead to more harmful and delinquent behaviors.<sup>190</sup> Ultimately, chronic or pervasive exposure to stress, and the release of hormones involved in that experience, may have long-term effects on a child's brain physiologically, along with other facets of their behavior, health, and development.<sup>191</sup> Among older minors, hormones, stress, and past experiences with stress may affect the juvenile's odds of engaging in delinquent behavior.<sup>192</sup> In short, if children do not develop appropriate coping mechanisms for stressors, including violence, they may experience cumulative adverse effects from

184 Vinicius Martins, Telma Toledo Florencio, Luciane Grillo, et al., "Long-Lasting Effects of Undernutrition," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 8:6 (2011); Michael Vaughn, Christopher Salas-Wright, Sandra Naeger, Jin Huang, and Alex Piquero, "Childhood Reports of Food Neglect and Impulse Control Problems and Violence in Adulthood," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13:4 (2016); Anandi Mani, Sendhil Mullainathan, Eldar Shafir, and Jiaying Zhao, "Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function," *Science* 314:6:149 (2013); Anuj Shah, Eldar Shafir, and Sendhil Mullainathan, "Scarcity Frames Value," *Psychological Science* 25:4 (2015).

185 For a short list of examples, see Catherine Panter-Brick, Marie-Pascale Grimon, Michael Kalin, and Mark Eggerman, "Trauma memories, mental health, and resilience: a prospective study of Afghan youth," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 56:7 (2015); Theresa Betancourt, Elizabeth Newnham, Ryan McBain, and Robert Brennan, "Post-traumatic stress symptoms among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone: follow-up study," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 203:3 (2013); and Jon Perkins, Maiss Ajeeb, Lina Fadel, and Ghassan Saleh, "Mental health in Syrian children with a focus on post-traumatic stress: a cross-sectional study from Syrian schools," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 253:1:231-1,239 (2018).

186 Hillary Franke, "Toxic Stress: Effects, Preventions and Treatment," *Children* 1:3 (2014); "Toxic Stress," Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.

187 Matthew Friedman, Terence Keane, and Patricia Resick eds., *Handbook of PTSD: Science and Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007); Panter-Brick, Grimon, Kalin, and Eggerman.

188 Melissa Peskin, Yu Gao, Andrea Glenn, Robert Schug, Yaling Yang, and Adrian Raine, "Personal characteristics of delinquents: Neurobiology, genetic predispositions, individual psychosocial attributes," in Barry Feld and Donna Bishop eds., *Oxford handbook of juvenile crime and juvenile justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 73-106.

189 "Factsheet: Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma;" Vargas; Wendy D'Andrea, Julian Ford, Bradley Stolbach, Joseph Spinazzola, and Bessel van der Kolk, "Understanding Interpersonal Trauma in Children: Why we need a developmentally appropriate trauma diagnosis," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 82:2 (2012).

190 "Toxic Stress," Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University; Pilyoung Kim, Gary Evans, Michael Angstadt, et al., "Effects of childhood poverty and chronic stress on emotion regulatory brain function in adulthood," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 110:46 (2013).

191 Ibid.

192 Kim, Evans, Angstadt, et al.; Mary Marsiglio, Krista Chronister, Brandon Gibson, and Leslie Leve, "Examining the link between traumatic events and delinquency among juvenile delinquent girls: A longitudinal study," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 7:4 (2014).

the chronic and pervasive exposure and later developmental problems.<sup>193</sup>

While broad generalizations across different countries and cultures may be misleading,<sup>194</sup> the DDR literature indicates that appropriate coping mechanisms for children affected by conflict include, among other things, acknowledging and accepting one's past deeds, renouncing affiliation to the former group, recognizing government authority, and embracing the love of family and community.<sup>195</sup> Additionally, addressing and reducing PTSD symptoms can be done through short-term trauma-focused treatment.<sup>196</sup>

In a study about addressing psychological trauma in children,<sup>197</sup> researchers centered their recommendations around the concept of "resilience," which they defined as the capacity to adapt to challenging circumstances.<sup>198</sup> While acknowledging that the factors that make a child resilient may vary from case to case, the researchers highlight the importance of some core coping mechanisms that effectively translate to more resilience. The universal building blocks that promote resilience are categorized as factors related to the *self* (such as self-efficacy and independence), factors related to *others* (social orientation and the ability to develop positive relationships), and factors associated with the regulation of experience (behavioral control and frustration tolerance).<sup>199</sup> Practitioners may reference these building blocks to inform interventions aimed at addressing the psychological well-being of Islamic State-affiliated minors.

Additionally, fostering a safe, welcoming, and comfortable environment is essential to a child's transition to a more manageable and positive stress response.<sup>200</sup> This is a long-term process that can take several months or longer. According to some research, taking into consideration the need for children to physically and psychologically recover from the change in environment and to adapt to their new setting, no in-depth therapeutic intervention should be attempted immediately after return.<sup>201</sup> Traumatized returnee children may demonstrate deep issues with trust, and if rushed, the consequence could be counterproductive.

### Addressing Indoctrination

Social and political concerns about the indoctrination of minors affiliated with the Islamic State, and the perceived risks associated with indoctrination, are a challenge facing practitioners and the children they aim to rehabilitate and reintegrate. Many researchers and practitioners advocate for repatriation procedures, risk-assessments, and programs for foreign Islamic State-affiliated persons, including minors. Ultimately, however, there is no consensus that such initiatives could deliver desired

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193 Kristine Kinniburgh, Margaret Blaustein, Joseph Spinazzola, and Bessel van der Kolk, "Attachment, Self-Regulation, and Competency: A comprehensive intervention framework for children with complex trauma," *Psychiatric Annals* 35:5 (2005): p. 426. See also E. Mark Cummings and Patrick Davies, "Maternal Depression and Child Development," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 35:1 (1994): pp. 73-122.

194 Aleksandar Pašagic, "Between Child Soldiers and Terrorists: Reintegrating Child Members of the Islamic State," *Journal for Deradicalization* 20 (2019): p. 123.

195 Niel Boothby, Jennifer Crawford, and Jason Halperin, "Mozambique child soldier life outcome study: Lessons learned in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts," *Global Public Health* 1:1 (2006): p. 93.

196 Verena Ertl, Anett Pfeiffer, Elisabeth Schauer, Thomas Elbert, and Frank Neuner, "Community-Implemented Trauma Therapy for Formed Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda: A Randomized Controlled Trial," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 306:5 (2011): pp. 503-512.

197 Margaret Blaustein and Kristine Kinniburgh, *Treating traumatic stress in children and adolescents: How to foster resilience through attachment, self-regulation, and competency* (New York: Guilford Publications 2019).

198 Ibid.

199 Ibid., p. 20.

200 "Toxic Stress," Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.

201 For example, some research argues that a child needs to physically and psychologically readjust to their new setting for at least six months before any intervention is implemented. "Child returnees from conflict zones," RAN Centre of Excellence, p. 7.

outcomes, particularly regarding indoctrination. People with a more deterministic view of the issues might argue that regardless of the minor's condition, it is too late for intervention because the Islamic State's worldview permeates every facet of a child's existence. Although policymakers and practitioners cannot wholly disregard these concerns, the potential for failure is a reality that states must confront and work to mitigate rather than avoid. The Islamic State invested a lot into the socialization and indoctrination of this demographic, and to be successful, policymakers and practitioners must respond in kind by addressing the child's needs at all levels.

Evidence suggests that the Islamic State's efforts to influence minors occurred on multiple fronts: at home, in their communities, through religious education, and various training programs. This method is believed to be relatively effective, and programs striving to rehabilitate minors should also try to engage minors on multiple fronts to address indoctrination. This might encompass efforts to resettle the individual in society, adjust to life away from the group, and pursue educational, extracurricular, and possibly professional opportunities.<sup>202</sup> In the eyes of the United Nations, the reintegration of a child should involve schooling and vocational training, family reunification, psychological support, and the mobilization of the child's environment and healthcare system.<sup>203</sup>

Although the desire to address a returning child's ideology may feel like a priority, there is no agreement that this approach is in the best interest of the child. In most cases, the need to create a safe and stable environment for minors returning from Islamic State-controlled territory or detention facilities is urgent, since failing to do so can be detrimental to the child.<sup>204</sup> When minors return to their countries of origin, with or without their parents, some social ties may be severed. The matter of parents and family members receives more attention in the following section, but still, an Islamic State-affiliated child's separation from friends and other people in their networks will be impactful. Consequently, as returning minors deal with the social transition, it is imperative for care providers, psychologists, and educators to build trust so the child can feel safe and engaged across multiple fronts. Practitioners' ability to foster a nurturing environment for minors that supports development with healthy and age-appropriate routines and relationships is a critical precondition to addressing indoctrination.<sup>205</sup> Across different conflicts and cultures, the literature on the rehabilitation and reintegration of minors affected by war suggests that education systems can serve an especially important function in this respect.<sup>206</sup> Here, it is worth noting that where the Islamic State deliberately excluded fostering critical thinking skills from their curriculum (through the exclusion of courses like history) (re-)introducing these skills in educational curricula could provide a compelling alternative to addressing ideology head-on. Even so, researchers indicate that school-based initiatives "may not be sustainable without

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202 Michael Wessells, "Psychosocial Issues in Reintegrating Child Soldiers," *Cornell International Law Journal* 32:3 (2004); Michelle Arciaga Young and Victor Gonzalez, "Getting Out of Gangs, Staying Out of Gangs," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention – National Gang Center Bulletin, January 2013. Consider the following resources as well: The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Youth Gang Strategic Planning Tool at [www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT](http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT); J Gomes Porto, Imogen Parsons, and Chris Alden, "From Soldiers to Citizens: The Social, Economic and Political Reintegration of Unita Ex-Combatants," Institute for Security Studies, 2007.

203 "United Nations launches new standards for disarmament, demobilization, reintegration of ex-combatants," United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Release, December 18, 2006.

204 "Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2017.

205 "Building resilience among young children raised in extremist environments – specifically child returnees," RAN Centre of Excellence, Policy and Practice Event, July 4, 2018.

206 Theresa Betancourt and Timothy Williams, "Building an evidence base on mental health interventions for children affected by armed conflict," *Intervention* 6:1 (2008); Femke Bannik-Mbazzi and Ann Lorschiedter, "Psychosocial support to vulnerable youth in vocational schools in northern Uganda," *Intervention* 7:2 (2009); Kimberly Ehntholt, Patrick Smith, and William Yule, "School-based Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Group Intervention for Refugee Children who have Experienced War-related Trauma," *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 2:10 (2005); Mark Jordans, Ivan Komproe, Wietse Tol, Brandon Kohrt, Nagendra Luitel, Robert Macy, and Joop De Jong, "Evaluation of a classroom-based psychological intervention in conflict-affected Nepal: a cluster randomized controlled trial," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 51:7 (2010).

additional changes in familial, peer, and community support.”<sup>207</sup>

After working to meet a child’s most basic needs, both personally and socially, matters of ideology and identity come more clearly into focus. While related to a minor’s well-being, a minor’s ideological belief system can help or hurt their ability to cope with traumatizing experiences. Although it is easy to assume that ideologically committed minors are the most difficult to rehabilitate, there are reasons to question this notion. For example, a small but growing body of research suggests that children with stronger ideological and religious convictions process difficult circumstances differently, and perhaps more effectively than their less ideologically committed counterparts.<sup>208</sup> A study of 385 Israeli school-age children affected by conflict, for example, produced the following results: “In the group with weak ideological commitment, war experiences increased anxiety, insecurity, and depression, and feelings of failure. However, no relation between symptoms and exposure to war experiences was found among the children expressing strong ideological commitment.”<sup>209</sup> At the same time, it should be noted there is a chance that those Islamic State-affiliated minors that seem most ideologically committed suppress feelings of guilt and shame through a mechanism of psychologically distancing—both from the reality as well as the morality of their past actions. Those cases underline the importance of the earlier-mentioned psychological coping mechanism of coming to terms with past deeds.

In practice, the role of ideology in intervention programs for minors returning from Islamic State-controlled territory and detention centers should vary. Engaging a child on matters of ideology and religion may be counter-productive in some circumstances but productive in others, so caseworkers must be ready to coordinate services according to a minor’s needs.<sup>210</sup> To this end, lessons learned from interviewing children in the context of torture, and inhumane treatment, including abuse and neglect, may help inform practitioners’ approaches to evaluating and interacting with Islamic State-affiliated minors.<sup>211</sup> In some scenarios, it may be more necessary and appropriate for trained professionals to conduct a forensic interview with a child.<sup>212</sup> Generally speaking, practical guidelines emphasize the importance of interviewing in a safe environment, building rapport with the child, avoiding suggestive questions, and accounting for context-based considerations.<sup>213</sup> Whether discussing a child’s experiences or worldview, practitioners should maintain a non-confrontational manner. Beyond discussion, a minor’s attitudes and beliefs may also manifest in other forms of expressions such as body language, behavior toward others, and disposition during recreational activities like games, playtime, or drawing.

Practitioners must develop nuanced approaches to support a child’s transition to avoid fueling a crisis of identity that overpowers the natural process to question one’s identity during periods of development from childhood to adolescence or adolescence to adulthood. Instead of trying to discuss the Islamic State’s ideology, it is essential to rebuild with the child an alternative or new worldview based on positive values, healthy interactions with others, and age-appropriate activities. In this perspective, schools and families can play a pivotal role.

Additionally, as emphasized earlier, criminological literature can help identify additional risk factors as they pertain to a minor, whether in the personal, familial, or social context. Research on the topic al-

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207 Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow, and Tol.

208 “Child returnees from conflict zones,” RAN Centre of Excellence.

209 Raija-Leena Punamaki, “Can Ideological Commitment Protect Children’s Psychosocial wellbeing in Situations of Political Violence?” *Child Development* 67:1 (1996).

210 “Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System.”

211 As provided, for example, in the Istanbul Protocol: “Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment,” UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2004.

212 For more information, see Chris Newlin, et al., “Child Forensic Interviewing: Best Practices,” *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, U.S. Department of Justice, September 2015.

213 “Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.” For more information, see Newlin, et al.



ready suggests that certain factors require more consideration in efforts to reduce the risks of children becoming offenders as they grow.<sup>214</sup> In a study focusing on victimization and delinquency among 877 minors aged from 11 to 15 years old, experts list several risk factors: in the individual domain (impulsivity, risk-seeking, guilt, use of neutralization techniques, and social isolation); in the family domain (lack of parental monitoring, over or under-attachment to mother or father); in the peer domain (lack of prosocial peers, presence of delinquent peers, no or little commitment to positive peers, commitment to negative peers, spending time without adults present, spending time with drugs and alcohol present); and in the school domain (lack of commitment to school, perception of limited educational opportunities, and perception of negative school environment).<sup>215</sup> Studies of multiple risk factors concluded that they have interdependent, multiplying effects; in other words, the more risk factors a child is exposed to, the higher the likelihood that they will become violent.<sup>216</sup> One study, for instance, found that a 10-year-old exposed to six or more risk factors is 10 times as likely to be violent by age 18 as a 10-year-old exposed to only one factor.<sup>217</sup> Moreover, research shows that children who offend or behave in a deviant way before the age of 12 are more likely to be persistent offenders.<sup>218</sup> Given that many of the children found in Kurdish detention facilities are young, and state-lead repatriation efforts sometimes prioritize younger children and infants, the importance of intervening in these children's lives as early as possible is critical to underline.

Though there is a lack of research about children growing up in territory controlled by terrorist organizations, this information still highlights the importance of early intervention. The process of normalizing life outside of the Islamic State's rule and detention facilities is slow, but continuity is essential to rehabilitating and reintegrating minors.

### Addressing Identity

Foreign minors with experience living under the Islamic State's rule, whether they traveled to join the group or were born into its ranks, are likely to encounter a range of challenges concerning identity, especially those who were already struggling with identity issues and a need to belong. For one thing, minors without accepted forms of documentation confirming their identities, like birth certificates and identification cards, might have difficulty returning. As discussed in the background section of this paper, practitioners must work to identify, document, trace, and reunify children with appropriate care-providers to the best of their ability to safeguard against subsequent abuse.<sup>219</sup> While arduous, an inability to conduct these tasks in a reasonable manner can disservice the broader efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate foreign minors.

In addition to encouraging states to take productive actions to help Islamic State-affiliated foreign minors establish their identity, governments should not create more obstacles for children's repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's *Roadmap on Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Extremist Groups* explains, "It should be ensured that Member States under no circumstances, by act or omission, implement policies that effectively render children stateless. In this regard, it is important that Member States, rather than stripping

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214 David Farrington, Hannah Gaffney, and Maria Ttofi, "Systematic reviews of explanatory risk factors for violence, offending, and delinquency," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 33 (2017).

215 Finn-Aage Esbensen and David Huizinga, "Juvenile Victimization and Delinquency," *Youth & Society* 23:2 (1991): pp. 202-228. For more on this topic, see also Farrington, Gaffney, and Ttofi.

216 Esbensen and Huizinga. For more on this topic, see also "National Crime and Prevention Centre, Family-Based Risk and Protective Factors and their Effects on Juvenile Delinquency: What do we know?" Public Safety Canada, 2008.

217 "Chapter 4 -- Risk Factors for Youth Violence Youth Violence," A Report of the Surgeon General - Office of the Surgeon General (US), 2001.

218 "Building resilience among young children raised in extremist environments – specifically child returnees," RAN Centre of Excellence.

219 For more information on these classifications, see Hepburn, Williamson, and Wolfram.

dual-nationals of their citizenship, accept children born of their nationals, grant them nationality and take proactive actions to prevent statelessness.”<sup>220</sup>

Beyond formal identification, identity affects Islamic State children in other ways. Given the Islamic State’s efforts to shape the character of its younger members, tasking them with carrying the fight into the next generation, the process of developing returning minors’ identity away from the group is an integral part of rehabilitation and reintegration. Foreign children who still identify with the group and its members may explicitly resist or attempt to complicate efforts to take them back. As stressed earlier, the transition away from one’s environment can be intimidating, confusing, and isolating. An article describing the experiences of child soldiers involved in demobilization programs explains that some grapple with an identity crisis when they separate from familiar circumstances and networks.<sup>221</sup> In the case of returning minors, practitioners who engage with this demographic should receive training to help children develop their sense of self and belonging to help support the transition.<sup>222</sup> This is especially important for those minors born in Islamic State territory, raised in the caliphate and/or currently living in Kurdish detention, and thus have no links to or knowledge of the country to which they would be repatriated.

Much like addressing the well-being and indoctrination of a foreign minor affiliated with the Islamic State, practitioners should account for context to enhance their efforts to empower the individual’s personal and social identity development. Here, scholars suggest the objective is to help a person construct a new understanding of who they are, and who they might become, rather than trying to facilitate “a psychological return to some pre-radicalized state.”<sup>223</sup> Particularly given the nature of child development, this aim is practical for foreign minors affiliated with the Islamic State. Even so, returnees may face a range of different obstacles. For instance, some individuals may find it hard to relinquish their role and responsibilities within the Islamic State, or the benefits associated with that position.<sup>224</sup> Since the Islamic State’s perspectives on gender dynamics between men and women are not compatible with the societies to which minors return, this facet of identity may require additional attention in some cases.

Many publications discussing the treatment of children in traumatizing circumstances, whether conflict-, poverty-, or health-related, highlight the importance of empowering minors to make developmentally appropriate choices about their lives.<sup>225</sup> Practitioners might encourage returning Islamic State children to have a say in developing daily routines, selecting recreational activities, and identifying needs. Over time, a minor’s participation in such decision-making may help “improve their sense of personal control and self-worth,”<sup>226</sup> as well as discern their individual preferences, values, and priorities. While opening the door for minors to care for themselves is crucial, listening to the subject and staying attuned to “children’s own insights regarding what they need in order to reintegrate” remains

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220 “Roadmap on Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Extremist Groups.”

221 Daxhelet and Brunet.

222 Please note, this recommendation stems from the Koehler and Fiebig article.

223 Original comment by Kurt Braddock, as quoted and contextualized in the Koehler and Fiebig article. For the original quote, see Kurt Braddock, “The talking cure? Communication and psychological impact in prison de-radicalisation programmes,” in Andrew Silke ed., *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism: Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and Reform* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 60-74.

224 Michael Wessells, “Reintegration of Child Soldiers: The Role of Social Identity in the Recruitment and Reintegration of Child Soldiers,” in Shelley McKeown, Reeshma Haji, and Neil Ferguson eds., *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory: Contemporary and Global Perspectives* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2016).

225 Mark Lorey, “Child Soldiers: Care and Protection of Children in Emergencies A Field Guide,” Save The Children, 2001; Julie Lerwick, “Minimizing pediatric healthcare-induced anxiety and trauma,” *World Journal of Clinical Pediatrics* 5:2 (2016); Bruce Perry, “Helping Traumatized Children: A brief Overview for Caregivers,” Child Trauma Academy, 2014.

226 Lorey.

an essential practice for caseworkers, too.<sup>227</sup>

With these topics in mind, the potential opportunities and challenges that can arise from family-level interventions require more attention. A range of evidence indicating that conflict-affected children can benefit from safe and reliable relationships with caregivers and family members appears to motivate the emphasis on family-centric initiatives for minors.<sup>228</sup> To date, some DDR literature and resources about rehabilitating children champion family reunification and intervention measures involving family members.<sup>229</sup> Other studies suggest that programs for minors that include the family can be impactful, but indicate that family participation alone is not decisive for a child's rehabilitation.<sup>230</sup>

The cases of returning foreign Islamic State children as they relate to family members and caregivers are complex.<sup>231</sup> This reality complicates decisions concerning who should care for the child and where they should stay once they return. When minors leave the Islamic State or the detention facilities for Islamic State-affiliated persons, they might be accompanied by relatives, including parents, siblings, extended family members, or their own children. Conversely, after arriving in their country of origin or nationality, they may or may not have relatives capable of supporting their rehabilitation. Although it is easy to say that entities should always act in the best interest of the minor, the most beneficial course of action is not always obvious. In order to act effectively, practitioners must be prepared to navigate different circumstances and understand the trade-offs associated with various options.

In instances where minors return with a parent, child, or another family member, it is essential to take stock of family dynamics and the needs of individuals. Some conflicts involving child soldiers placed less emphasis on mobilizing families in their recruitment and conscription, so DDR programs addressing children's involvement in those movements focused more on reconnecting children and parents separated by conflict.<sup>232</sup> In the case of the Islamic State, the group's state-building efforts made membership more of a family affair. Consequently, a parent's association with the Islamic State, and the actions and beliefs they pursued in that role, can create more barriers for family reunification and rehabilitation efforts.<sup>233</sup> While some issues might be procedural, like if a parent is incarcerated or moving through the justice system, others might be more conditional, like if the parent requires tailored treatment or is unable or unwilling to care for the child. Even in logistically complex circumstances, practitioners should help maintain and build connections between children and their families.<sup>234</sup> When possible and in the minor's best interest, this could also include relatives that were not affiliated with the Islamic State.<sup>235</sup> In facilitating familial ties, however, governments should avoid placing minors in the care of family members who are sympathetic to violent extremism. There is already a

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227 Wessells, "Reintegration of Child Soldiers."

228 Please note, the Betancourt and Williams article makes this point and directs readers toward a swathe of studies that support this observation.

229 Michelle Slone and Shiri Mann, "Effects of War, Terrorism and Armed Conflict on Young Children: A Systematic Review," *Child Psychiatry and Human Development* 47:6 (2016). Additionally, in a study of former Salvadoran child soldiers, over 80 percent identified family as the "most useful supports in the transition to civilian life." Maria Santacruz and Rubi Arana, "Experiences and psychosocial impact of the El Salvador civil war on child soldiers," Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2002, p. 15. For more discussion on this point, see Staley Smith, "When Cubs Become Lions: The Future of ISIS Child Soldiers," *Lawfare*, August 10, 2015.

230 Wessells, "Reintegration of Child Soldiers;" Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow, and Tol.

231 For some added context, see "Children Affected by the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon: Ensuring A Child Rights-Based Approach," United Nations Counter-Terrorism Center (UNCCT), 2019. See also Rebecca Turkington and Agathe Christien, "Policy Brief: Women, Deradicalization, and Rehabilitation: Lessons from an Expert Workshop," Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, April 2018.

232 In Uganda and Sierra Leone, for example. For more information about how practitioners might learn from past efforts to reintegrate child soldiers, see Pašagic.

233 Staley Smith, "When Cubs Become Lions: The Future of ISIS Child Soldiers," *Lawfare*, August 10, 2015.

234 "Risk mechanisms and desistance factors facing radicalization," Partnership Against Violent Radicalization in Cities, October 31, 2018.

235 "Child returnees from conflict zones," RAN Centre of Excellence.

notable case of this occurring, as two returning children were placed in the care of their grandparents, who were allegedly sympathetic to the Islamic State.<sup>236</sup>

In some scenarios, reference materials concede that “it may be necessary to consider the removal of a child from a family,” however, this action should only serve as the “absolute last resort.”<sup>237</sup> Since most countries already have policies, laws, and entities to protect children, officials and caseworkers could wield these tools if necessary to protect returning minors. In the United States, for example, parents might lose custody for reasons such as child abuse, child neglect, domestic violence, and failure to provide safe living conditions. If evidence of these behaviors arises or persists after family members of an Islamic State-affiliated child are returned or reunited, the child’s well-being is paramount.<sup>238</sup>

When no favorable options arise from a child’s social network, in some cases, officials may have to entrust the minor’s custody and care to select individuals, host families, and specialized institutions.<sup>239</sup> Naturally, some environments may be more conducive to rehabilitating juveniles than others depending on contextual factors like the age of individuals and whether or not siblings accompany them.<sup>240</sup> However, research flags some considerations and recommendations, like identifying families of the same ethnic origin that can help provide stability and support.<sup>241</sup> Though challenging, a minor’s life at home can be critical in shaping their identity in life after the Islamic State and teaching them new skills about how to cope with adversity and build relationships. If returning minors are in the wrong environment, it may create additional pressure without enhancing their ability to deal with stress and anxiety in healthy ways.<sup>242</sup>

Helping a child discover their identity and settle into life after the Islamic State can be a labor- and resource-intensive process. Ultimately, regardless of where a minor lives during their transition, individuals tasked with their care require training, particularly about supporting the child’s personal and social development. One report explains, “in the same way as specialists,” family members, foster families, and other leading care providers need resources and training to help a returning child and, when possible, should be offered “proper counseling, support and expert guidance.”<sup>243</sup> This includes carefully considering the need for foster families or institutions to be informed of the child’s previous experiences related to the Islamic State. If those who regularly interact with the returning child are sufficiently prepared for the process and able to recognize and meet the needs of the individual with the help of others, they can create a stable environment that is more conducive to growth and discovery.

### Safeguarding Against Stigmatization and Discrimination

Minors returning from Islamic State-controlled territory or detention facilities for Islamic State-affiliated persons are just beginning their journey away from life in the group. As stakeholders address the well-being, indoctrination, and identities of returning minors, they must also anticipate the challenges posed by stigmatization. Given the lack of public support for policies to bring home Islamic State-affiliated individuals, minors are likely to face an uphill battle because of how they are perceived by the

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236 Andreas Kouwenhoven and Frederiek Weeda, “Kinderbescherming plaatst IS-kinderen bij opa met IS-sympathieën,” *NRC Handelsblad*, June 14, 2019.

237 “Children Affected by the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon: Ensuring A Child Rights-Based Approach;” “Child returnees from conflict zones,” RAN Centre of Excellence.

238 “Roadmap on Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Extremist Groups.”

239 “Child returnees from conflict zones,” RAN Centre of Excellence.

240 “Children Affected by the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon: Ensuring A Child Rights-Based Approach.”

241 “Child returnees from conflict zones,” RAN Centre of Excellence.

242 David Farrington, Maria Ttofi, and Friedrich Lösel, “School bullying and later criminal offending,” *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health* 21:2 (2011); Pašagic.

243 “RAN Manual: Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families,” RAN Centre of Excellence, 2017.

public in the communities and countries in which they live. The issue is contentious, but administratively, stigmatization and discrimination already appear to affect the lives of many foreign minors affiliated with the Islamic State, including those born in Islamic State-controlled territory. Subjective applications of the instruments designed to protect human rights and the rights of children are counter-productive.<sup>244</sup> To avoid undercutting the purpose of such conventions, the UNODC's *Roadmap on Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Extremist Groups* explicitly notes, "Under international human rights law, children have the right to return to their country and limitations on this right must be lawful, pursuant to a legitimate aim, as well as necessary and proportionate."<sup>245</sup>

When minors can return, stigmatization and discrimination might manifest in different ways, potentially affecting individuals in the short-, medium-, and long-term. Minors featured in propaganda that garnered international media attention, for instance, may face more issues with privacy and protection than lesser-known children with links to the Islamic State.<sup>246</sup> Generally speaking, younger children might struggle to fit in and build relationships with peers because of both real and perceived setbacks in development from life in Islamic State-controlled territory or detention facilities. For instance, the caregivers of children who were *not* affiliated with the Islamic State may prohibit or be reticent to allow association or playtime with returning children due to safety and security concerns. Older minors returning from Islamic State-controlled territory are also likely to struggle with both acceptance from peers and society writ large as well as finding or establishing new social networks. Whether founded or unfounded, a teenager's past association with the Islamic State could potentially have long-term effects on the individual's access to educational or employment opportunities.

Though the public's frustration and discomfort with returning minors are understandable, societies' distrust of reintegration and rehabilitation efforts can create more obstacles for the process. Numerous studies indicate that conflict-affected minors' experiences with discrimination, rejection, and stigmatization are associated with less favorable life outcomes.<sup>247</sup> Meanwhile, research about child soldiers places a premium on acceptance and social bonds in a subject's rehabilitation and reintegration.<sup>248</sup> In essence, this body of literature indicates that children with positive connections to peers, family, and community members tend to transition away from life in conflict better than their counterparts without dependable relationships.<sup>249</sup> The difficulty with Islamic State-affiliated minors is that the affiliation generally meant a family affair, in which case positive relations with family members could be detrimental to reintegration into society. Naturally, since nuances arise in the literature, more research is required to examine how interpersonal connections relate to rehabilitation trajectories of minors affiliated with the Islamic State.

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244 "IBelong: Minority Children and Statelessness."

245 "Roadmap on Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Extremist Groups."

246 Kaczkowski; Rosand, Ellis, and Weine; Elian Peltier, "U.K. Takes Back Children From Former ISIS Territory," *New York Times*, November 22, 2019.

247 Theresa Betancourt, Dana Thomson, Robert Brennan, Cara Antonaccio, Stephen Gilman, and Tyler VanderWeele, "Stigma and Acceptance of Sierra Leone's Child Soldiers: A Prospective Longitudinal Study of Adult Mental Health and Social Functioning," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (2019); Victoria Esses, Leah Hamilton, and Danielle Gaucher, "The Global Refugee Crisis: Empirical Evidence and Policy Implications for Improving Public Attitudes and Facilitating Refugee Resettlement," *Social Issues and Policy Review* (2017); "Review of Child and Adolescent Refugee Mental Health," National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2003; Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand, "One Cannot Take Away the Stain': Rejection and Stigma Among Former Child Soldiers in Colombia," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 20:3 (2014); Robert Agnew and Timothy Brezina, *Juvenile Delinquency: Causes and Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Pašagic.

248 Wessells, "Reintegration of Child Soldiers;" Theresa Betancourt, Robert Brennan, Julia Rubin-Smith, Garret Fitzmaurice, and Stephen Gilman, "Sierra Leone's former child soldiers: a longitudinal study of risk, protective factors, and mental health," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 49:6 (2010): p. 611.

249 Theresa Betancourt, Jessica Agnew-Blais, Stephen Gilman, David Williams, and B. Heidi Ellis, "Past horrors, present struggles: The role of stigma in the association between war experiences and psychological adjustment among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone," *Social Science & Medicine* 70:1 (2010); Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow, and Tol; "Radicalization Awareness Network," European Commission, November 9, 2016; Pašagic.

Ultimately, if supportive networks can help mitigate some of the negative experiences associated with marginalization while supporting a returning minor's ability to settle into life after the Islamic State, then it is crucial to foster an environment conducive to such connections.<sup>250</sup> Efforts to address the discrimination and stigmatization of minors returning from Islamic State-controlled territory and detention facilities for Islamic State-personnel can occur at multiple levels. In this vein, political leaders and policymakers must account for the rhetoric they use to inform the public while discussing repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Optimistic, yet pragmatic discourse about the process is an integral part of creating an environment that fosters positive change, rather than taking a narrow risk-oriented approach to returning children. Such measures could focus on building children's resilience and enhancing the capabilities and understanding of their communities. In some contexts, reducing the stigma against returnees requires stakeholders to focus on society, not just the individual.<sup>251</sup>

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250 "Radicalization Awareness Network;" Pašagic.

251 Wessells, "Reintegration of Child Soldiers."

## Concluding Thoughts

Today, the challenges facing policymakers and practitioners tasked with addressing the fallout from the Islamic State's campaign in Iraq and Syria are daunting, and concerns about how to cope with Islamic State-affiliated persons, including minors, persist. The problem of displaced Islamic State members is not new, but there is still little agreement about who is responsible for what aspect of the situation. With the culpability of many Islamic State affiliates in question, one might argue that this unresolved issue disproportionately affects developing minors, as many of those linked to the group subsist in dire conditions and face uncertain futures.<sup>252</sup> Indeed, no unified solution to the crisis exists, but the demand for a coherent response becomes more urgent every day. In a discussion about international law and the challenge associated with reintegrating and rehabilitating returnees, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights While Countering Terrorism, asserted, "the longer we keep them there, the harder that is going to be."<sup>253</sup> Realistically, failure to coordinate a meaningful intervention invites risk to security, health, human rights, and arguably, the legitimacy of governments opposing the Islamic State and its governance project.

In order to contextualize the challenges at hand, this report reviewed the contours of minors' lives during and after their time in Islamic State-controlled territory. To synthesize some key takeaways, a range of evidence indicates that the nature of the Islamic State's efforts to mobilize minors associated with the Islamic State was a serious initiative, central to ensuring the organization's future. Foreign children became affiliated with the Islamic State in different ways: while most joined because of familial ties or were born in the caliphate, older minors also joined the group voluntarily. Next, age, to some degree, affected the lives of minors under the Islamic State's rule. The age at which children arrived in Islamic State-controlled territory influenced the child's level of awareness, degree of education, the roles they assumed, and the training they received. Other factors, like a minor's gender, ethnicity, nationality, or family status, have influenced their experience within the organization or affect some of the challenges they might encounter leaving the group and the caliphate behind.<sup>254</sup>

For states, a necessary step in developing any rehabilitation initiative for returning minors is a thorough examination of the relevant cases writ large, and on an individual basis. Although some aspects of the Islamic State's indoctrination, socialization, and preparation process are similar, evidence suggests that minors affiliated with the Islamic State also have different experiences within the organization. While several external factors are likely to affect a child's life within Islamic State-controlled territory, such as living conditions or proximity to violence, aspects of a minor's identity and trajectory may also shape their interactions with the Islamic State and other members of the group. Ultimately, the sheer diversity of cases, and minors' dynamic paths to, through, and from life in Syria and Iraq, suggests that responses require some degree of tailored intervention. Programming that fosters the reintegration of minors should be context-specific, accounting for the best possible understanding of the individual's age, level of development, and experience within the organization to identify their specific needs and challenges as they pertain to reintegration. Furthermore, as part of this process, assessments should also take stock of a returning minor's risk to themselves and their communities, including their potential reengagement into terrorism or other illegal or violent activities.

Thus, familiarity with the paths of minors away from the caliphate, and the challenges associated with

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252 Charlie Savage, "The Kurds' Prisons and Detention Camps for ISIS Members, Explained," *New York Times*, October 13, 2019; "More than 2,500 Foreign Children are Living in Camps in North-East Syria." According to Human Rights Watch, as of July 2019 at least 240 children had died either in the camps or en route. See "Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects' Families," Human Rights Watch, July 2019.

253 Jalabi.

254 "Gender Dimensions of the Response to Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters."

various routes, is vital to developing reintegration programs for children. Moreover, increased awareness can also help policies designed to help facilitate children's transition away from such circumstances. While some juveniles have already returned to their country of origin, many children spend extended periods in displacement camps or detention facilities. Given reports about the conditions of such establishments, and the range of traumatizing experiences a minor might encounter, practitioners cannot overlook how the transition away from life under the Islamic State affects a child. As the crisis continues, in some cases, a minor's time in either displacement camps or detention facilities might come close to, match, or exceed their time under the Islamic State's rule. Another complicating factor pertains to a returning minor's connection with family or close friends as they return. While some might have close or complicated ties with loved ones, others might be more isolated or neglected. Failure to anticipate such nuances could lead to ineffective and possibly counter-productive interventions.

This report worked to highlight a range of themes and avenues for the policymakers and practitioners responsible for designing and implementing a response. Though individual needs require attention, since they vary from child to child, this discussion narrows in on four overlapping issue areas that demand particular attention because of the barriers they pose to rehabilitation and reintegration for Islamic State-affiliated children. This list includes addressing a minor's physical and psychological well-being, indoctrination, and identity, as well as mitigating the effects of stigmatization and discrimination. Reflections on the four focus areas, which are motivated by literature relevant to each topic, are meant to serve as a reference for those grappling with how to rehabilitate and reintegrate foreign minors associated with the Islamic State.

One theme that emerges across all four focus areas discussed in this report is the importance of an integrated approach to rehabilitating and reintegrating minors.<sup>255</sup> One scholar observes this phenomenon in a discussion about child soldiers, stating, "One universal is that reintegration is a social process that involves actors at the family, community, and societal levels."<sup>256</sup> In other words, as the adage states: "It takes a village to raise a child." The process of rehabilitation, too, requires patience, flexibility, coordination, and dedication from all the stakeholders involved, including relatives, caseworkers, legal representatives, foster parents, clinicians, educators, and peers, who work to build trust and support a minor's development in their life after the Islamic State.

Given the diversity of cases, a multifaceted toolkit is necessary, and stakeholders must understand how and when to wield the tools at their disposal. While legal recourse may be appropriate in some circumstances, particularly for older juveniles, this course of action does not preclude other forms of treatment.<sup>257</sup> In different scenarios, interventions for minors might prioritize things like family reunification, identifying safe and reliable care and accommodations, medical attention, psycho-social support, and educational programming. Even though an array of research compels this approach, it is still incumbent upon responsible parties to conduct additional research and develop more context-specific measures. In sum, however, dimensional methods should aim to progressively support the child's transition from the life of a child in conflict to that of a civilian. The aim, while not without challenges, is best articulated by the Paris Principles:

*"Reintegration is the process by which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in the context of local and national reconciliation. Sustainable reintegration is achieved when the political, legal, economic and social conditions needed for children to maintain life, livelihood and dignity have been secured. This process aims to ensure that children can access their rights, including*

255 Rosand, Ellis, and Weine.

256 Wessells, "Reintegration of Child Soldiers."

257 "RAN Manual: Responses to returnees," pp. 60-80.



*formal and non-formal education, family unity, dignified livelihoods and safety from harm.*<sup>258</sup>

Although it is natural to fear the worst-case scenario, being realistic and transparent about these scenarios are necessary steps in gauging risk. A complete preoccupation with the notion that a child affiliated with the Islamic State will inevitably commit acts of terrorism may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A wealth of research on children affected by conflict, disasters, violence, and extreme poverty indicates that intervention mechanisms, when sufficiently case- and context-specific, have related to better life outcomes for children facing adversity. If decision-makers and the wider public are not willing to pave a meaningful path for minors away from violent extremism, thus denying an opportunity for course correction, then there is little reason to expect the child will veer off the road they are on. At the end of the day, successfully reintegrating and rehabilitating Islamic State-affiliated minors is a process that relies on the capability and coordination of key stakeholders, which in turn is reliant on their general mindset toward these children.

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258 "The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups," UNICEF, 2007.



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AT WEST POINT