



# Psychosocial Needs of Former ISIS Child Soldiers in Northern Iraq

## Research Report

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## 1 Introduction

In this report, we elaborate on key findings of the research project *Psychosocial Needs of Former ISIS Child Soldiers in Northern Iraq*.<sup>1</sup> We implemented the research project within the framework of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) regional program *Psychosocial Support for Syrian and Iraqi Refugees and IDPs* (internally displaced persons) from August 2018 to June 2019.<sup>2</sup> It was part of a larger ongoing research program on experiences of violence in conflict and war at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin (IPU) that also included studies on youths' agency in Afghanistan (Langer et al. 2019, 2020), organizational staff care in the Middle East (Langer 2019), and psychosocial challenges of young refugees in Germany.

The research project aimed at answering the following interrelated questions:

1. What are the psychosocial needs of former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq?
2. How are former ISIS child soldiers perceived by their social environment, and how does this affect their current situation?
3. Which services for them are already in place in the region, and what approaches seem to be helpful?
4. Which additional services should be provided to gain and sustain a meaningful state of mental integrity, social agency, and societal integration of the children?

To answer these questions, we developed a multimethodological approach, by combining:

- a systematic review of existing research literature;<sup>3</sup>
- explorative fieldwork in the region, accompanied by formal and informal interviews with regional and international experts;<sup>4</sup>
- an actor and service mapping of organizations and projects working with former ISIS child soldiers in the region;<sup>5</sup>
- collaborative storytelling with former ISIS-affiliated children in different settings.

<sup>1</sup> We initially tried to avoid the common term “child soldiers”—or in this particular case “ISIS child soldiers”—to refer to these children, as it contains problematic connotations. Over the course of the first phase, we decided to use the term, however, since it is a well-established one that enables the problematization and politicization of the experiences and situation of children that are linked to the atrocities of Daesh, the so-called Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL).

<sup>2</sup> For continuous support, including the funding of the project and rich thematic discussions, we would like to thank Judith Baessler and her team at the GIZ, esp. Andreas Löpsinger and Sylvia Wutzke.

<sup>3</sup> For the literature review the databases PubMed, PsycINFO, PSYINDEX, PsycARTICLES, JStore, and Sociological Abstracts were searched with the following search items: “child soldier”, “child soldiers”, “child fighter”, “child fighters”, “jihadi child”, “jihadi children”, “ISIS child soldiers”. The results were merged and duplicates removed, resulting in a total list of 416 texts that include empirical studies, policy papers, books, and book chapters. Further relevant studies that we came across coincidentally or that were drawn to our attention by colleagues during the project were also considered for this report.

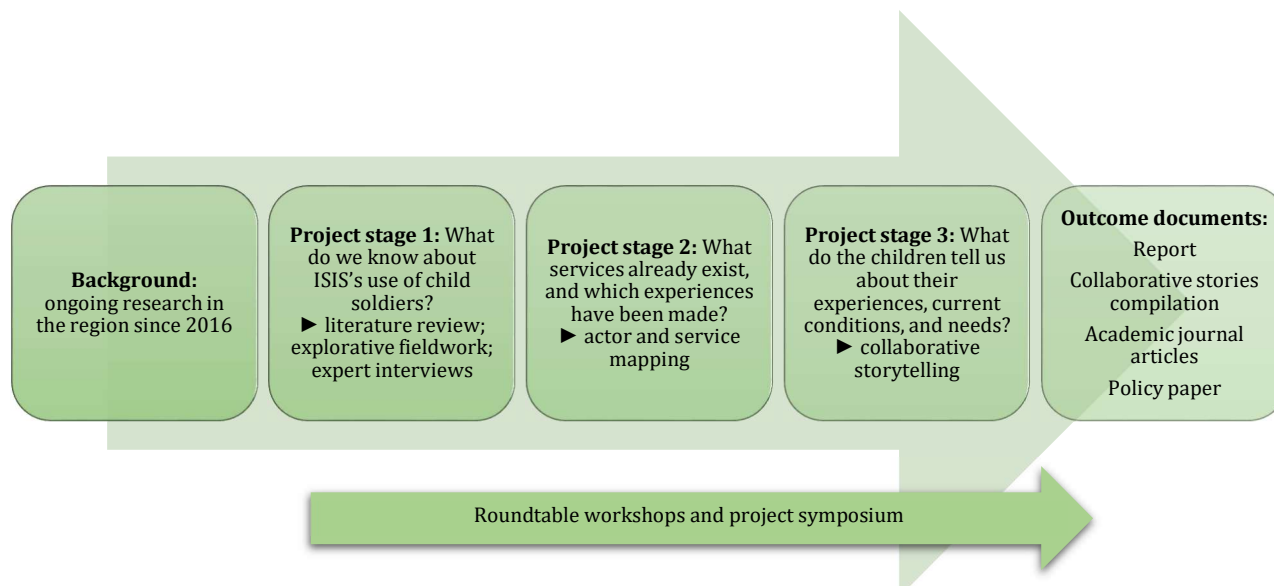
<sup>4</sup> The fieldwork in the region was conducted in several stays between October 2018 and April 2019. During the stay in October 2018, we conducted formal interviews with eight professionals and informal talks with people working with/on children formerly affiliated with Daesh. Different institutional settings were visited. In addition, we conducted eight formal interviews with internationally active experts on the issue of child soldiers from different disciplines and regional foci.

<sup>5</sup> The actor and service mapping was compiled from November 2018 to February 2019 on the basis of data gathered by field researchers, predominantly covering the Kurdish region of Iraq with a focus on the governorates of Dohuk and Erbil, but also including information from the governorate of Kirkuk. In total, 54 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were contacted by phone, e-mail, or personal visits and asked for cooperation. Five organizations did not reply (or postponed phone or physical meetings); first-hand information on their mental health and psychosocial support network (MHPSS) services and their service-related reference to former ISIS child soldiers could not be obtained. 49 organizations answered to the request for information positively (91% response rate). The collection of information was guided by a template that focused on the following issues: general provision of services and its relation to former child soldiers; specific psychosocial services for former ISIS child soldiers, respective approaches and methods; experiences of staff working with former ISIS child soldiers.



In addition, we participated in a joint effort to create spaces for exchanging experiences for organizations that work for and with former child soldiers and allowing for a critical discussion of our observations and interpretations.<sup>6</sup>

The research process unfolded in three main stages, as illustrated below (see figure 1):



**Figure 1: Research process, methodical elements, and outcome documents.**

The project has exceeded the scope of a needs assessment mission, by following different basic and applied research perspectives, including the development of innovative methods. In this regard, we would like to emphasize collaborative storytelling as a specially developed participatory *research* method to work in an ethically responsible way with these children that might also be worth taking into account and advance working with children *psychosocially* and *therapeutically*.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the report, we refer to the stories that provide a unique empirical contribution to the understanding of the children's psychosocial struggling with their violent past, troubling present, and challenging future. It is, therefore, necessary to elaborate on the methodical approach more in detail in the next section.

However, first, three words of caution: Firstly, being German-based researchers conducting a project funded by a prominent German federal enterprise in the Middle East, we are quite aware of the postcolonial implications of our work. We tried to account for that as much as possible by being present in different parts of Northern Iraq every other month throughout the project timeframe and by systematically involving field researchers from the region into the project development, implementation, and discussion of findings.<sup>8</sup> We cannot deny, however, existing power differences, in view of making decisions and dissemination. Secondly, 10 months are clearly not enough to get a comprehensive picture of the complex phenomenon of ISIS's use of child soldiers and its multifaceted

<sup>6</sup> Two roundtable workshops and the project symposium with practical and political key actors were conducted in close cooperation with the regional program *Psychosocial Support for Syrian and Iraqi Refugees and IDPs*, especially with Andreas Löpsinger and Sylvia Wutzke, and the German Civil Peace Service in Iraq in December 2018, March and April 2019. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to work together with Andreas Selmic and his team, especially Nadine Gerdes and Delwer Shakir, and thank all participants for sharing their invaluable experiences and ideas with us.

<sup>7</sup> A draft of the collaborative storytelling manual and the compilation of stories developed by groups of Arab-Sunni and Yezidi children can be provided by the authors of this report, together with information on the research methodology and the actor mapping that resulted from the three stages of the project. We would like to express our thanks to the academic and clinical colleagues that were involved in the development of the method, especially Joram Ronel, Yessica Steinert, Gabriele Rosenthal, Andrea Ploder, and Thomas Kühn, our field researchers, and the roundtable participants for their comments and advice.

<sup>8</sup> The project would not have been successful without the dedicated participation of our field researchers who are named as coauthors of this report on the cover page. We owe them more than just a thank you.



and multileveled consequences in the region. New actors constantly enter the fast changing field, bringing in their particular experiences and ideas. In this regard, the project might have facilitated the constitution of a community of practice that possesses more collective insights than we can hope to achieve. We would like to apologize in advance if some actors and their positions and insights are missing in this report and look forward to getting in touch with them. Thirdly, the political and societal situation is still fragile, thereby impacting the approach to the group of child soldiers. At the very moment of preparing the report, some of our observations and findings could already be overtaken by events.

Two basic limitations of the project also need to be mentioned. First, we set a regional focus on the governorates Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Kirkuk in Northern Iraq because of available research resources. The situation of the children in the Nineveh governorate, especially Mosul as one of the main areas of ISIS, could only be included in the project through key informants and second-hand information. Second, we concentrated on male child soldiers that constituted the largest group of children within the ISIS fighting-related structures and have lacked institutionalized support. It is, of course, important to systematically take into account female child soldiers as well that are certainly in equal need of attention, protection, and support. Their experiences and struggles must not to be silenced through research and politics which happens all too often in post-conflict societies.

This report, hence, is a particular snapshot in time, providing selected observations and insights, empirical data and interpretations, tentative results and recommendations. We address the report to the growing community of practice, to policymakers, and to international donors, hoping that whoever is working on the issue of former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq might find something helpful, informative, or even instructive, looking forward to further exchanges, joint discussions, and collective action.

## 2 Collaborative Storytelling

The fieldwork in October 2018 in Iraq that included ethnographic visits of juvenile detention centers and IDP camps with informal encounters with formerly ISIS-affiliated children made clear that conducting research with former ISIS child soldiers would pose significant methodological, methodical, and ethical challenges to be addressed and meaningfully met by the research design. The issue of child soldiers was (and still is) highly stigmatized, and we expected psychosocial (and not always conscious) dynamics of guilt and shame to shape the interaction with the children. Building trust that is crucial for any qualitative research was regarded to be very difficult to achieve, since even in therapeutic settings, therapists struggled to form trustful relationships with the children. We learned that conversations with therapists were sometimes perceived as disguised interrogations—why would narrative interviews with unknown researchers be seen or felt differently? Sharing their stories could also put the children in danger and do harm to them when held in juvenile detention centers or other institutions where observation or social control is strong. To understand the psychosocial needs of children who pose a highly vulnerable group, we aimed at developing a method that would not expose the children in a problematic way but give them the opportunity and space to decide when and what to share with us. Based on intense discussions with experts working with traumatized and violence-affiliated youths, we proposed collaborative storytelling as a participatory method for working with the children and slightly modified and practically refined it together with the field researchers to meet the requirements in the field.



The basic methodical idea was to set up small groups of three to five children that had been affiliated with ISIS and facilitate a process of collaboratively developing a story of a fictional character of an ISIS child soldier that begins prior to ISIS, follows the character through his ISIS time into the present, with a brief outlook to his possible future. The idea was guided by the following considerations:

- The significance of narratives for research and therapy has widely been stressed. Developing stories as coherent and meaningful narratives in traumatic contexts enables children to integrate their difficult experiences in their identities and distance themselves from the past, as the past can be told as something that has happened but is over now. At the same time, the narrative records and acknowledges their own past as an essential part of their lives.<sup>9</sup>
- Developing a fictional story represents an “as if” mode that is also used in psychotherapeutic approaches. It allows for expressing one’s own story “in the name” of another. This is important whenever issues are shame-ridden, stigmatized, or otherwise problematic to talk about. Articulating biographical experiences in regard to ISIS applies to all three aspects; especially in institutionally controlled settings like the prison, telling one’s own story can be risky and harmful for the children. However, in developing the story together with others, one’s own story can be integrated, the experiences processed and worked through.
- The joint development of a storyline in combination with drawings inherit a playful moment which makes the approach appropriate for working with children. At the same time, it follows the imperative of do not harm, by minimalizing risks of re-traumatization.<sup>10</sup>
- The theory of Keilson et al. (1992) of sequential trauma allows us to understand that the “time after” a key traumatic event/time (here: the time with ISIS) is as important as the time within it (or even more important in terms of the psychosocial consequences). Working on joint stories provides a sense of agency, ownership, and recognition for the children involved in the process and a space for thinking about a future life beyond the current situation. Research-wise, we get a better understanding of their past experiences that are essential to know their present and their current psychosocial situation that form the basis of their storytelling endeavor and future perspectives.
- Finally, collective narratives are decisive in establishing the very basis of articulating individual traumatic experiences. We know from research on the Holocaust that survivors were able to

<sup>9</sup> Brison (1999: 39) remarks: “Working through or remastering traumatic memory involves a shift from being the object or medium of someone else’s speech to being the subject of one’s own. The act of bearing witness to the trauma facilitates the shift not only by transforming traumatic memory into a coherent narrative that can be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world but also by reintegrating the survivor into the community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood. The study of trauma provides support for the view of the self as fundamentally relational-vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and yet resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of others.” See also Pasupathi et al. (2016).

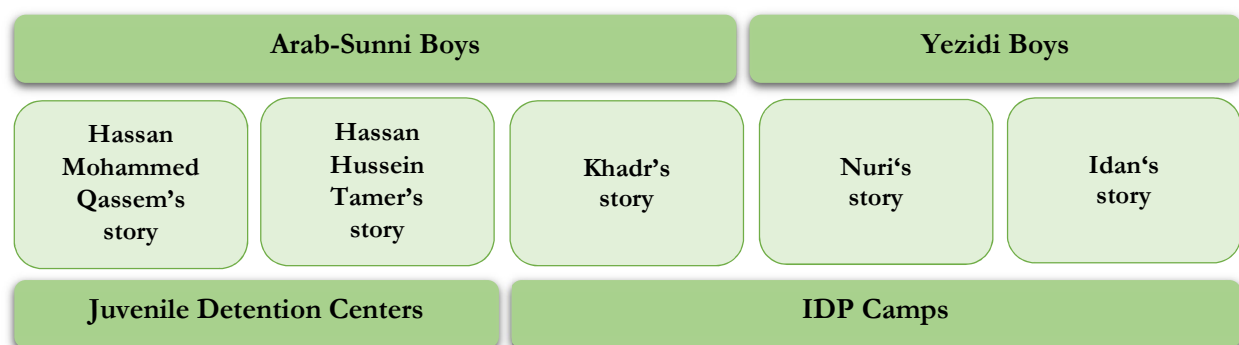
<sup>10</sup> Trauma researchers frequently ask participants to recount their traumatic life events and circumstances in great detail, by using interviews, written narratives, or questionnaires. When participants discuss past traumatic experiences, they probably experience negative emotional reactions. For example, in a study with Vietnam veterans, 30% of the participants reported experiencing feelings of distress (Parslow et al. 2000). In studies with individuals that experienced 9/11 or other terrorist attacks or sexual abuse, an association between distress levels and intensity of stress exposure were observed (Boscarino et al. 2004, Galea et al. 2005, Johnson & Benight 2003, Newman et al. 1999, Walker et al. 1997). Carter-Visscher et al. (2007) conducted a study with college-aged survivors of childhood trauma, in which they examined participants’ descriptions of their abuse and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. In a follow-up session conducted one week later, participants’ reactions to the study were assessed. The researchers found that rates of distress were low and, although the subset of individuals with PTSD symptoms reported more distress when asked about their trauma histories than other participants, the level of distress among participants with and without PTSD symptoms was mild and dissipated over time (Legerski & Bunnell 2010). Therefore, a clear distinction should be made between re-traumatization and emotional distress. Although there may be distress related to research participation, talking about past experiences in the context of a research study is more than unlikely to be equivalent to re-traumatization. Arguing against risks of re-traumatization for not asking people to tell what they have experienced might sometimes be seen as evidence of a particular fear of the researchers of what they might be confronted with as a (for them) unbearable story.





(publicly and often privately) talk about their lives only when a collective or cultural narrative was established (shaped by media and art representations and oral history projects; see, e.g., Langer 2002, Levy & Sznajder 2002). The collective storytelling approach aims at serving this function by providing a diverse narrative of life stories and experiences that other children affiliated with ISIS can use to talk about what they experienced, went through, or actively did.<sup>11</sup> The story collection may constitute the basis of a collective memory for a generation of children that were with ISIS and open up a discursive space to talk about this in a socioculturally meaningful way.

The stories were generated from February to April 2019. The process was guided by our field researchers as facilitators who worked with the children on a regular basis over a long period, usually once or twice a week over a couple of weeks. In total, five stories by former ISIS child soldiers were collected during the course of the project. The stories depict the diverse group of former ISIS child soldiers and their current situation. While two stories were collected in juvenile detention centers where boys from Arab-Sunni background were detained, three stories were collected in IDP camps, two of which were developed by a group of Yezidi children and one by a group of Arab-Sunni children living in an IDP camp for so-called “ISIS families” (see also figure 2).



**Figure 2: Collaborative storytelling—group compositions, settings, and stories by name of their protagonist.**

What can we learn from these stories? How can we work with them methodologically? Even though these stories do not provide direct access to an “authentic” life story of an ISIS former child soldier, they are fueled by individual experiences that are worth being taken seriously.<sup>12</sup> Collective narrating requires a negotiation of plausibility and realism and evokes shared group values, norms, and assumptions as well as perception, understanding, and interpretation patterns.<sup>13</sup>

What does that mean? For example, the analyses suggest structural differences between the stories developed by the Arab-Sunni and Yezidi children. Notions of guilt and shame come up in the stories from the Arab-Sunni boys but not in those collected with the Yezidi boys. While in the stories collected with Yezidi children violence and its exercise by the children themselves is mentioned explicitly, it is missing (or touched rather vaguely) within the stories developed by the Arab-Sunni boys.<sup>14</sup> In their stories different reasons, motives, and pathways are outlined for the choice of the protagonist to join

<sup>11</sup> The Holocaust or other genocide survivors’ narrative is impossible to adopt by these children because they are not perceived as pure victims but also as possible perpetrators—or to be more precise, the victim-perpetrator dichotomy does not work here.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note, for example, that the stories present situations, scenes, and refer to significant moments that have validated expert interviews and or secondhand literature. These stories also give details about aspects we only have anecdotal or marginal information about such as *Dawa kiosks* and their role and impact concerning recruitment.

<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the collaborative storytelling shares similar features with focus group discussions (see, e.g., Blatter et al. 2017, Kitzinger 2005, Kühn & Koschel 2011).

<sup>14</sup> In the story of Hassan Mohammed Qassem, violent actions by ISIS are mentioned, but they serve the purpose of leaving ISIS and do not touch upon the protagonist’s involvement in violent activities.



ISIS, and while references to libidinous experiences of adventure, power, and force are relativized and downplayed, issues of deceived hopes for stability, better social conditions, or a faithful community are emphasized that are more in line with socially accepted motives. Taken together, one could speak of “justification narratives” that can be observed in the groups of Arab-Sunni boys but that were entirely missing in the stories developed by Yezidi children.

We refer to the collaborative stories and key issues of our analyses throughout the report to illustrate the project findings. They also complement insights from other sources that we considered in the project for gaining a better understanding of the recruitment and socialization process, the current situation, and psychosocial needs of the ISIS child soldiers that we outline in the next sections.

### 3 Recruitment and Indoctrination

In 2014, the *Islamic State in Iraq and Syria* (ISIS), also known as *Islamic State in Iraq and Levant* (ISIL) or *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham* (Daesh) gained global prominence by conquering and controlling around 34,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria from the Mediterranean coast to south of Baghdad and proclaiming itself a caliphate. The genocide on the Yezidi community in Sinjar and the reign of terror in Mosul marked sad climaxes of the grave human rights violations by ISIS. Lesser known to date is the group’s vast abuse of thousands of children in combat and combat-related support roles.<sup>15</sup> These children are commonly referred to as child soldiers. Among the definitions that have been proposed and institutionalized in internationally binding conventions and that, e.g., differ in terms of age, the one formulated in the Paris Principles is the most prominent one. It defines a child soldier as

any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities. (UNICEF 2007: 7)

The definition reflects an important diversity: of pathways into armed groups (from recruitment based on some kind or degree of voluntariness to forceful and violent abduction); of armed groups themselves (from the military as governmental institution to any kind of paramilitary or terror organization); of children (with regard, e.g., to age and gender); and of roles and functions within the armed group that could include fighting and killing, but not necessarily, as the term includes all possible misuses of children for military-related purposes (and beyond, as the explicit mentioning of sexualized violence indicates).<sup>16</sup> In the case of ISIS, we differentiate between three different groups, defined by different pathways and subsequent processes of ISIS socialization, tasks, and experiences, as well as corresponding frames of perceiving, feeling, and making sense of the experiences within ISIS and

<sup>15</sup> An estimation of the total number of former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq is difficult since official data are missing and information by NGOs anecdotal. Our working estimation of up to 20,000 children, hence, needs further validation. Additionally, what makes the estimation difficult is the fact that especially Yezidi children along with their families have been resettled to Canada and European countries.

<sup>16</sup> The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court clarified this point in 2002: “The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.” (International Criminal Court 2011). Other and in some aspects diverging definitions of a child soldier are provided by the Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (“Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention”, No. 182) of the International Labour Organization (ILO), entry into force 19 Nov 2000 and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by General Assembly resolution A/RES/54/263 of 25 May 2000, entry into force 12 February 2002.





afterwards: Arab-Sunni children, Yazidi children, and children of foreign fighters.<sup>17</sup> These groups are also object to different ways of political, societal, and juridical dealing with and providing support for the children.<sup>18</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, we have focused on male children of the first two groups in the project.<sup>19</sup>

ISIS followed a multifaceted approach to recruit, indoctrinate, and militarize children. McCue et al. (2017) and Almohammad (2018) argue that this approach is believed to provide ISIS with a transgenerational capability as well as to transcend territorial losses. Also, having children in the ranks of ISIS had a psychological impact on adults, as it shames men to witness children being more “manly” than themselves (Bloom & Horgan 2019). It appears that ISIS recognized that having a sustainable and loyal force required having access to as many children as possible (Morris & Dunning 2018); hence, the group of ISIS child soldiers is a very diverse one. Arab-Sunni boys have been recruited by ISIS in different modes that have been described as structural and/or predatory. While, as we will argue below, the structural mode is embedded in ISIS’s organizational bureaucracy, the predatory recruitment includes the selection of the recruit, gaining access, developing emotional trust, as well as ideological preschooling and agency development (Almohammad 2018).

Mosques appear to be strategically important locations in ISIS-held territories, as they are the single biggest place where children gather and received intensive indoctrination by the ISIS regime. Additionally, ISIS focused on recruiting children who had lost their parents and found themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation. While ISIS provided the children in the orphanages with basic necessities, they simultaneously exposed them to intensive indoctrination. Warrick (2015: 289) notes on the specific situation of orphans in ISIS-held territories the following:

Meanwhile, the city’s hundreds of orphaned children and teens were moved to military camps to learn to shoot rifles and drive suicide trucks. [One] would sometimes see the young ISIS recruits in military convoys, carrying guns and wearing oversized uniforms. “Some of the boys were younger than sixteen... when the schools were closed there was nothing for them to do.”

Additionally to orphanages, ISIS also aggressively recruited in refugee camps. ISIS is very much invested in its media operations in their held territories. Besides the indoctrination in mosques, *Dawa kiosks*, also known as *media kiosks*, are claimed to have a crucial function for recruitment as our data show (see figure 3 with Khadr’s story for illustration).

<sup>17</sup> Horgan et al. (2017) differentiate between “at least five distinct sources”: children of internally displaced people and foreigners; children volunteered by local fighters and civilians; children recruited from local orphanages; children involuntarily taken from their parents; children, many of whom are runaways, who volunteer.

<sup>18</sup> Other or additional categorizations are, of course, possible that are based on the duration of being with ISIS, the different roles within ISIS, or fighting-related experiences.

<sup>19</sup> We included expert interviews on the situation of children of foreign fighters coming from countries like Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, or Russia. The mostly orphaned children were returned by NGOs to their home communities that were not affected by ISIS in the way we see in Iraq and Syria. The children seem not to face the kind of stigma in their communities that former child soldiers experience in Northern Iraq. The families (often grandparents) and communities, however, are faced with a similar uncertainty and helplessness in dealing with them. Children of foreign—and now returning—ISIS fighters (that we do not have included in our study) have become a hot topic also in Western countries in which problematic concepts of radicalization are used that frame these children only as possible security risks. In both contexts, the need for timely development and implementation of support structures for the children is obvious.



“When Khadr went to the market with his father, the regime was showing how to train children on large television screens set up on public roads. They also hung these screens where young people and children would gather, trying to drag them into their ranks. Khadr saw these clips on television and he asked himself: ‘Why don’t I join this organization? People will praise me, be afraid of me...’”



**Figure 3: Excerpt from Khadr’s story and drawing of the boy in ISIS clothes with a weapon.**

data, Almohammad (2018) describes how predatory recruitment by ISIS (gaining access, developing emotional trust, as well as ideological preschooling and agency development) is comparable to pedophiles’ child grooming processes. ISIS recruiters have been observed to employ grooming processes over a relatively extended period of time. For successful grooming, in the case of ISIS recruiters, a set of manipulative as well as coercive actions are required that are targeted both at children and their communities, so that their enlistment and deployment can be done without much attention and resistance. ISIS recruiters employ strategies that can be conceptualized as deceptive trust development<sup>20</sup> that are also employed by child molesters. In the case of ISIS recruiters, the deceptive trust development concept is defined as the recruiters’ ability to nurture ties and relationships with a potential recruit. The recruiter builds a personal relationship with the child by showing interest, providing social support, and showering the child with

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attention, food, gifts, and other material goods. This phase of recruitment is marked by increased feelings of trust and attachment as well as cooperation. This stage is of significant importance because the recruiter can turn the child against his family. Similar to pedophiles’ process of gradually desensitizing children to touching, ISIS recruiters have subjected children gradually to their ideology and acts of violence. During the course of grooming, ISIS recruiters isolate children physically and psychologically. Especially in the case of orphans, ISIS recruitment appears to resemble pedophiles’ exploitation of children’s psychological and material vulnerabilities.

The structural mode, however, is a central and organized system that utilizes the various resources and experience found in ISIS’s education, media, mosques, and enlistment directorates. Education plays a decisive role in convincing children and young people to adopt radical views or absorb a group’s ideology. Benotman & Malik (2016) as well as a report by War Child (2019) state that the former school curriculum was replaced by ISIS with strict religious Salafist teachings, strict rules on dress for the students, and subjects such as drawing, music, nationalism, history, and philosophy, as well as social studies were removed and replaced with the memorization of the Quran, *tawbeed* (monotheism), *salat* (prayer), and *aqeeda* (creed). Standard texts were combined with Jihadist messages (such as math assignments; see also figure 4). Physical education was renamed to Jihadi training, a combat-based education including wrestling, shooting, and swimming. The curriculum changed significantly; while specific subjects were removed completely, others were heavily redacted to ensure ideological

<sup>20</sup> Almohammed (2018) refers here to the deceptive trust development model proposed by Olson et al. (2007).



uniformity. Anything in the curriculum that even implied issues such as charging financial interest, calling for elections, or establishing democracy was removed.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 4: Examples of ideological indoctrination—(upper) pages of textbooks on Arabic literature, grammar, and mathematics, all showing weapons and (lower) screenshot of an app that provides a game setting where children can attack Western fighter jets or the Eiffel tower (Molloy 2017, Lakomy 2019).**

While many children were lured to join ISIS by indoctrination and promises for material betterment and prospects of power and status, as well as admiration by the militants and the public alike, other children were forcefully recruited. ISIS has been abducting large numbers of children regardless of ethnicity and religion. From August 2014 until June 2015, hundreds of boys, including Yazidis and Turkmen, were forcibly abducted from their families in Nineveh and taken to ISIS-held territories. After the abduction, the boys were converted forcefully to Islam and given Arabic names. By giving the boys new names, ISIS attempted to impose new identities on these boys. The abducted boys were integrated in the ISIS-held territories, where they were placed together with other children in ISIS-controlled educational facilities, obliged to learn Arabic, and receive ISIS's ideological indoctrination and combat training in military compounds. For the process of militarization, the children were separated from the family unit and were not allowed to have visitors; being split from the family unit appears as a necessary prerequisite to breaking down resistance (Bloom & Horgan 2019).

Children living in Syria and Iraq have been witnesses and victims of air strikes, bombings, and other forms of violence. Many have experienced deaths of close family members as well as community members. Children have to some extent become accustomed to violent events and, in some cases, even participated in public displays of violence, including punishments and executions. ISIS has systematically desensitized and normalized violence toward children.

<sup>21</sup> The severe impact of ISIS's reign on education was not limited only to the level of schools but also at the university level. After IS took over Mosul in 2014, studies of law, political science, and fine arts at the University of Mosul were terminated, and Islamic studies and other aspects of the university's curriculum radically changed. Mixed-sex education or coeducation ended, and males and females attended the university separately.



Our data as well as secondary literature suggest a systematic pattern of normalization to violence, e.g., by exposing children from a very young age to toys that mimic weapons, making children witness executions and stoning or even aid and participate in public displays of violence, including punishment and executions such as beheadings (see figure 5). ISIS also changed for the purpose of militarization the outward appearances of children by making them wear military uniforms. An interesting observation from the analysis of the child soldiers stories may be noted: In describing the protagonists' ISIS uniforms, the groups referred to "Afghan style clothes" or "Pakistani clothes", thereby suggesting a "foreign" root of ISIS, ISIS is linked to "other" countries, their fighters coming from "outside" (see also figure 3).

Some differences and similarities between the stories we collected from former ISIS child soldiers can be mentioned. The groups of Yazidi children describe in detail the forceful change of religions and the process of militarization (see figure 5 for an example); the stories generated by Arab-Sunni boys do not touch upon the process of militarization except for the fact that they were temporarily separated from the family. Common in the stories despite the different backgrounds is, however, how by becoming part of ISIS, their lives were disrupted, they were subjected to an entirely different reality of life, and how their outward appearances were changed (see also figure 5). An aspect that is unique in the stories generated by the Arab-Sunni children is the way the family dynamics change once the protagonist joins ISIS. Joining ISIS is experienced as empowering also in the context of family dynamics and within the communities. Despite their young age, the protagonists of the stories are feared by their families. Alienation from family and former friends is reported and a new sense of community and belonging among ISIS comrades desired.

Nuri's story illustrates the process of forceful abduction, socialization, indoctrination, and desensitization to violence by ISIS. After the capture of their village in Sinjar, the protagonist observed that "ISIS separated the men, boys, girls, and women" and—without getting into details here about the consequences of this separation—was transferred without family members to Mosul with other children where he was sold to an ISIS group leader called AbuMujahid. He was converted to Islam and was forced to pray and attend Quran lectures. Becoming a fighter is portrayed as a learning process that requires overcoming internal struggles and hardships:

AbuMujahid took Nuri to weapons training camps, and Nuri quickly learned how to use rifles and pistols. Even though the rifle was a bit heavy for him, and he preferred the pistol, he still had to learn to handle it. Nuri found it fun to shoot, and he felt that he was becoming a strong man. As Nuri learned to shoot very well, AbuMujahid ordered him to execute a prisoner, but Nuri was scared and cried, "I can't." The next day, Nuri was ordered to execute a black dog, which he did so using a 9 mm pistol.

AbuMujahid is progressively presented as a new father figure for Nuri in the story, a role model in terms of fighting as well:

Whenever AbuMujahid changed homes, he took Nuri with him. AbuMujahid even took Nuri with him when raiding houses and to places where ISIS was executing rebels. Three years had gone by, and Nuri had become stronger and bigger and was now able to carry a rifle with him along with a pistol. Nuri learned how to drive trucks, and he also rode tanks in Syria sometimes.



**Figure 5:** Excerpts from Nuri's story, including drawings



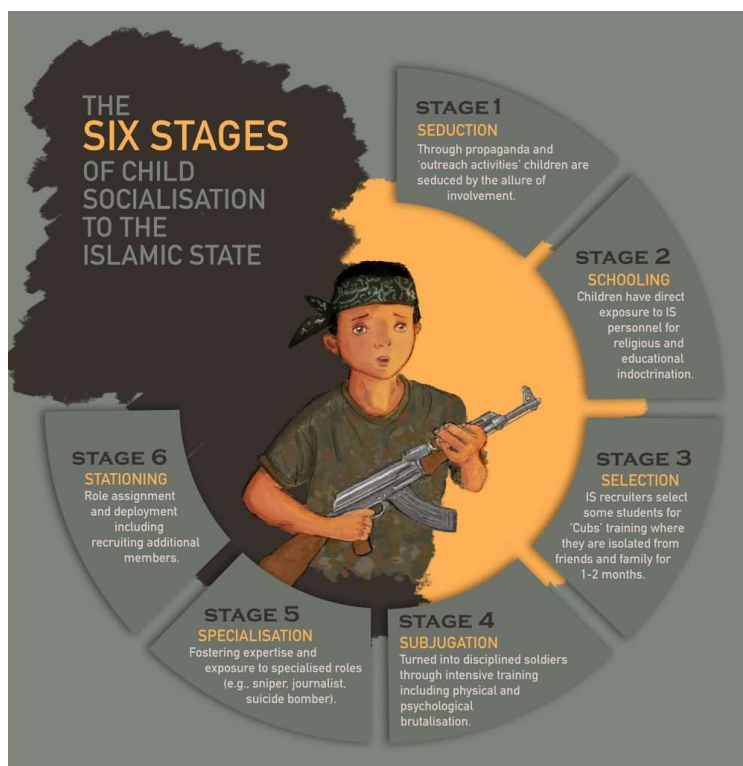


Among several experts in the region working with former child soldiers, Heing (2018) points out that ISIS did not solely focus on fear or manipulation to gain the children's loyalty but also fostered situations where children were able to develop feelings of connection that make it more difficult to leave the group. Accounts given by former child soldiers as well as in the collaborative stories elaborated that the conditions in the military camps were horrendous—the children were mentally and physically exhausted, yet these experiences built camaraderie, and the children formed close bonds with one another and felt pride in what they were doing (see Bloom & Horgan 2019).

After receiving military training, the children were (mis)used as spies, soldiers, and suicide bombers. For instance, in their roles as spies, children were urged to report on family and community members who did not oblige to the rules and practices set by ISIS. The data collection especially with former child soldiers illustrates also how children executed power over their parents and siblings and how power dynamics shifted in the families.

It is assumed that those children who succeeded at the stage of being a spy were given roles with greater responsibilities. On the frontline, children were also trained to spy on the enemy. As mentioned

above, children were trained in combat skills from an early stage and learned how to fight on the frontline, but also how to guard the headquarters as well as how to manufacture explosives, become snipers, and guard checkpoints. Since children were trained as suicide bombers, they were also instructed to wear suicide vests while performing other tasks such as guarding in cases of attacks (Benotman & Malik 2016). Based on his research with Bloom on children's mobilization into violent extremist organizations (Bloom & Horgan 2019), Horgan has proposed a model of socialization to ISIS that systematizes the stages described above (see figure 6).

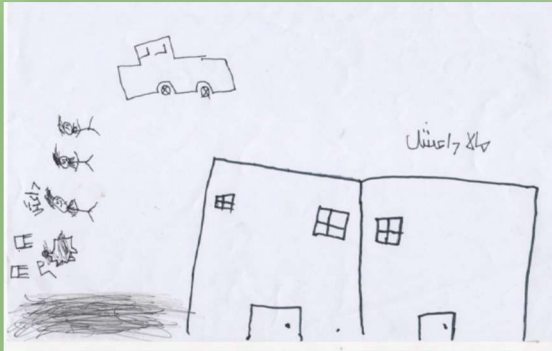


**Figure 6: Stage model of socialization to ISIS (Horgan 2017).**

The children's time with ISIS could not be systematically explored within our project. The diversity and complexities of experiences exceed the framework of an explorative study by far. The collaboratively developed stories remain rather vague in view of the protagonists' ISIS time (see also figure 7).



“Idan’s life turned upside down after this tragic and dark adventure with ISIS—his days became black. He was separated from his mother and brothers, and he turned from an innocent child into a fighter trained to use weapons, to murder, and to use terrorism while at the ISIS camps in Raqqa. They changed his name from Idan to Jaafar and replaced his beautiful children’s clothes for those worn by the ISIS fighters: a long black dress. He was not allowed to cut his hair, which had to remain long to resemble the hair of ISIS fighters. Idan suffered from hunger due to the lack of food. He used to awake in the morning to look for breadcrumbs and some old yogurt just to quell his hunger. He would lead this life for nearly four years...



The house in which Idan (Jaafar) lived, his stay with ISIS. As we notice from the picture, there are people representing ISIS, in the eyes of Idan (Jaafar), and there is a dead ISIS soldier lying on the ground...

Idan turned into an angry, aggressive, and sad person. He missed his family, his loved ones, and his beautiful village of Kocho. Initially, he had not been aware of what was happening or what the outcome of the training would be, but in the end, he would realize that he was to become a fighter, fighting alongside ISIS against the people of his homeland.”

**Figure 7: Excerpts from Idan’s story – Idan’s time with ISIS**

The interviews with professionals working with former ISIS child soldiers in the region provided very dense information about particular “cases” that cannot be generalized but point at often extremely traumatizing experiences that psychosocial support needs to address (see figure 8 for an example of a case reconstructed from an interview with a psychotherapist).

14

Khalil was a 15-year-old teenager when he was brought to a NGO for psychotherapy in 2018. Until the ISIS attack at Sinjar, he had lived a “normal” life in a small village with his family. When the people from the village were captured and transported by ISIS in August 2014, they were forcefully “stripped” of their belongings and initially separated into two groups—mothers and children. His father was killed in front of the boy. This strategy by ISIS is of great sociological interest since it resembles the total institution structure presented by Goffman (1961). There was a basic split between a large captive group of children and mothers (inmates) and a supervisory group of soldiers (staff) with restricted contact and exclusion of knowledge of the decisions taken regarding the fate of the captive group. The stripping of belongings and each other’s support marks the beginning of the degradation and profanation of the self. The boy was given a new Arabic name and was forced to convert to Islam. Following this initial ISIS strategy, the children were sent to school where they were taught the Koran and the Arabic language while they were also allowed to be placed with their mothers during the night. This tactic represents an integration process to a new life, especially since after three months, ISIS moved the mothers to another place, and the separation process between mother and child began. After a year and a half, Khalil was moved together with the other boys to a military base to receive their military training of 21 days and became a guard, working for ISIS as a security soldier. The boy was ultimately involved in 10 fights. On his last fight, he was told to put a dynamite device and detonate himself with a group of other children at a security post. However, this operation was unsuccessful due to a technical problem with the bomb’s mechanism. This led to his participation in another operation which was once again unsuccessful since the Russians bombed the ISIS group on their way to the operation location. The boy was injured and transported to a hospital by ISIS members. There, Khalil was able to clandestinely use a mobile phone with internet access, which became a decisive factor in his liberation.

**Figure 8: Reconstruction of key events of a boy abducted by ISIS, based on an interview with a psychotherapist.**





## 4 Current Situation

What do we know about the present situation of formerly ISIS-affiliated children? Some boys were able to flee from ISIS's captivity; others were freed in return for a ransom payment. The majority, however, remained under the control of ISIS until the liberation of ISIS-held territories in central Iraq. Since then, the majority of those children and adolescents who were recruited and mobilized by ISIS have been under the surveillance and detention of the authorities in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) and Central Iraq and prosecuted under antiterrorism legislation. This legislation is specially designed to deal with terrorist groups like ISIS. However, the implementation of this legislation seems rather problematic in the sense that proof that somebody supported ISIS or war efforts in some way is enough for the courts to issue a guilty verdict. There is no proof needed that crimes were committed by an individual; the support is sufficient. This legislation has been implemented in KRI as well as in Iraq, with the difference that, in KRI, unlike in Central Iraq, there is no death sentence. Like the actual numbers of child soldiers within ISIS, the number of former ISIS child soldiers in the prisons and detention centers in Iraq is unknown. For 2018, *The Children and Armed Conflicts. Report of the Secretary General* stated that at least 902 children remained in juvenile detention facilities on national security-related charges, most of them due to their alleged affiliation with ISIS. The conducted interviews with experts and a report by Human Rights Watch (January 2019) point out that formerly ISIS-affiliated children are subject to torture in the juvenile and detention centers as well as during the investigations by the Iraqi and Kurdish intelligence services. Also, the lack of legal counseling and unfair trials are criticized. After release from detention centers, Arab-Sunni boys are placed in remote or isolated camps, lacking even basic facilities, where only families of ISIS members are detained. These boys face heavy stigma and currently lead lives in camps with no prospects (see figure 9 for an example of former ISIS child soldiers with an Arab-Sunni background).

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**Figure 9: Excerpts from two child soldiers' stories.**

In Khadr's story, the struggle for access to education after liberation from ISIS is described:

Khadr wanted to go to school to ensure his future, at least after what had happened to him, but the school wouldn't accept him unless he went to Mosul to gather some documents. They knew he was unable to go to Mosul out of a fear that the Iraqi army would arrest him once again, since they were unfamiliar with the decisions made by the Kurdish region and didn't know that he had been prosecuted. He looked at others and felt a sense of sadness when he saw them going to school, knowing that he couldn't.

A strong sense of a lack of future prospects that goes beyond the inaccessibility of education is inscribed in Hassan's story:

Hassan now lives in the Kokli district of Mosul, after spending a period at the Khazar camp. During his time at the camp, he was arrested by the camp security and interrogated, but due to his young age and their inability to take him seriously, the police let him go. His daily life routine is back to how it used to be before ISIS. He wakes up and helps his family with the housework, milking cows, making milk and cheese, and enjoying his daily activities, such as riding bicycles and playing video games. His family made an agreement with his relatives that they would try to keep the electricity connected so Hassan would not get bored. Their financial condition was very good on account of being able to save the money they collected during the ISIS occupation. Hassan has not completed his studies. His desire to be with his friends, to be in his home region, and to lead life as he had before the ISIS occupation is strong beyond description. He did not know the value of stability until he had lost it, but his sense of loss is great, and it may not be possible to regain it: the thing missing for Hassan is trust around him, and he now fears people, and problems occupy the bulk of his life, but the good thing about being new to this area is that nobody knows him, nor does he know anybody.

The sequence is alarming due to the imagined normalcy it describes and the sharp ambivalences it contains. Liberation from ISIS comes with arrest and interrogation. Non-punishment results from not being taken seriously by security agencies. The power and agency he had with ISIS is neglected; he finds himself in a dependent situation with pre-ISIS daily routines in a post-ISIS world that would never be the same as before. It may not come as a surprise then that the time with ISIS is remembered positively in view of social status for the entire family, without feelings of guilt and shame. What would happen, one might ask, if Hassan gets bored?



Continuing education is not possible since they often lack documents they are required to obtain from their hometowns; however, a return to their respective hometowns seems for now impossible since *Hash'd al Shaabi* (Shiite Militia) controls these areas, and their lives would be in imminent danger if they returned. There are very few services by NGOs for the group of Arab-Sunni former child soldiers since it seems highly problematic to secure funding for those that are perceived as perpetrators. Consequently, there are hardly any psychosocial or therapeutic services for this group at all in place. This group of child soldiers is highly stigmatized, and currently, there seems to be hardly any possibility for processing their experiences and finding ways to deal with these experiences.

Our analysis of the interviews conducted in KRI suggests that former Yezidi child soldiers were not held in detention for a long time if they were interrogated by the Asayish (the primary Kurdish intelligence agency) and did not indicate a security threat. If possible, they were allowed to join their families that mostly live in IDP camps; otherwise, they were placed alone in the camps. There are nearly 24 refugee camps in the governorates of Dohuk and Zakho where these boys are accommodated. These camps house up to 28,000 refugees. The resources in the IDP camps where most of these children are placed are scarce. As mentioned above, Heing (2018) as well as several experts in the region working with former child soldiers point out regarding Daesh/ISIS's socialization that ISIS did not solely focus on fear or manipulation to gain the children's loyalty but also fostered situations where children were able to develop feelings of connection that make it more difficult to leave the group. As mentioned in the section on recruitment, the boys were groomed by ISIS, and there are multiple cases of Yezidi children reported who want their "ISIS life" back. We take up this troubling issue in section 5 of this report. There are to some extent psychosocial services and therapeutic services for former Yezidi child soldiers in place; however, they lack a consistent conceptualization. The interviews with therapists working with former Yezidi child soldiers suggest that this group is in particular overwhelming to work with; hence, they try out different therapeutic methods that, however, are not evidence based but ad hoc decisions. There is also no systematic and meaningful connection of therapeutic and psychosocial services. In general, the assessment of the current situation shows major gaps in political action, legal processing, and psychosocial support, as well as high levels of social stigma.

The condensed outline of the current situation clearly shows that we deal within a highly complex, contested, politicized, and emotionalized field. It involves multiple actors, from national and regional politics, national and international law, donors, communities, and NGOs focusing on human rights, reconciliation, psychosocial and therapeutic support. They differ more or less significantly in their perceptions of the children. How they define what it means and what is involved in being a former ISIS child soldier influences, shapes, or even determines their response to the challenge these children pose for achieving their goals in terms of security, transitional justice, societal integration, empowerment, or mental health.

From a human rights perspective, for example, the children clearly represent traumatized victims of war, an understanding that is also grounded in the Paris Principles (2007: 9) that state that these children "should be considered primarily as victims of offences against international law, not only as perpetrators". From a political and criminal justice perspective of governmental or societal actors that successfully fought against the existential threat posed by ISIS, perceiving the children as perpetrators is also understandable, as they were part of the ISIS regime, its actions, and its killings. The two distinct readings are inscribed in the semantic tension that brings together connotations of an innocent child and a soldier whose job description includes the killing of others. The chances to be categorized as one



or the other, however, are not equally distributed between the groups. While Yazidi boys are more likely to be perceived as forcefully abducted victims, Arab-Sunni boys are more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators, by assuming a voluntary decision to join ISIS. To be more precise: It seems to be more difficult to refer and offer psychosocial services and work with Arab-Sunni boys as victims in the direct aftermath of ISIS. These perceptions bring about different institutional frameworks for dealing with them as “cases”.

### Some Notes on Stigma

Categorization matters. In view of former ISIS child soldiers, categorizations deeply affect the children themselves. Taylor (1994: 25) notes:

our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.

Goffman (1963) wrote of stigma as a “spoiled identity” or damaged self. Perpetuating the stigma attached to children as ISIS soldiers brings about a consequential devaluation and dis-recognition, its externalization may backfire on its sources: Betancourt et al. (2010), for example, found that “post-conflict experiences of discrimination largely explained the relationship between past involvement in wounding/killing others and subsequent increases in hostility. Stigma similarly mediated the relationship between surviving rape and depression”. Needless to say, discrimination and marginalization is exactly one “promising” source of re-radicalization—a problematic term that we use purposefully here for stressing the consequences of stigma; a perpetuating pattern: youth marginalization before a war easily becomes remarginalization after it. We, therefore, call for a reframing of the debates on former child soldiers that programmatically centers around the concept of “children in need of protection”.

To note an obvious point: While being forced to join did not make anyone immune to fighting and killing or even against enjoying the fighting and the killing, having joined ISIS by choice does not necessarily mean that those child soldiers did some kind of harm to others or were engaged in criminal actions. Even when children did engage in criminal action during their ISIS time, they must also be seen as victims in the sense that they were targeted, groomed, and exploited to elicit violence in the service of others (Bloom & Horgan 2019). As long as the stigma attached to the children and the threats for their lives and limbs persist, it may be necessary to emphasize their status of a victim within a human rights framework. The very experiences of ISIS child soldiers, however, call for moving beyond this dichotomy, as they transcend both the victim and perpetrator position. Stressing just one—the victim *or* the perpetrator—position falls short if we want to understand their struggle to cope with what they have lived through. While it is maybe difficult but somehow possible to

empathize with their suffering as victims of extreme violence, it may seem nearly impossible to explore their experiences of power over people, of belonging to a terrorist regime, of a lust of killing—without judging. At least in view of societal reconciliation and psychosocial as well as therapeutic support, it is decisive to give space and voice for these seemingly unbearable traces of experiences—unbearable for both maybe the child as well as the professional working with him. Ignoring this dimension would neglect their agency in the situation, reducing them to passive objects. Acknowledging their subjectivity, therefore, is a precondition for helping them to integrate psychologically the stark ambivalence and contradictions. Otherwise, socially more desirable narratives of justification may surface and cover up feelings of excitement and power linked to the ISIS time. The stories of Arab-Sunni boys in our project illustrate this tendency: they try to rationally relate the decision of joining ISIS to religious, economic, and social aspects, but a second narrative strand also gives insights into the emotional side of reasons to join ISIS.



Thinking collaboratively about measurements with colleagues who work in psychosocial settings with former ISIS child soldiers brought up crucial questions such as: Can a child who has killed in war be reached for reintegration and therapy at all? Is there a tipping point? Is it the experience of fighting, of killing, maybe even of multiple killings (i.e., the normalization of killing), that makes a or *the* difference? From a social psychological perspective, answering these questions is, again, more than difficult because it disregards the complexity of experiences and their implications. Someone who was never engaged in any kind of fighting while with ISIS, for example, may still be highly identified with the regime afterwards and stuck to their goals, and someone with fighting experience who killed in combat may well be able to distance himself from his past actions and contribute significantly to a process of postwar peace building and societal reconciliation and vice versa. In regard to the experience of having killed, empirical data suggest a significant difference between former child soldiers that identified with ISIS's ideology (showing less PTSD symptoms and feelings of guilt and shame but a greater ability to adapt to a new situation) and those who did not easily go with the ideology (showing higher PTSD symptoms and feelings of guilt and shame *and* had significantly less openness to reconciliation and more feelings of revenge). Hence, while certain actions with ISIS may lead to persecution (in line with international law that sets strict limits in this respect), the experience of having killed someone with ISIS as such does not promise much knowledge of or insights into the psychosocial needs and chances of societal participation and should not be referred to for outlining or legitimizing respective actions.<sup>22</sup> In view of psychosocial and therapeutic efforts, instead of focusing on the issue of killing, we suggest that it would be important to understand the children's subjective experiences and affective involvement: How did they experience their time with ISIS? What was important for them and why? How did they feel about it? How do they feel about it now? What did they miss there? What do they miss now? Are guilt and shame relevant categories for them, or is it more about mourning or anger? Questions like these enable us to better contextualize the everyday routines and struggles of the children within ISIS that a focus on killing as the extreme often ignores.

Are there spaces in the current life worlds of the children for addressing these questions? In order to get an overview of psychosocial services that are already in place, we conducted an actor and service mapping (see section 1 for details). The 49 organizations that provided information about their services can be differentiated in view of their relatedness to former ISIS child soldiers, by applying four categories that evolved from the analysis:

- (1) NGOs that explicitly work with/provide services to former ISIS child soldiers among other target groups;
- (2) NGOs that include former ISIS child soldiers in their work/services along with other children without differentiation;
- (3) NGOs that do not know whether there are former ISIS child soldiers among the children they provide services to;
- (4) NGOs that explicitly do not work with/provide services to former ISIS child soldiers.

The majority of the organizations (25 of 49; 51%) reported not to have any cases of former ISIS child soldiers or not to work with former ISIS child soldiers. Four organizations (8%) stated that they do

<sup>22</sup> It may be superfluous to note, but speaking of reintegration is fuzzy and ill-defined because the situation before ISIS cannot be restored; history cannot be deleted; neither society nor the youths will ever be in a pre-ISIS condition. We propose speaking of participation in different sectors of society (e.g., education, labor market, health system, culture, politics) instead which requires actions from both sides, the children as well as key actors in these sectors; the willingness to participate must resonate with created and provided opportunities for participation.





not know (or do not want to know) whether former child soldiers are among their clients. It is noteworthy that these four organizations are from Kirkuk. The field researchers that contacted these organizations suggested, often based on the answers of the staff they talked with, security issues to be the reasons for the organizational reluctance to acquire certain information about the children. In our inquiry, nine organizations (18 %) reported to know (or strongly assume) that former child soldiers are among their clients but stressed that they would provide the same service to every child, without taking into account the backgrounds and war-related experiences of the children. Many of these organizations also were quite reluctant to share information about what they know about the children.<sup>23</sup> Security concerns were regularly given as reasons for not distinguishing between former child soldiers and other war-affected children. Confidentiality was seen as imperative. Eleven organizations (22%) explicitly work with and provide particular services to former ISIS child soldiers as one group of clients among others. They provided information about their approaches, including certain methods and techniques they use in working psychosocially with former child soldiers. In addition to relaxation techniques, a mixture of established psychotherapeutic methods were mentioned that mainly refer to particular conceptualizations of trauma (as PTSD) and (cognitive-driven) interventions (like cognitive behavioral therapy [CBT] or narrative exposure therapy [NET]). No organization, however, could provide a coherent theoretical or methodological framework. This also applies to the only organization that solely related to former child soldiers in its work, but we are careful to point out that this organization was founded just recently and has, to our knowledge, just started with its work.<sup>24</sup>

We, therefore, could identify only eleven organizations that provide particular psychosocial services for former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq. Consistent psychosocial and psychotherapeutic approaches are missing. We would like to emphasize that the organizations and the staff involved in working with these children are extraordinarily engaged; however, empirically and theoretically well-founded approaches and methods are lacking that could inform the training of the professionals and volunteers in the field. Another gap in the field refers to the (nonexistent) systematic conflation of reintegration and psychosocial efforts.

Many difficulties in acquiring information hint at a high degree of stigma related to child soldiers and existential risks, not only for the children themselves but the organizations working with and for them.

## 5 Psychosocial Needs and Implications for Support

Let us start with noting a remarkable discrepancy from our review of existing research on child soldiers: While there are dozens of studies presenting the psychological and psychosocial damages of child

<sup>23</sup> The informal interviews with staff members gave some insights into the “methods” they applied in order to identify children who might have been affiliated with ISIS. These include, e.g., observational techniques (by looking for certain aggressive behavior, realizing children playing with sticks as weapons to kill others, watching children marching militarily, etc.) or a systematic questioning within psychosocial sessions (by asking about their dreams or their willingness to hurt others, etc.). We put “methods” in quotation marks to stress that these strategies used are not more than indicative of some kind of ISIS affiliation and lack empirical validation. However, we decided to report on them because they impact the way staff members interact with the children.

<sup>24</sup> The actor and service mapping still contains several blind spots that call for further research in this regard. First, we do not have systematic information about organizations working with children in Mosul as one of the main cities ruled by ISIS and do not know much about the situation of former child soldiers outside of institutionalized context, e.g., after returning to their places of origin before ISIS. Second, we need to retry contacting organizations that have not answered our requests or that have provided only vague information in order to substantiate the list. We suggest regular reviews and updates of the information, especially for those organizations that already work with the children of concern to take up their experiences. Third, more detailed and in-depth information about the particular approaches and experiences of working with these children is needed to be able to assess what currently works (and how, under which conditions) and what might not make sense.



soldiering, only a handful of studies elaborate on psychosocial and therapeutic approaches and their effects with former child soldiers.

We know a lot about the high prevalence of measurable psychopathological conditions, especially PTSD, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.<sup>25</sup> These findings are reflected in beginning research on former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq. A study recently conducted by Kizilhan & Noll-Housong (2018), for instance, shows that the formerly abducted Yezidi child soldiers show a significantly high prevalence of PTSD (48.3%), somatic disturbances (50.6%), depressive disorders (45.6%), and anxiety disorders (45.8%). The authors also state that self-esteem was significantly reduced in former Yezidi child soldiers. Major behavioral and emotional problems have also been reported widely. Some studies suggest, for instance, that the ability to identify facial emotions in general and of negative emotions—especially sadness—in particular may be impaired in former child soldiers. Behavioral problems are reported in terms of aggression and violence, including sexualized violence and—later in life—domestic violence in partnerships.<sup>26</sup> They can also be linked to high prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV and syphilis as consequences of sexually risky behavior among former child soldiers. The bottom line of the study, regardless of their differences, e.g., in view of prevalence data, is: The experience of having been a child soldier and living on under precarious and often insecure and stigmatizing conditions deeply impacts and impairs—over a very long term—psychological integrity, resulting in severe interrelated mental health and interpersonal problems. Bluntly speaking: We cannot and should not expect the children to be “healed” from what they went through, not now, not in one year or in 10 years, never. What we can hope for is to support them in their struggle to get to a point of “living with it” and under conditions that allow them to strive for a future worth living.

Numerous factors have been identified that fuel this dynamic, like the exposure to traumatic events (in regard to their number and severity), including having observed the killing of others and having participated in killings or the loss of close relatives, the duration of stay within the armed group, the kind of recruitment, and the age at time of recruitment. Results further indicate that perceived stigma within society or the community demonstrates an important relationship to externalizing and internalizing problems among former child soldiers. We have also mentioned some other troubling findings that indicate that identification with the group’s ideology and aggression when being exposed to the victim’s struggling can lead to a substantial risk reduction for developing PTSD and come along with reduced feelings of guilt and shame. In other (and a bit simplified) words: If one enjoyed killing, he probably would not feel that bad and struggle with a bad conscience later on. Having strong feelings of guilt and shame increases the risk for PTSD, and showing more PTSD symptoms is related to significantly less openness to reconciliation and more feelings of revenge.<sup>27</sup> Decreases in adaptive and

<sup>25</sup> The findings differ, however, significantly, which could be explained by different regional contexts, definition of a child soldier, the composition of the researched groups, and the concepts and methods of measuring. In one of the first studies on the issue, Derluyn et al. (2004) wrote that 97% of the 71 children in the study who were abducted by the Northern Ugandan rebellion movement Lord’s Resistance Army reported posttraumatic stress reactions of clinical importance. Including former Ugandan and Congolese child soldiers, Bayer et al. (2007) noted that, of the 169 children interviewed, 59 (35%) had a PTSD symptom score higher than 35. A study on former child soldiers attending a rehabilitative service and primary school education in Northern Uganda, Ovuga et al. (2008) found that 56% of the children suffered from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, 88% from symptoms of depressed mood.

<sup>26</sup> There is, to our knowledge, no study yet on transgenerational transmission of traumatizing events in the context of child soldiers, but research on German young soldiers at the end of the Second World War indicates that the experience of war is passed on to further generations, often unconsciously.

<sup>27</sup> In our collection of stories by former ISIS child soldiers, issues of guilt and shame are mostly absent. Considering the methodical concept of collaboratively developing a fictional story, this datum does not, however, be understood as evidence of any kind of lustfully conducted violence during their ISIS time but need to be taken into account when thinking about therapeutic and psychosocial approaches for working with the children. As professionals, we would expect the children to feel guilt and shame and, therefore, need to understand the psychological meaning and consequences of a lack of these feelings (or of the ability to relate to or express them).





prosocial behaviors were also reported to be “associated with killing/injuring others during the war and (sic!) postconflict stigma, but (sic!) partially mitigated by social support, being in school and increased community acceptance... Family acceptance, social support, and educational/economic opportunities were associated with improved psychosocial adjustment” (Betancourt et al. 2013: 17).

Adding onto the last point, we also know a lot from these studies about protective factors, i.e., psychosocial conditions that enable former child soldiers to cope with the challenges in a more or less “good” way and find a place in the new social order of a postconflict society. There is an overwhelming consent that social support (by the community, the family, teachers, peers) plays a—*or the*—significant role in coming to terms with the past experience and present challenges psychologically and adjusting to social expectations and norms (“decreased hostility” and “adaptive attitudes and behaviors”, as Betancourt et al. 2010 calls it). We can understand social support in a broader sense as well, by emphasizing the importance of socioeconomic stability, access to education and the labor market, and of course: a reduction of stigma attached to the children. Werner (2012: 553) takes up some of the aspects, by resuming:

### Some Notes on Trauma

Over the last decades, trauma has become a major – if not the major – conceptual framework to address experiences of violence and suffering (Fassin & Rechtman 2009). Different conceptualizations of trauma can be distinguished (Langer, Ronel, Dymzyk & Brehm 2020):

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as the most influential **clinical concept** was added to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) of the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. Critical trauma scholars have pointed out that the political dimension that fueled its institutionalization (in grounding it in respect to experiences of political violence and torture, war and genocide) has widely been lost, resulting in a decontextualized, individualized, and psychopathologizing understanding of traumatic experiences (see, e.g., Herzog 2017; Nguyen 2011). They also assumes a return to a (“*post*-traumatic”) normalcy that cannot be taken for granted under conditions of ongoing conflicts. We share this criticism, but would like to acknowledge, nevertheless, the value of using the concept of PTSD for discussing therapeutic responses to the suffering it denotes.

In comparison, **psychosocial and social conceptualizations** emphasize the importance of taking into account the concrete historical, political, and societal contexts in which traumatic violence is enacted and experienced and that frame the ways victims of such violence can (or cannot) deal with these experiences, individually and as members of a particular group (see, e.g., Becker 2004; Langer & Brehm 2020). Referring to Bettelheim’s concept of “extreme situations” one might speak of “extreme traumatization” that occurs when “we are suddenly catapulted into a series of conditions where our adaptive mechanisms and former values are no longer valid; moreover, some of them may even put the very lives they were meant to protect in jeopardy” (Bettelheim, 1952). In these situations, Giddens (1984: 64) remarks, “The individual’s sense of trust in the continuity of social activity and the object-world is undermined, if not demolished.” Keilson (1992) developed the concept of “sequential trauma” that enables us to look “at a process in which the description of the changing traumatic situation is the framework that organizes our understanding of trauma” (Becker 2004: 5). In this view, the *current* situation of former ISIS child soldiers also needs to be understood as a traumatic phase, even a decisive one for their ability to somehow cope with the past and reach a sense of coherence and mental integrity.

Finally, **concepts of cultural and collective trauma** as well as understandings of a **transgenerational transmission of trauma** go beyond the individual’s own experiences and hint at different ways traumatic experiences can be passed to others beyond a concrete traumatic situation. Whatever the children affiliated with ISIS might have experienced and might struggle with, will not remain with them and cease with them but will – often unconsciously – affect future generations.

Conventional concepts of trauma can be a starting-point for understanding the experiences of being a former ISIS child soldier in present Iraq but probably need further theoretical development based on inductive research. In this respect, LaCapra’s (2014: 41) understanding of trauma as “empathetic unsettlement” can guide us (at least a bit), but we also have to go beyond our understanding of trauma itself.



Among protective factors that moderated the impact of war-related adversities in children were a strong bond between the primary caregiver and the child, the social support of teachers and peers, and a shared sense of values. Among the few documented intervention studies for children of war, school-based interventions, implemented by teachers or locally trained paraprofessionals, proved to be a feasible and low-cost alternative to individual or group therapy. More longitudinal research with multiple informants is needed to document the trajectories of risk and resilience in war-affected children, to assess their long-term development and mental health, and to identify effective treatment approaches.

Werner points to the other side of the discrepancy mentioned at the beginning of this section: the lack of knowledge about (effective) psychosocial and therapeutic interventions with former child soldiers. It is irritating that, given the hundreds of studies that we reviewed in the course of the project, we could only find five studies that explicitly outline therapeutic interventions with former child soldiers and elaborate on their procedure and outcome. In Werner's article, two approaches are briefly presented: school-based interventions that provide predictable routines and rules, training in academic skills, social support by teachers and peers which fosters social interactions and respective skills; and group therapy that is based on and works with similar experiences of the children, their feelings of belonging together and having gone through similar traumatic events, and fosters peer support through which problem solving and coping skills can be modeled and practiced in the safety of a group setting. These interventions are not discussed in a child soldier-specific perspective but are related to children in war in general (with reference, e.g., to the situation of children in Israel). They are presented more anecdotally; their effectiveness with former child soldiers can be only assumed (with good arguments) but would need empirical foundation and validation.

McMullen et al. (2013: 1231) report on a group trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) with former child soldiers (and other war-affected children) in the Democratic Republic of Congo and note that "A culturally modified, group-based TF-CBT intervention was effective in reducing posttraumatic stress and psychosocial distress in former child soldiers and other war-affected boys." They developed a culturally adapted version of the therapeutic approach that included the use of familiar games and songs to help the children relax, learn social skills, and participate in group activities as well as culturally appropriate stories and metaphors and relied on local interpreters for implementation.

In a study conducted by Betancourt et al. (2012), an interpersonal therapy group was set up with war-affected youth with depression in North Uganda that included but was not restricted to former child soldiers. The findings indicated some effectiveness only among female subjects without an abduction history, i.e., young women who were *not* child soldiers. The therapeutic intervention did not prove effective for former child soldiers.

Draijer & Van Zon (2013: 179) reported on a transference-focused psychotherapy (TFP) with former child soldiers (with the telling subtitle: "meeting the murderous self") that suffered from dissociative identity disorder.<sup>28</sup> In reflecting about the outcome of a single case they discussed in detail, they write:

After 18 months of TFP the therapist notices a remarkable increase in and tolerance for intimacy and vulnerability in the therapeutic relationship. This development represents access to the previously split-off libidinal segment of the patient's internal world. He is more able to verbalize and tolerate painful experiences and strong emotions. There are fewer oscillations between emotional states and there is less black-and-white thinking. The aggression has

<sup>28</sup> The approach is introduced as follows by the authors: "It focuses on the problems with aggression faced in psychotherapy. TFP provides a psychodynamic, object relations model to understand the aggression arising in psychotherapy, focusing on the transference and countertransference in the here and now of the therapeutic relationship. Aggression is considered an essential and vital inner dynamic aimed at autonomy, distancing, and the prevention of injury and dependency. In extremely traumatized patients there may be aggressive and oppressive inner parts that want total control-identifying with childhood aggressors-thus avoiding vulnerability. According to TFP it is vital that this aggression is addressed as belonging to the patients themselves in order to reach some form of integration, balance, and health."



become less wild, destructive, and scary and seems to be gradually melting away. Aggressive feelings, thoughts, and fantasies are openly shared in therapy. Ishmael is better able to regulate emotions and to assert himself nonviolently.

At the symptom level there are fewer nightmares, fewer flashbacks/reliving states of terror, less dissociation, less avoidance of traumatic material, less distrust, and fewer feelings of guilt and shame. Auditory comments and visual hallucinations have receded. With respect to DID there is more differentiation between then and now. Emotional states are less fragmented and less separated by amnesia. Severe traumatic experiences concerning atrocities no longer are told only through the murderous self but now are also told in sad and more reflective states. Ishmael lives a less isolated life; he has more contact with the outside world through his volunteer work, hobbies, and even a budding friendship.

White (2005), finally, includes children in war in his approach of subordinate storyline development. He presents subordinate storyline development as an alternative territory of identity for children to stand in as they begin to give voice to their experiences of trauma. In his view, this affords children a significant degree of immunity from the potential for retraumatization in response to therapeutic initiatives to assist them to speak of their experiences of trauma and its consequences.

The approaches presented in these studies are either quite general (children in war) or very specific (subgroup of child soldiers with certain characteristics in a particular context). Except for the TFP study by Draijer and Van Zon (2013), they are short-period interventions which makes it hard to predict sustainable long-term effects, and since adaptations of the studies with former child soldiers in other contexts are not available, we can only assume whether they might work (or not), e.g., in the case of former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq. However, it is noteworthy that three of them relate to group-based interventions. In our project, we followed a narrative approach as presented by White (2005). What we can learn from Draijer & Van Zon (2013) is the need for long-term interventions: After 18 months of high-intensive therapy, some promising effects could be observed. The timeframe that we need to think about in view of a meaningful psychosocial support of former ISIS child soldiers should take this as a minimum level which, of course, brings about strong implications for service providers and funding programs.

The overall finding is challenging: After 20 years of intensively dealing with the issue of child soldiers worldwide, we still do not have a well-tested and approved psychosocial and/or therapeutic approach that we can recommend or follow. There are bits and pieces of experience out there but fragmented and underconceptualized. This reflects the present situation of MHPSS-related support in Northern Iraq that we outlined in the actor and service mapping. Acknowledging the dedication of the organizations providing psychosocial and/or therapeutic support for former ISIS child soldiers and knowing about the incredible motivation and engagement and invaluable experience of the professionals working with the children, the small number of the services in contrast to the estimated number of children who were affiliated with ISIS and the lack of consistent, empirically and theoretically well-founded psychosocial and psychotherapeutic approaches are alarming.

More service providers with more adequate services and well-trained staff are urgently needed for a sustainable and integrative work with former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq. The lack of a comprehensive psychosocial support for these children not only touches humanitarian ethics that stress the rights of the children for adequate care but could also lead to a problematic further marginalization of the children who might see terrorist groups as a chance for agency, recognition, or even survival. The high degree of stigma related to child soldiers calls for awareness raising about the issue of former ISIS child soldiers in regional, national, and international politics, donors and service



providers alike. This, however, would require some political willingness to reflexively deal with the topic.<sup>29</sup>

The overall situation seems to have improved in the course of the project and especially in the months that followed the conduction of the mapping, as new organizations have joined in and brought in their approaches and experiences, sharing their knowledge in the ongoing roundtables on the issue. Nevertheless, we still see a lack of a coherent and target group-specific approach in the field. Sometimes two, three, or four methods are used and applied within seven sessions with a single child, reflecting a struggle to find “the right one”. A marker of success is missing. A long-term approach is hardly possible in the resource-limited context.

In summary, taking into account the interviews we conducted and the child soldiers’ stories that our field researchers collected, we think that the following psychosocial needs have to be addressed:

- (1) **Basic needs**, including a feeling of security and stability (which is hard to achieve under conditions of displacement in IDP camps and nearly impossible under conditions of imprisonment), for example, through reliable access to food, housing, health, and education. In terms of the capacity approach that Nussbaum (2006) proposed, we also understand the chance for societal participation as a basic need, calling for a combined approach of psychosocial and social support and political efforts for providing opportunities for societal participation (e.g., being able to make a living for themselves).<sup>30</sup>
- (2) **Regaining social trust** that was destroyed and lost within and after leaving ISIS, the ability to connect and relate to others, to form close and intimate relationships, to rely on others. It is of paramount importance to fill the loss of emotional intensity and the feeling of fusion that was experienced within the ISIS group. Here, families and communities, also within the camp environment, could be key, as they usually provide social support and can help create a reliable environment that allows the children to slowly find trust in the social world again. Regaining trust is a long-term project, of course; therefore, long-term interventions need to be developed and implemented. In this regard, short-term interventions that might be in line with current funding programs run the risk of doing harm by promising support, trying to get trusted by the children—while, when they end and leave, this might be felt as just another betrayal of trust.
- (3) **Dealing with the complex, confusing, intense, and contradicting feelings** of loss, grief, mourning, guilt, lust, happiness, shame, hate, anger, loneliness, emptiness, different senses of belonging, and beyond that, reflect their time with ISIS and afterwards and their memories of a time before ISIS. In a salutogenetic (Antonovsky 1987) perspective an essential goal would be to help the children develop a sense of coherence, how temporary and fragile it may be, that integrates the fragmented experiences and feelings in a narrative that allows the children to have a sense of comprehensibility of what has happened, a sense of meaningfulness of their lives, and a sense of manageability of the current situation. Such an endeavor poses challenges for us, as it means opening up spaces for talking and listening in a nonjudgmental way and supporting them to create a narration that finds social recognition. We think that the collaborative storytelling may be a promising starting point for this.

<sup>29</sup> The roundtable on the topic of former ISIS child soldiers that was realized successfully in December 2018 in Erbil represented a promising and important beginning of a process of opening up spaces for a reliable and trustful cooperation between the organizations for sharing their experiences and developing approaches and strategies together.

<sup>30</sup> We need to at least briefly mention that catching up on developmental issues connected to achieving a gender identity and “healthy” sexuality is also a basic psychosocial need for the children who spend a great deal of adolescence in warlike contexts.



- (4) **Articulating and overcoming feelings of severe alienation:** This need not only applies to the Yazidi children but can be observed there quite distinctly as they had to undergo stark identity deformations and reformations. In an insightful paper, Wessells (2016: 105) emphasized that “children who had been recruited by force or other means frequently undergo an identity transformation as armed groups resocialize them to see themselves and to be seen by others as soldiers and warriors”. Returning to the community which was genocidally targeted from exactly the group that was responsible for the genocide and that they were forced to belong to is all but easy and may not be perceived and felt like a liberation by the children. In an interview with a therapist working with former child soldiers from the Yazidi community, the term “bomb of sadness” was coined that metaphorically describes a possible reaction—psychoanalytically, one could speak of splitting—that might work for a while and suggests some kind of social adaption that can collapse at any time.
- (5) **Fostering empowerment, agency, and the feeling of being heard and seen and belonging,** of knowing that their lives also matter and their stories.

All this requires working with the children on their complex experiences and intense feelings, their fears and worries, their wishes and hopes, in a non-stigmatizing, nonjudgmental, non-psychopathologizing way, trying to help them integrate this in a meaningful narrative and reflexive self. What is needed to achieve this are safe spaces for talking and listening, for working through.

## 6 Recommendations, Conclusions, and Perspectives

Based on the research findings outlined above, we have compiled and differentiated recommendations and perspectives for action on the governmental level, level of practice, and for upcoming research on the issue of former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq. We are convinced that, if children stay without support and continue facing stigma, there is hazard potential for re-radicalization and rejoining ISIS or other extremist groups. We, therefore, suggest the following:

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### Governmental level:

- A political framework for processing and supporting former child soldiers is currently only available in fragments. To our knowledge, there are hardly any structures or programs in place or available on the issue of child soldiers. These children and adolescents need to be framed as being in need for protection and not only as a threat and liability that fuels the social stigma of especially Arab-Sunni boys. With such a political framework on the issue, the government could positively guide the societal handling of former child soldiers.
- The government should support former ISIS child soldiers in obtaining new identification documents and continuing their education. It should also actively seek integration measures for former ISIS child soldiers, especially regarding education and vocational training.

### Psychosocial and therapeutic support:

- Currently, only a few organizations are committed to the cause of former ISIS child soldiers, and in most cases, the focus is on former Yazidi ISIS child soldiers. Receiving funding seems especially difficult for Arab-Sunni boys; therefore, this group needs to be reframed as in need for protection as well as psychosocial and legal support; hence, NGOs need to do more advocacy for this group.





- On the therapeutic and psychosocial support level, there are no specific concepts to work with former ISIS child soldiers that would allow meaningful processing; therefore, therapeutic and psychosocial concepts need to be developed in the region collaboratively with actors in the field, taking into account experiences from other contexts of child soldiers. A conceptual framework with guidelines on ethics and key principles, on the one hand, and a toolbox with a variety of methods related to different groups defined by the experiences and current state of mind in particular contexts (not just: symptom-driven, given that PTSD symptoms, as outlined above, proved to be a bad marker for the psychosocial needs of the children), on the other, should be developed in this respect.
- Spaces for processing experiences and coping mechanisms for former ISIS child soldiers need to be established.
  - ❖ Issues of belonging and experiences of estrangement to former communities (especially regarding Yazidi boys), the possibility of talking about feelings of guilt, power over life, death, lust could be touched on.
  - ❖ The collaborative stories could have a crucial function for this when it comes to exchanging experiences and stories of both groups; a first step could be reading the stories that have already been written.
  - ❖ A buddy system could be established to have peer role models.
- Therapists and facilitators for psychosocial services need extensive training for working with former ISIS child soldiers, and they need meaningful staff care measures.
- Therapeutic interventions need to be combined in a meaningful way with psychosocial services and efforts for fostering societal participation.<sup>31</sup>

### Research:

- Currently, there is hardly any knowledge on the situation of former child soldiers who have returned in spring 2019 from liberated areas in Syria; therefore, research on this issue is needed urgently.
- There is no knowledge on Arab-Sunni boys after their release from the prisons. We recommend that their trajectories be accompanied in order to find out facility conditions for reintegration and what aspects hinder their reintegration.
- The method of collaborative storytelling needs to be explored further, and one should seek to what extent this method could also have therapeutic effects for those who participate in the process of collaborative storytelling.

We all are still in a decisive phase of struggling to find answers to the challenges that the phenomenon of former ISIS child soldiers pose. All too easy, all too often, and all too soon, we rely on fixed and seemingly useful concepts and labels, but sometimes, they primarily seem to help *us* as professionals to feel secure, “knowing”, and agentic, as their value for understanding the phenomenon is sometimes limited and can even be misleading. We need to acknowledge that, at least to some degree, working with former child soldiers is a transgressive and overwhelming experience for us as professionals (in every field of practice). What is needed is the will to think into the open, theoretically and conceptually, which might feel insecure and frightening because it means being confronted with the possibility of

<sup>31</sup> An excellent analysis of the chances and challenges of societal integration of former child soldiers in post-conflict settings is provided by Bogner & Rosenthal (2017; 2018).





evil that exists in every human society and every human being and, therefore, in every one of us. Remaining in “empathetic unsettlement”, to quote LaCapra (2014: 41-42) again, “poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit”.



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