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Children in Armed Conflict.

Child recruitment and education in regions controlled by armed groups in Syria and Iraq

by

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Abstract: Il saggio prende in esame le conseguenze a lungo termine del conflitto armato sui bambini siriani ed iracheni, muovendo da una ricerca incentrata sulle regioni controllate dai gruppi armati non statali e includendo i rifugiati e gli sfollati che si trovano a vivere in quelle aree. L'attenzione è focalizzata principalmente su due aspetti: il reclutamento e l'impiego dei bambini da parte di forze armate e miliziani e gli attacchi contro le scuole e l'impatto sull'educazione, analizzati entrambi nella sezione *Children in armed Conflict*. Mentre nella sezione *Civilians in Asymmetric Conflicts in Syria and Iraq* si delineano le dinamiche delle guerre nel corso degli ultimi due anni, mostrando come la violenza armata in Siria e in Iraq sia intessuta nella realtà sociale circostante.

Introduction

In March 2011, Syrian protesters took to the streets calling for democratic reform. Their chants were met with increasing levels of violence by their Government forces. As casualties mounted, and activists were arrested or disappeared, an armed opposition emerged from the embers of the protests. The ensuing clashes spiraled into a bloody civil war which has continued for five years. The violence and sectarianism that erupted in Syria, as well as the humanitarian crisis it engendered, spilled over into neighboring countries, threatening to destabilize them.

Over six million people are internally displaced within Syria's borders. Many have slipped into poverty. The war has destroyed much of the country's civilian infrastructure. Basic services are reduced to a minimum, and continue to decline in some regions. The humanitarian situation with regards to housing, education, health, electricity, fuel, economy, food and water, is dire. As a result, Syrians – whether displaced from their homes or not – face extreme hardship, and have been left vulnerable and without protection. The conflict created harsh and dangerous living conditions that continue today. It has spread from region to region, and shaped the future of individuals and families in these societies, including those indirectly affected. These facts have become the standard introductory of any text that is written on Syria today[1].

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The Syrian conflict has had a particularly dramatic effect on Iraq, where it has rekindled old dormant conflicts between ethnic and religious groups, especially between Shiite and Sunni political or military actors. Iraq has been enmeshed in armed violence, to varying degrees, since 2003 and even earlier, but this paper looks specifically at the impact of the Syrian conflict on Iraq. After several years (2009-2012) of low-intensity conflict in Iraq, fierce armed confrontation erupted in 2014 between the extremist organization, ISIL, also known as DAESH, and Shiite militias fighting alongside Iraqi Security Forces. Moreover, the renewed spiral of violence fractured along ethnic lines, as ferocious clashes erupted between Kurdish armed groups and ISIL, polarizing Arab and Kurdish communities in Syria and Iraq. A stream of reports has highlighted the conflicts' impact on children over the course of 2012-2014 when extreme violence rose to unprecedented levels in Syria and Iraq[2].

Humanitarian organizations have tried to draft response plans, and each year they have faced new, and seemingly, insurmountable challenges in reaching persons in urgent need of aid. The daily clashes, casualties, and political dynamics are closely covered and analyzed, while the media continues to look for new perspectives and attention-grabbing headlines to report the ongoing tragedy. But while we hear about yet another massacre or atrocity, we rarely read information on the future of these war-torn societies. Naturally, cessation of hostilities is the top priority of the international community, but even negotiations aimed at achieving enduring peace are mainly guided by short-term thinking[3]. The prevalent feeling in the public opinion is that the conflicts will continue "forever", with no end in sight.

Furthermore, humanitarian organizations and the UN have continued to warn the international community and member states of the direct threat that the conflicts in Syria and Iraq pose to international peace and security[4]. Moreover, these bodies are warning of long-term consequences and challenges that will deepen and become aggravated if left unaddressed. Violence can be like a "contagious disea-

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kholm, Sweden. Between 2013-2016 he worked on the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

[1] Syrian Center for Policy Research, "Confronting Fragmentation," 16 February 2016, http://scpr-syria.org/publications/confronting-fragmentation (accessed 4 April 2016).

[2] A/HRC/21/50 3rd report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2012, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50_en.pdf (accessed 4 April 2016); A/HRC/19/69, 2nd report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic - A/HRC/19/69, 22 February 2012, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G12/106/13/PDF/G1210613.pdf?OpenElement (accessed 4 April 2016).

[3] Lund, Aron. 2015. Grim Expert Assessments of Syria's Peace Process, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=60917 (accessed 2 February 2016).

[4] A/HRC/27/60, 8th Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, February 2015,

http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session27/Documents/A_HRC_27_60_ENG.doc, accessed 2 January 2016, § 9; 9th Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, February 2014,

https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G15/019/37/PDF/G1501937.pdf?OpenElement, § 33 and 137 (accessed 4 January 2016).

se"[5], not only to those who participate in the conflicts, but also to civilians caught in the maelstrom. This is particularly so in the case of children.

In 1997 the UN General Assembly (UNGA) created the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC)[6]. The role of this office is to strengthen the protection of children in war zones, raise awareness, promote the collection of information, and foster international cooperation to improve their protection. The mandate was prompted by a report titled "Impact of Armed Conflict on Children", which highlighted the disproportionate impact of war on children and identified them as the primary victims of armed conflict[7].

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has gradually created a strong framework for the SRSG-CAAC, making it the leading UN advocate for the protection and well-being of children affected by armed conflict. UNSC enumerated *Six Grave Violations against Children in Armed Conflict* to form the basis of an international protection regime for children in armed conflict. The legal basis for these violations was drawn from international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international criminal law[8].

The six grave violations are designated as "triggers" by the UNSC to list parties to armed conflict in an annual report of the SRSG-CAAC[9]. Documentation on violations is gathered through the UNICEF-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children and Armed Conflict (MRM), which was established in 2005[10].

This paper will discuss the long-term consequences of armed conflict on children in Syria and Iraq based on two out of the six triggers: 1) Recruitment or use of children by armed forces and groups, and 2) attacks against schools and impact on education.[11] The scope of the research will be limited to regions controlled by non-state armed groups, including refugee or displaced populations that live there.

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[5] Rosegrant, Susan. Hidden costs of war: Middle East violence and its effect on children, http://home.isr.umich.edu/sampler/hidden-costs-of-war-middle-east-violence-and-its-effect-on-children/ (accessed 4 February 2016).

[6] A/Res/51/77, 20 February 1997, http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/51/ares51-77.htm.

[7] A/51/306, "Promotion and Protection of The Rights of Children: Impact of Armed Conflict on Children," 26 August 1996,

http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/51/306&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC.

[8] UN Security Council, Security Council resolution 1882, S/RES/1882, 4 August 2009, http://www.refworld.org/docid/4a7bdb432.html, accessed 5 April 2016; United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, "The Six Grave Violations Against Children During Armed Conflict: The Legal Foundation," 14 October 2009, http://www.crin.org/en/docs/SixGraveViolationspaper.pdf (accessed 3 April 2016).

[9] UN Security Council resolution 1612, S/RES/1612, 26 July 2005, http://www.refworld.org/docid/43f308d6c.html (accessed 5 April 2016).

[10] UNICEF, "Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations of children's rights in situations of armed conflict," 22 March 2011, http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_57997.html.

[11] UN Security Council resolution 1539 (2004), S/RES/1539, 22 April 2004, http://www.refworld.org/docid/411236fd4.html (accessed 5 April 2016).

A brief discussion will be presented first, in section *Children in armed Conflict*, detailing the dynamics of the wars over the last two years. It will show how armed violence in Syria and Iraq are woven into the social landscape. Thereafter, I will discuss the two above-mentioned triggers in section *Civilians in Asymmetric Conflicts in Syria and Iraq*.

Civilians in Asymmetric Conflicts in Syria and Iraq

A majority of today's armed conflicts occur between governments and non-state armed groups (NSAG) or between armed groups[12]. These conflicts are legally defined as "not of an international character", and thus internal armed conflicts, according to Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions (GC).

The wars in the Middle East, and particularly in Syria and Iraq, are largely asymmetric and multi-dimensional. Frontlines are dislocated and battlefields have lost their traditional borders. Neither highly trained state forces nor poorly equipped rebel fighters spare civilian infrastructure. In fact, hostilities mostly rage in densely populated neighborhoods, increasing the risk for indiscriminate fire or 'collateral damage'. The weaponry used in Syria and Iraq can range from, on one hand, drones and advanced weapons technology, and on the other hand, firearms and improvised explosives manufactured by armed groups, terrorist organizations, or rag-tag rebels[13].

Legally analyzed, the non-international conflicts in Syria and Iraq can be characterized as separate and distinct. From a historical and political perspective, however, they are interrelated and overlapping. A bloody civil war emerged in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which toppled the Saddam Hussein regime. Iraqi society has since then been torn by a violent, multilayered, and hybrid conflict, which involves multiple State and non-state actors.

The conflict in Syria started with a wave of popular protest that spread across, not only Syria, but multiple countries in the Arab world in 2011. As mass protests were repressed and quelled by Syrian government forces, an armed rebellion gradually emerged. The situation rapidly escalated into a bloody civil war, and the situation deteriorated to the extent that the internal conflict in Syria now has turned into an international and regional proxy war.

The violence in Syria quickly spread to urban centers and fighting raged in street-to-street clashes. Schools, hospitals, and other key civilian infrastructure were destroyed by VBIEDs (vehicle-born improvised explosive devices), and relentless aerial bombardment.[14] Roads and free movement to other cities were cut-

[12] Bassiouni, M. Cherif. 2008. "The New Wars and the Crisis of Compliance with the Law of Armed Conflict by Non-state Actors." *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 98 (3): 711–810. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40042787 (accessed 25 February 2016).

[13] de Nevers, Renée. 2006."The Geneva Conventions and New Wars." *Political Science Quarterly* 121 (3): 369–95, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20202724 (accessed 2 March 2016).

[14] Abouzeid, Rania. 2014. Aleppo's Deadly Stalemate: A Visit to Syria's Divided Metropolis, *The Time*, November 14, http://world.time.com/2012/11/14/aleppos-deadly-stalemate-a-visit-to-syrias-divided-metropolis/ (accessed 3 January 2016). "Many of Bustan al-Basha's four- and five-storey residential buildings have been partially sliced open, their concrete floors pancaked atop each other,

off by checkpoints, and snipers made a walk to an adjoining location in a neighborhood extremely dangerous[15].

The sheer violence that has infested Syrian and Iraqi society, steadily spread along ethnic and sectarian lines. The explosion of sectarian rhetoric in Syria has similarities to the Sunni-Shiite divide in Iraq, which developed over the course of the civil war. The core ideological framework had unsurprisingly been imported to Syria from jihadist organizations in Iraq. Such organizations held the view that the conflict was of a regional character, between the two main sects in Islam, and that the Shiite-led government in Iran was mobilizing militias to back the Syrian government. Such perceptions eventually shifted a bulk of the overall political discourse in Syria, from its anti-government orientation to a radical sectarian discourse, filled with historic references to intra-Islamic wars between Sunnis and Shiites.

It is important to note that common perceptions of sectarian or ethnic conflicts often are overly one-dimensional and simplistic[16]. The sectarian element is a symptom of political conflict rather than a cause in itself[17]. The sect or religious identity is an abstract and collective reference for the group, yet the real locus of its authority/influence lies in the political and military apparatus that advance its objectives through popular mobilization and propaganda[18].

Armed Groups

The societal vacuum created by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq – whether in security, politics, services, education, and most importantly economy – was increa-

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their contents – dining tables, children's toys, washing machines – spewed into dusty mounds onto the streets below. Apart from the gentle sound of water gushing from burst pipes, there's a heavy silence here, punctured by sporadic sniper fire, the occasional roar of a warplane overhead unleashing its payload in another part of Aleppo, or the more frequent hair-raising whistle of an incoming mortar".

[15] Sahloul, Zaher. 2014. "Corridor of Death", *Foreign Policy*, March 4, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/04/the-corridor-of-death/, accessed 4 February 2016. For example, the "Corridor of Death" in Aleppo city was for a long time the only short passage between eastern rebel-held districts and western government-controlled areas of Aleppo. Civilian casualties occurred on an almost daily basis, as snipers took up positions on the tall buildings around the pass-way and targeted men, women, and children. Civilians soon preferred to travel over ten hours along the rural parameters (circular arc) of the city to reach a location on the western side, rather than walking through central districts under the eye of a sniper for half an hour.

[16] Morten and Bank. 2007. "Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunnishi'i Divide", *Middle East Report*, 242, pp. 6-11, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25164771 (accessed 28 January 2016). For historical references, see Mackensen, Ruth. 1935. "Moslem Libraries and Sectarian Propaganda", *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 51 (2): 83–113, http://www.jstor.org/stable/528860 (accessed 1 February 2016).

[17] Reese, Aaron. July 2013, "Sectarian and regional conflict in the Middle East," *Middle East Security Report* 13: 7,

http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/SectarianandRegionalConflictintheMiddleEast_3JUL.pdf (accessed 7 February 2016).

[18] Matthiesen, Toby. 2013. "Syria: Inventing a Religious War", *New York Review of Books*, June 12, http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2013/06/12/syria-inventing-religious-war/ (accessed 5 March 2016).

singly filled by non-state actors, often armed groups. When the State agency's monopoly of violence faded, newly organized armed elements seized control over neighborhoods, towns, and territory. Eventually they were able to impose local authority and replaced State institutions, and thereby, establishing an alternative rule that was shaped by multiple factors, such as ideology, war economy, and military dynamics. The rise of a vast number of armed groups in Syria and Iraq resulted in internal discord among them, which ultimately escalated into lethal confrontation.

Smaller armed fractions, however, soon dissolved or merged with stronger groups. In the end there remained only a number of influential actors on the operational theater/scene, such as the Islamic State (ISIL), Jabhat al-Nusra, the Al-Qaeda franchise in Syria, rebel groups with regional support such as the Islamist groups Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh Al-Islam, and the Kurdish armed group, YPG, which is the sister organization of the Kurdistan Worker's Party, and better known internationally under its acronym PKK. These armed groups control large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq.

Armed groups gradually established a strong local presence and inevitably interacted closely with the civilian population. Maintaining close and good relations with the local population naturally became a long term strategy, as they were relying on them for logistical supplies, recruitment, and popular support. The armed groups were visible in urban and rural areas and the civilian population in Syria and Iraq was regularly exposed to their everyday activities. With time an interdependent relation evolved between them, based on power, mutual interests, and political sympathy/association. The dynamics at play were similar to the historical characteristics of guerilla or insurgency movements[19].

One of the most concrete aspects of this relationship is armed groups' abilities to provide basic services, order, and stability to the local population. Their influence and expansion in Syria depended partly on their capacity, efficiency, and outreach as a service provider. The social support networks brought the armed groups to the doorstep of the civilian population. Military victories alone did not warrant enduring hegemony[20]. This was true of all armed groups in Syria and Iraq, regardless of their ideological orientation.

Children in Armed Conflict

By early 2016 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had registered over two million child refugees fleeing from the conflict in Syria[21]. The widespread violence in Syria and Iraq has over the last years resulted in deaths

[19] Tse-Tung, Mao. 1961. *On guerrilla warfare*. University of Illinois Press; Guevara, Ernesto. 1961. *Che Guevara on guerrilla warfare*. New York: Praeger; Galula, David. 1964. *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, New York: Praeger.

[20] Author's Interview with Noah Feldman, Harvard Law School, 10 December 2015. "This is one of the most striking differences between Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and its successor ISIL. Whereas the latter developed a functioning socio-political organization that could provide basic services in areas under their control, the former showed little interest in real governance beyond military issues".

[21] Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal, UNCHR, http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php (accessed 17 February 2016).

and maiming of thousands of children. Those who are physically unscathed suffer trauma from daily horrors, including witnessing violence against family members and neighbors. Many have been pulled out of school and been forced to assume adult roles in their families. Young boys, whose fathers and brothers may be fighting, imprisoned, missing or disappeared, assume the responsibilities of older males in a patriarchal society. This is largely a situation where children are forced by circumstances or need, given the particularly harsh surviving conditions in conflict zones. The economic insecurity brought upon many affected families also led them to arrange early marriages for daughters as young as 10-12 years old.

There are multiple motives for children's recruitment to armed forces and groups. Syria and Iraq have, as outlined in section 2, had turned into conflict-ridden societies where violence and instability ran deep into every aspect of daily life. Children were constantly exposed and bore witness to violence and war-propaganda. The overall level of political violence in Syrian and Iraqi society lies at the heart of children's recruitment into armed forces and groups.

The initial phase of child recruitment can best be characterized as spectatorial, during which children are exposed to violence as a "passive observer". Children's social imagination and ideals changed with the sounds of bombs and weapons, or with the spread of aggressive and hateful rhetoric by lionized commanders. Many children, reportedly, learn to differentiate between the sounds of warplanes, machine guns, and artillery calibers[22]. The wars gradually became personal and intimate to most children, most of them can name a friend or relative who has been killed or taken direct or indirect part in armed conflict. No longer distant political propaganda or merely media headlines, the conflict became visible on streets where families lived or digitally in personal social media posts – increasingly omnipresent for each individual.

While children have been directly targeted and gravely affected by the violence and terror, they are also actively recruited, trained, and used to take part in violent confrontations and act in combat or support roles[23]. Children have been trained and used by armed groups to take direct and indirect part in hostilities; they were deployed as spies and scouts, tasked to transport military equipment and supplies, to conduct patrols, to man checkpoints, to videotape attacks for propaganda purposes and to plant explosive devices[24]. The ever-accelerating rate of child recruitment in Syria and Iraq is grave and alarming[25].

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[22] Save the Children. 2015. "Futures under threat – the impact of the education crisis on Syria's children," "'Right now you can ask any child about the different types of weapons and they would be able to name all of them for you; they remember weapons more than lessons' Hanan*, 44, teacher, Syria", p. 5.

[23] UN Doc. A/69/926 - S/2015/409, UN General Assembly, "Annual Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict," 5 June 2015, § 17 http://watchlist.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/080615-SG-report-on-Children-and-armed-conflict-revised.pdf (accessed 5 February 2016).

[24] *Ibidem*, § 71-78, and 190-207.

[25] Why young Syrians choose to fight - Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria, May, 2016. International Alert, p. 8, http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Syria_YouthRecruitmentExtremistGroups_EN_2016.pdf (accessed 15 May 2016).

All protracted conflicts create a mounting shortage of manpower for the involved parties. The warring sides generally respond to this by actively recruiting children. Three distinct factors can be identified on child recruitment in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq: identity/ideology, economy, and propaganda[26]. A few examples will be discussed below where such factors have been particularly evident for child recruitment into armed forces and groups in various regions of Syria and Iraq.

First Trigger: Recruitment or use of children by armed forces and groups

The prevalence of child soldiers has risen exponentially in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, in particular within the ranks of armed groups, militias, and paramilitaries. There recruitment of children as soldiers or rebel fighters does not necessarily depend on ideological orientation, although some organizations target children particularly. The trend extends across the political spectrum, within both state and non-state actors.

Recruitment by State forces, paramilitaries, and militias

Syria and Iraq are State parties to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, and thereby have treaty obligations they must uphold on child recruitment. The obligations include prevention of conscription of soldiers under the age of 18 years, and criminalization of all recruitment of children which can involve them in hostilities. Moreover, States must demobilize already existing child soldiers and provide physical as well as psychological recovery services with the aim of facilitating their social reintegration[27].

Conscription into Syrian and Iraqi armed forces has historically been centralized and bureaucratic, in particular under the Assad and Saddam regime. This naturally limited the scope for arbitrary underage recruitment of children, with the exception of (state-sponsored) scout-type summer training camps that included elements of weapons training[28]. Throughout the present conflicts in Syria and Iraq, there have

[26] Compare to "Vulnerability Factors for child recruitment" in most recent report by International Alert. Why young Syrians choose to fight - Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria, May, 2016. International Alert, p. 8, http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Syria_YouthRecruitmentExtremistGroups_EN_2016.pdf (accessed 4 August 2016).

[27] Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/OPACCRC.aspx.

[28] For 30 years Ba'athist military education, including civil defence training, was compulsory in state schools. On 17 March 2003 the Ba'ath party formally resolved to replace military education with extra-curricular activities such as computer training and summer camps for older children (Resolution 381/31). It was unclear whether military training for minors would continue at summer camps. In April 2003 military-style khaki school uniforms were replaced with pink and blue uniforms. On 1 October 2003 the Ministry of Education ordered the cancellation of all military education (Circular 2997/543), and the Office of Military Education was replaced with an Office of Sport. Child Soldiers International, Child Soldiers Global Report 2004 - Syria, 2004, available at: http://www.refworld.org/docid/49880627c.html (accessed 17 October 2016).

been few reports of child soldiers in regular army units. However, as both states descended deep into civil wars, their armies slowly crumbled due to defection, combat inefficiency, and loss of prestige. Both governments began to increasingly rely on paramilitaries, militias, affiliated foreign-armed groups, and external backing from allied states. Such actors recruited children on large scale and used them in combat roles at frontlines, when fighting on behalf of the government. A few examples will be given below of such armed organizations that take part in hostilities on the government side. The Iraqi Army crumbled in 2014 and has since then relied primarily on a swiftly formed pro-government militia known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). According to UN sources, hundreds of children have been recruited into the PMU[29]. The Syrian army has relied on paramilitary units from the National Defence Force (NDF), a paramilitary program aimed to cover its major deficit in manpower. The Syrian army has also received Afghan-Shiite militiamen (often from refugee populations) through an Iranian-led recruitment program. All of these alternative military structures have protractedly used children in combat and non-combat operations[30]. The central governments of Syria and Iraq have willingly, or sometimes unwillingly, left this matter unaddressed. Two points are important and possibly explanatory in this regard. The first is that such militias can make up a critical part of the government's military manpower and overall capability, and thus must be maintained for strategic reasons. Second, and more importantly, neither the government of Iraq, nor Syria, exercise effective control over the militias that fight on their behalf. Unless the situation with regards to these two points will change, the recruitment of children will likely continue unimpeded. Whereas the abovementioned militias and paramilitaries are closely affiliated to governments, child recruitment has been particularly widespread among non-state armed groups that oppose States or ruling regimes. Such armed groups gained control over large territories in Syria and Iraq between 2012-2015, and steadily established their rule in a *de facto* manner. Recruitment of children to armed groups notably spiked during this period.

Recruitment by non-state armed groups

As social and economic networks fell apart in Syria and Iraq, children assumed "adult roles" and faced the necessity to contribute to the household. Children had to assist their families' efforts for economic survival. This took different forms, depending on whether a family lived in an urban center, rural village, or refugee

[29] UNSC. Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, S/2015/852, 9 November 2015, p. 10.

https://documents-ddsny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/356/32/PDF/N1535632.pdf?OpenElement (accessed 9 February 2016).

[30] Human Rights Watch, No Child's Play: Kids Fighting One Another in Iraq Conflict, 30 October 2015, https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/30/no-childs-play-kids-fighting-one-another-iraq-conflict (accessed 30 March 2016); Human Rights Watch, Iran Sending Thousands of Afghans to Fight in Syria, 29 January 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/29/iran-sending-thousands-afghans-fight-syria (accessed 20 March 2016); Al-Monitor, Iraq's child soldiers, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iraq-iran-child-soldiers.html (accessed 20 March 2016).

camp. As a general rule, there was no or very few income generating jobs in the conflict areas. The war economy produced working conditions that were well known for their high levels of risk, abuse and exploitation[31]. A large part of the hostilities in Syria or Iraq evolved around control over agriculture, natural resources, and other economic infrastructure, most of which eventually came under the purview of the armed groups. By virtue of their control over significant parts of the war economy, the armed groups were able to provide salaries, housing, and social prestige[32]. In Syria and Iraq, being a fighter was one of few income generating prospects that were available for adolescents.

In pursuit of economic stability and social status, a large number of men chose to join armed groups rather than risking destitute or extreme poverty. Steadily, this emerged as a general trend in many regions of Syria and Iraq. Children and teenagers soon followed and saw becoming a part of an armed group as a viable option. Armed groups accelerated this process by adopting strategies to target youth populations for recruitment.

Many children have a family background or contextual relation to the armed groups, for example through close relatives who joined. Children can associate to the wars on a personal level as they hear adults talk about it on a daily basis. It is not uncommon, in a pre-recruitment phase, that children identify with the fighters and aspire to reach a similar status within the community, particularly as they are very vulnerable to social pressure and indoctrination[33].

In the mountainous Jabal az-Zawiyya region of Idlib in Syria, rebel fighters from Islamist armed groups offer the civilian population protection, agricultural tools, or safe routes for access to supplies, etc. Relatives or friends in the armed groups also provide food, shelter, and day-to-day information that are important for survival. Sympathies for the fighters, therefore, run deep in the region and among the local population. There is a strong feeling that the locals and the fighters belong to the same community, and that they fight for their identity as disenfranchised Sunni Muslims. Most Idlib locals refer to the fighters as "revolutionaries" or "freedom fighters". Teenagers in this region adopted similar sympathetic views, and undeniably, many children eventually joined the armed groups. The interplay of economic and ideological motives has been visible in this and other remote areas of Syria[34].

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[31] Jihad Yazigi, Syria's war economy, European Council on Foreign Relations, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ecfr97_syria_brief_aw.pdf (accessed 14 August 2016); Gobat and Kostial, Syria's Conflict Economy, IMF Working Paper, June 2016, https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16123.pdf (accessed 14 August 2016); Yezid Sayigh, The war over Syria's gas fields, Carnegie Middle East Center, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/60316?lang=en (accessed 14 August 2016).

[32] How to lose your mind to isis and then fight to get it back, Buzzfeed News, https://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/how-to-lose-your-mind-to-isis-and-then-fight-to-get-it-back?utm_term=.aheD7dxkX#.yixjDevOL (accessed 17 April 2016).

[33] Rosen, David M. 2007. "Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalization of Childhood", *American Anthropologist* 109: 296-306, p. 300.

[34] Abdulrahim, Raja. 2016. "In Syria's Mangled Economy, Truckers Stitch Together Warring Regions", *Wall Street Journal*, May 24, "The war has effectively partitioned Syria into four nominally autonomous regions. The Assad regime, the Kurds, Islamic State and an array of rebel groups all con-

ISIL targeted children in a systematic manner in urban centers like Mosul and Raqqah after fully seizing the cities and establishing an administration based on an extremist interpretation of Islamic scripture. Their radical ideology coupled with a rigid central control and harsh rule, created a breeding ground for forced child recruitment in urban and rural communities that lived under their rule. ISIL implemented ideologically motivated regulations, including on child recruitment, through intimidation, brutality, and security control. Their control of economic resources and trade also aided them in recruiting children by offering salaries etc.

Since 2014 ISIL has trained hundreds of children in organized military and ideological camps. The children were forced to live in the camps and not allowed to visit their families on a regular basis. They received weapons training, underwent religious and ideological indoctrination, and were forced to watch propaganda videos of battles or beheadings. The total number of children that were recruited into such training camps is unknown but assessed to be in the thousands[35]. The children were from multiple nationalities, and in an age range from 6-18. It stands to reason that the long-term consequences on these children will be grave and that they need special care and rehabilitation in a post-conflict phase.

ISIL has also targeted young women and girls as a part of their campaign on child recruitment. Women and girls are recruited to act in support roles for the organizations security apparatus, and to impose strict dress codes on women that appear in public. As a part of it its recruitment strategy they actively force girls to marry ISIL fighters, often by threatening the girl's family to give their consent[36]. There are also families that voluntarily agreed to such marriages, as they held sympathies or a direct allegiance to ISIL. Teenage girls are most vulnerable, and particularly targeted by ISIL's local commanders for this purpose[37].

It is interesting to note that on the other hand, the war against ISIL also has led to an increasing number of child recruits in armed groups fighting against them. One such example is ISIL's onslaught on the Syrian-Kurdish town of Kobane on September 2014, caused a mass displacement of its 400,000 inhabitants over less than a week. The ISIL attack was carried out from three fronts and almost encircled the town, leaving the residents with a last escape route northwards across the Turkish border. The fleeing residents were all of Kurdish origin, and viewed the threat that ISIL posed as "existential". In this situation, as heavy clashes were ongoing, Kurdish armed groups called on Kurds in all ages to take up arms and defend the

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trol territory. All need to trade with each other, even if it means strengthening a rival's hold on regional power". http://www.wsj.com/articles/in-syrias-mangled-economy-truckers-stitch-together-warring-regions-1464106368 (accessed 24 May 2016).

[35] Smith, Staley. 2015. "When cubs become lions: future of ISIS child soldiers", LawFare Institute, August 10, https://www.lawfareblog.com/when-cubs-become-lions-future-isis-child-soldiers, (accessed 20 August 2016).

[36] Asaad, Hanna. 2014. "Syrian girls forced to marry ISIS fighters", Al-Monitor, May 12, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/syria-girls-marriage-isis-raqqa.html (accessed 8 November 2016).

[37] Qassim, Salar. 2016. "Syrian teenage girls forced to marry ISIS jihadis in Deir ez-Zor", AraNews, January 9, http://aranews.net/2016/01/syrian-teenage-girls-forced-to-marry-isis-jihadis-in-deir-ez-zor/ (accessed 8 November 2016).

town and their ethnic identity. Hundreds of male and female teenagers responded and joined the battle within the coming weeks and months. A large group of them were under 18 years. All of them had joined to defend their "existence and identity"[38]. When speaking about what had made them take part in the hostilities, many referred to having read or seen media and online content on the "heroic fighting, and imperative for us to resist"[39].

It is worth to note that since 2013 women and girls have also been recruited to the Kurdish forces, as female fighters in the YPG. A number of them were under 18 years-old, and their recruitment was a violation of international law[40]. The recruited women and girls have formed all-women battalions with an independent structure under the moniker, the Women's Defense Units, YPJ. These battalions have units with female fighters organized in heavy machine-gun squads, sniper units, mortar platoons and motorised infantry units. There have also been an increasing number of female field commanders within the YPJ. A large number of these women, including underage girls, were from socially conservative or rural background, and their families opposed their participation in politics or armed combat on the basis of gender. It was deemed as being far beyond the socially accepted roles for females. There have been many cases of underage recruitment of girls by the YPG, which led to strong reactions from their family members who felt that their teenage daughters had been manipulated to join. In one such case, a father set himself on fire in an self-immolation act, to protest the recruitment of his daughter[41].

The town of Sinjar was home to the Yezidi community, a religious minority group in northwest Iraq. When ISIL attacked their native homeland on August 2014, over 300,000 Yezidis fled overnight. Those who failed to escape were killed, captured, or enslaved by ISIL, including women and children. After this traumatic attack, Yezidi armed groups have slowly retaken much of the Sinjar region. A vast number of Yezidi teenagers have since then joined these armed groups to defend the Yezidi community. Most of the child recruits stated that they had joined the fighters to "protect our families, our religion, and prevent ISIL from committing a new genocide against us"[42]. A group of Yezidi teenagers on Mount Sinjar that had joined the armed groups as non-fighting personnel, acting mainly in support roles, invoked the same motives for their participation, namely, faith and identity.

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[38] Author's Skype interview with DA, wounded 16 year-old female volunteer fighter, Sanliurfa, Turkey, 5 April 2016.

[39] Author's interview with EK, wounded 17 year-old volunteer fighter, Sanliurfa, Turkey, 6 November 2016

[40] Human Rights Watch. 15 July 2015. "Syria: Kurdish Forces Violating Child Soldier Ban", https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/10/syria-kurdish-forces-violating-child-soldier-ban-0 (accessed 8 November 2016).

[41] Rudaw. 26 October 2015. "Syrian Kurd self-immolates after daughter recruited by YPJ", http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/26102015 (accessed 8 November 2016).

[42] Author's Skype interview with SE, 16 year-old Yezidi fighter, from Sinuni town, Sinjar region, Iraq, 4 April 2016.

International response to child recruitment in Syria and Iraq

To counter this negative trend, the United Nations Office for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC) and UNICEF launched the campaign "Children, Not Soldiers" to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children. The campaign generated wide support from United Nations, member states, and civil society organizations. It provided opportunities for affected States to exchange expertise, experience, and best practice on child recruitment in armed conflict[43].

In 2015 forty-nine armed groups were listed in the annual SRSG-CAAC report for having committed grave violations against children, several of them were from Syria and Iraq. The SRSG-CAAC noted it had sustained dialogue with armed groups with the aim of ending and preventing violations, negotiating the demobilization of children and facilitating their reintegration.

However, it remained inherently challenging for the international community as such, to engage with armed groups, given their variety, number, and ever-changing composition. The emergence of extremist groups in Syria and Iraq compounded this challenge, as humanitarian organizations had little or no capacity to influence such groups[44]. Nevertheless, persistent efforts were made to urge the leadership of other armed groups, which have been willing to interact with the UN and humanitarian organizations, to stop child recruitment. This was mainly mediated through intermediaries, local organizations, and special envoys. In some cases case-by-case efforts resulted in positive steps being taken by armed groups, for example when top leaders issued command orders to prohibit and sanction child recruitment[45]. Unfortunately, such armed groups were often unable to prevent future child recruitment into their ranks, even if they managed to decommission many underage-fighters during an initial phase. Monitoring and close follow-up was deemed essential for compliance, and moreover for guiding the armed groups into concrete and verifiable action that made difference in children's lives[46].

The long-term work of the Swiss NGO Geneva Call on implementation challenges is informative in how to engage armed groups and urge them to respect international humanitarian law on child recruitment. In their advocacy and capacity building with armed groups they dedicated significant resources to prevent child recruitment. Their efforts were successful with a dozen of armed groups worldwide. Over the course of 2012-2015 Geneva Call established contact with the YPG, a Syrian Kurdish armed group, to address child recruitment in its ranks. Their activities aimed at raise awareness among the groups field commanders, taking measures to constraint underage recruitment, and to decommission child soldiers[47].

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[43] "Children, Not Soldiers," Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, March 2014, https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/children-not-soldiers (accessed 14 April 2016).

[44] UN Doc. A/69/926 - S/2015/409, UN General Assembly, "Annual Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict", 5 June 2015, §17.

[45] *Ibidem*, § 18.

[46] *Ibidem*, § 19-20.

[47] Geneva Call. 5 July 2014. "YPG signing Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children", http://www.genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2014/07/2014-5july-YPG-YPJ-syria-

Second Trigger: Attacks against schools and impact on education

Education was free and state-sponsored in pre-conflict Syria, and elementary education (grades 1-9) was compulsory[48]. Legislation in the 1970s aimed at improving education and eliminating illiteracy. According to a 2004 census Syria's literacy rate was 79.6 percent: 86 percent for men and 73.6 percent for women. Before the war almost all of Syria's children were enrolled in primary education. Education has since deteriorated and the country has one of the worst enrolment rates in the world[49]. An estimated half of the 4.3 million Syrian children eligible for primary and secondary education — are not enrolled in schools, and over half a million Syrian children in Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey have been denied or do not have access to education. Additionally, over one million children are at risk of dropping out due to ongoing violence and inability to physically arrive at buildings where classes are held[50].

The right to education is a fundamental human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). It is furthermore protected by several international conventions, for example in human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and Convention of the Rights of the Child, or under International Humanitarian Law in the IV Geneva Convention prohibiting the targeting of civilian objects, emphasizing the importance of schools and children.

The UN has sought to strengthen the protection of education, and after two years of multilateral diplomatic negotiations it adopted guidelines for protecting schools and universities from military use during armed conflict. The guidelines have been endorsed by 53 States in the Safe Schools Declaration on 29 May 2015[51]. At least 3,465 schools had been destroyed or damaged in Syria by mid-2015, while a further 1,000 were being used as shelters for displaced people[52].

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children.pdf (accessed 4 February 2016); Geneva Call. 7 October 2014. "Syria: monitoring the prohibition of child soldiers by Kurdish armed forces", http://www.genevacall.org/syria-monitoring-prohibition-child-soldiers-kurdish-armed-forces, accessed 6 February 2016; Geneva Call. 29 May 2015. "Syria: Kurdish forces take further measures to stop the use of children in hostilities", http://www.genevacall.org/syrian-kurdish-forces-take-measures-stop-use-children-hostilities (accessed 6 February 2016).

[48] Article 37 of the Decree Law No. 208 of 13 March 1973, which embodies the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic.

[49] UNRWA. May 2014. "Squandering Humanity: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report on Syria", p. 38, http://www.unrwa.org/sites/ default/files/scpr_repor t_q3-q4_2013_270514final_3.pdf, accessed 12 March 2016; Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2139, 20 June 2014, S/2014/427, p.10,

http:// www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/427, accessed 12 March 2016.

[50] Children of Syria - Realizing Children's Rights in Syria, http://www.humanium.org/en/middle-east-north-africa/syria (accessed 8 January 2016).

[51] UNICEF.15 March 2015. "Middle east and North Africa out-of-school children initiative, Syria Crisis, Educational Factsheet", pp. 3-6; Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), "Safe Schools Declaration: 53 Countries and Counting",

Syrian children are consequently being denied the right to education on a mass scale. The protracted nature of the Syrian crisis has weakened the capacity of the education system radically. In its current state, it is unable to address the educational needs of Syrian children and adolescents. Multiple reports underlined the alarming magnitude of the crisis by 2012-2014, and urged international agencies and host governments to extend considerable efforts to provide education for Syrian children[53].

UNICEF's conducted a comprehensive survey over *out-of-school* children and adolescents. It showed that by 2014 over 20 percent of schools in Syria have been damaged, destroyed, adapted as shelters, or occupied by armed forces. The risk of attacks, looting, abduction and military use of schools were considered high and the route from home to school increasingly dangerous for children. Moreover, almost 20 percent of Syria's teaching staff and school counselors have already left the country.

The survey also underscored that Syrian refugee children in neighboring countries faced major challenges in accessing education. Those that were enrolled in schools were forced to attend mostly over-crowded and under-resourced schools where learning spaces were either limited or too expensive, and often not adequately equipped. By the end of 2015 it had been estimated that only 2 percent of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon were enrolled in secondary schools; partly due to restrictions regarding who can sit for secondary exams. Economic reasons also factored in as boys left school to join the labor force or girls were pushed into early-marriage[54]. Education for Syrian refugees did steadily improve in Jordan over the period 2012-2014, yet nearly 40 percent of Syrian children in the ages 6-18 remained out of school as of December 2015. Due to the large influx of refugees, the Jordanian school system struggled, in terms of resources, to expand and include Syrian children. In 2016 around hundred schools had adopted double-shift system in which Syrian and Jordanian students attended separate morning and afternoon shifts. This new system has, however, taken a significant toll on the quality of the education. Classes are held in the most vulnerable areas in northern Jordan and in the refugee camps, and can include more than hundred students at a time[55]. This was also exacerbated by the fact that Syrian teachers among the refugee population, lacked incentives, adequate salaries for teaching, or were not legally allowed to teach.

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http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/press_release_one_year_anniversary_of_ssd.pdf (accessed 27 May 2016).

[52] UN OCHA, "Response Plan for the Syrian Humanitarian Operations from Turkey," July 2014-June 2015, p. 18.

[53] UNICEF. Global Leaders Demand Immediate Attention to Children's Education in Crisis Zones, http://www.unicef.org/media/media_65935.html (accessed 5 March 2016).

[54] Buckner. Elisabetn and Spencer, Dominique. 2016. "Educating Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace", May 4, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=63513 (accessed 4 May 2016).

[55] UNHCR. "The Challenge Of Education", http://unhcr.org/FutureOfSyria/the-challenge-of-education.html (accessed 14 May 2016).

Education and Ideology

Destroyed schools and educational infrastructure have in many regions of Syria and Iraq been replaced by new (often informal) schools or training centers. Armed groups and political movements have established hundreds of schools, across conflict zones and in refugee camps. Radical movements have altered or introduced new the curriculums in regions under their control. The new curriculums are often based on a strict ideological framework rather than a scientific program.

Ideologically influenced educational policy dates back several decades in Syria and Iraq, and existed long before the ongoing conflicts. Albeit the national curriculum mainly aimed at advancing knowledge and science, it also contained purely ideological elements. Among the main objectives of Syria's educational policy, as stipulated in Decree Law No. 208 of 13 March 1973, was put in place to bring up

> citizens rooted in their Arab homeland, having deep faith in their Arab nationalism and its objectives of unity and liberation and building the socialist society, committed to the causes of their nation and land and believing in revolutionary behaviour as a means and practice, in a spirit of socialist-based responsibility.

Or,

> perpetuating the science-based socialist values in the minds of the youth, values which underlie the cohesion of the national and socialist struggle, and ruling out all sorts of dissension or family, sectarian, tribal and regional fanatic allegiances so that all members of the Arab society shall dissolve in the mould of Pan-Arab unity[56].

Similarly in the 1970 constitution of Iraq, article 28 stipulates

> Education has the objective of raising and developing the general educational level, promoting scientific thinking, animating the research spirit…against the capitalistic ideology, exploitation, reaction, Zionism, and imperialism for the purpose of realizing the Arab unity, liberty, and socialism.

All sides to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have gradually sought to replace items in previous curriculums with their own ideological doctrine, and have moreover removed items that dispute core elements of their ideology, for example evolution theory in biology. Classical books that long belonged to literature canons were prohibited, for example by ISIL or Jabhat al-Nusra, with the claim that they do not adhere to Islam and the worldview endorsed by them. ISIL has also gone as far as to impose a radical, violent, and extremist ideology in the education program in regions under their control.

In ISIL-controlled regions children must enroll in Islamic schools that primarily provide religious education, based on extremist doctrines or interpretations of Islam. Subjects such as drawing, music, nationalism, history, philosophy, and social sciences have all been removed. They have instead been replaced with Koran memorization, *tawheed* (monotheism), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *salat* (prayer), *aqeeda* (creed), *Hadith,* and *Sura* (life of Muhammad). History textbooks in ISIL schools

[56] Article 22-23 of the Decree Law No. 208 of 13 March 1973, which embodies the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic.

only include Islamic History[57]. Physical Education was renamed '*Jihadi* Training', and includes shooting, swimming, and wrestling[58].

ISIL's educational policy is central to its political and military strategy and organized under their administrative department *Diwan al-Ta'aleem*. Significant resources and personnel are allocated to implement this policy[59]. School attendance is compulsory for all children, and home schooling has been banned. Schools are seen by ISIL as perfect instruments for indoctrination, shaping the hearts and minds of the next generation. Children are taught a rigid curriculum, and encouraged to adhere to Islamic norms and thinking, as interpreted by ISIL. The school week runs from Sunday to Thursday, and classes are segregated by gender. Students attend five years of elementary school and four years of high school, between the ages of 6 and 15[60].

Teachers who refuse to cooperate are strictly monitored, threatened, and often executed[61]. Those who do not have previous teaching experience must undergo religious *shari'a* training in a special institute organized by ISIL. Teachers with earlier experience from public and non-Islamic schools are required to attend *shari'a* courses and claim repentance for teaching "the disbelieving curriculum". Teachers are thus recruited to only teach ISIL educational material[62].

Close to 900,000 children are estimated to live in territory controlled by ISIL in Syria, as of October 2015. And 1.4 million live in areas controlled by armed groups in general[63]. Children make up almost half of the 3.3 million people that have been displaced in Iraq since January 2014. Over one-third of them have lived under ISIL control[64].

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[57] "Imam Bukhari Institute in the Tal Abyad Area", *Islamic State Wilayat Raqqa*, 2 December 2015, https://archive.org/details/am_maa (accessed 15 March 2016); "Islamic State Curriculum" https://archive.org/details/Mnahiij (accessed 15 March 2016).

[58] Quilliam. March 2016. The Children of Islamic State. https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-children-of-islamic-state.pdf (accessed 17 April 2017).

[59] al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad. 2015. "Specimen 5A: Minutes of a meeting on educational reform by the Diwan al-Ta'aleem for upcoming academic year (unofficial document)", January 27 http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents (accessed 4 April 2016).

[60] Quilliam. March 2016. The Children of Islamic State. https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-children-of-islamic-state.pdf (accessed 17 April 2017).

[61] Montgomery, Katarina. 2014. "ISIS Sets a 'New Paradigm' for Child Soldiers: Ideology, Combat and Forced Marriage", *Syria Deeply*, November 27,

http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/11/6433/isis-sets-new-paradigm-child-soldiers-ideology-combat-forced-marriage (accessed 5 March 2016).

[62] Quilliam. March 2016. The Children of Islamic State. https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-children-of-islamic-state.pdf (accessed 17 April 2017).

[63] No Lost Generation 2015, Syria crisis update, p. 4.

[64] UNICEF. June 2016. Children are especially at risk in Iraq crisis, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iraq_74784.html.

In the past years, Jabhat al-Nusra has established a large number of schools for its fighters and children living in territory it controls[65]. The extremist curricula provided in their schools is a source of vulnerability for many children, which grow up without alternative sources of information or education in a war town region. A few local civil society organizations have been allowed to continue running informal education sessions in areas controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra.

Other political organizations and armed groups have introduced politically or culturally motivated elements in the educational program. The Kurdish population of Syria had no access to education in their mother tongue prior to the conflict, as education was only provided in Arabic. When the Syrian government's presence gradually diminished in the Kurdish regions, Kurdish political organizations introduced a bilingual curriculum with education in both Arabic and Kurdish. While many writers and linguists saw the "Kurdish curriculum" as a historic milestone, two main concerns have been discussed by civil society activists, journalists, and among politicians. Regarding the formal recognition of the education; many voiced concerns and questioned if the new curriculum would be accepted for admission to higher education at Syrian universities. Secondly, they underlined that there was a new ideological subject in the curriculum, which replaced the former compulsory National Education subject on teaching the fundamentals of the Arab Socialist Baath Party and Arab nationalism. The new subject is said to teach the political ideology of the Democratic Union Party, PYD, which is the dominant party in the Kurdish local administration. The educational administration printed 40,000 textbooks in Kurdish and trained 2,600 teachers in six months on the new curriculum[66].

Equally, the Syrian National Coalition, the main political opposition in Syria, adopted a new curriculum for regions in Syria under its control. All subjects that were related to the Assad regime, such as the National Education subject, were removed from the curriculum. Islam was also added to the curriculum as a subject, and reviewed when grading final exams[67].

Noticeably, armed groups across the ideological and political spectrum in Syria and Iraq organize schools and new curriculums as a part of a long-term strategy to ensure future influence and power in the Middle East. Most of the armed groups have ambitious political goals and are not new to the region's geopolitics; some have been deeply involved in earlier conflicts by proxy or under different names. All parties to the conflicts have future claims on control of territory and political representation, and likewise, they all seek to target a growing number of children and teenagers through education and propaganda. Instilling ideological beliefs in children's sense of identity is likely to pave the way for future mobilization or re-

[65] Mansour, Hadia. 2016. "Syria: Confusion Reigns in Kfar Nabel's School System, Institute for War & Peace Reporting", June 19, https://iwpr.net/global-voices/syria-confusion-reigns-kfar-nabels-school (accessed 17 August 2016).

[66] al-Jablawi, Hosam. 2016. "Syria's Warring Parties Teach Separate Curriculums", January 19, https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/01/19/syrias-warring-parties-teach-separate-curriculums (accessed 23 February 2016).

[67] Bhatti, Jabeen and Al-Rubaie, Mohammed. 2013. "The Other Syrian Conflict: The Curriculum," October 26, http://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2013/10/the-other-syrian-war-the-curriculum (accessed 13 January 2016).

cruitment in vulnerable conflict zones. It is therefore imperative to address the protection needs of these children.

No Lost Generation

In face of the overwhelming evidence that a generation of children is put at great risk, UNICEF and a group of partners including host governments, donors, international agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), came together to develop a strategy to prevent "a lost generation" in Syria and Iraq. UNICEF outlined the No Lost Generation Initiative aimed at providing Syrian children, both those affected by the conflict within the country and those who fled to neighboring countries, with access to education and opportunities for a better future[68]. By 2013 five million children had already been affected by the war in one way or another, and it was imperative to adopt measures to save their future. The No Lost Generation (NLG) strategy set out to address generational challenges by working to mitigate immediate and long-term risks children faced in the ongoing conflicts. According to the NLG strategy, preventive logic and long-term thinking had to guide the international humanitarian action on Syria and Iraq.

Three targets were identified to achieve this:

a) Increasing learning and skills

Increasing school enrolment and keeping children learning; improving quality of education; and expanding vocational and remedial secondary education.

b) Providing a protective environment

Protecting children and upholding their human rights; providing psychosocial support, including teacher training; promoting birth registration; providing mine-risk education; monitoring the child protection situation and assessing children's vulnerability; addressing gender-based violence and specific needs of adolescent girls.

c) Broadening opportunities for children and adolescents

Building life-skills for children and adolescents; vocational training; mobilizing communities to support peace building.

The NLG strategy had a significant outreach in its first years. In 2015 the NLG strategy had been successful in supporting 165,000 children to enroll in formal education, through its education sector partners for Syria and Iraq. Remedial education reached 575,000 children. Moreover, 19,000 students resumed their studies through the piloting of an innovative self-learning program. In the five countries hosting Syrian refugees, NLG education sector partners supported 700,000 children (5-17 years old) to access education opportunities both in formal and non-formal settings. Government leadership and sector coordination were crucial to expand learning opportunities[69]. More than 599,000 Syrian children and adolescents, in Syria's neighboring countries, received support to enroll in formal education through

[68] UNHCR. 2014. Urgent call for massive investment to prevent lost generation of Syrian children, January 7, http://www.unhcr.org/52cba9099.html (accessed 4 March 2016).

[69] No Lost Generation 2015, Syria crisis update, pp. 2-3

NLG supported efforts. 148,000 children and adolescents received support to enroll in non-formal, informal, or life skills education. Over 568,000 Syrian refugee children participated in structured and sustained child protection or psychosocial support programs in 2015[70].

Major challenges remain, however. The NLG strategy has identified lack of access to hard-to-reach areas, lack of teachers, ongoing destruction of schools, re-enrollment of IDP and refugee children, alternative or non-formal curriculums, and language barriers for refugee children, as the most central challenges for the coming years. Negative coping strategies among refugees, such as sending children to work to meet families' needs also prolong vulnerability of children and raise obstacles for re-enrollment. Reaching the most marginalized and vulnerable children and youth will continue to be a challenge in 2016, and more efforts must be directed towards reaching drop outs, out of school, working adolescents, and children in difficult economic situations, according to UNICEF[71].

Despite these challenges, the number of students enrolled in formal education has increased over three times since the launch of NLG in August 2013. Regrettably, the percentage of out-of-school children has remained around 50 per cent, as host countries struggle to accommodate the increasing influx of Syrian refugees. As of November 2015 there were 1.44 million school-aged Syrian children in the five neighboring receiving countries, 52% of them were still out of school.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed two themes that have long-term, or even generational, impact on children in Syria and Iraq, namely, child recruitment and education. By providing a careful analysis of the conflict dynamics, it initially situated the discussion in the circumstances from which the present situation emerged. Child recruitment and education was then studied separately, based on available information from recent empirical reports published by international or humanitarian organizations, including UN agencies. With the experience and perspective of a practitioner, my analysis aimed at providing concrete cases and situations in the ongoing conflicts.

The social environment in Syria and Iraq, which is imbued with violence, has a desensitizing effect on children from early age, and leave them vulnerable for recruitment into armed groups or military ranks. Child recruitment increased steadily in both countries in the last years, and in the section on 3.1 the paper examined numerous reports by humanitarian organizations that flagged serious concerns. The analysis on child recruitment focused on how the last five-year-period of violence has created conducive conditions for mass recruitment of children from all religions and ethnicities. The trend is observable across most regions in the two countries, and not limited to a single or specific group of armed actors.

If diplomatic negotiations for reaching a peace accord continue to fail, and the current situation is allowed to continue, it may give rise to a generation of fighters

[70] *Ibidem*, p. 4.

[71] *Ibidem*, pp. 3-4.

that have experienced nothing but war and violence since early childhood. Inevitably, that would be an ominous foundation on which the current conflicts may transpire into a new decade, post 2020, in one way or another. The trends and alarming numbers, discussed in this paper, do not find such a prospect unlikely.

The situation for girls and young women is particularly alarming and underreported. Girls and young women live partly confined to their homes, and their movement or participation in public/community life is often restricted. This limits their chances of acquiring basic education or work skills through job training, and makes them very vulnerable to child marriage. As they become teenagers they are also at high risk of facing sexual and gender based violence in conflict zones or refugee camps.

However, threats and risks posed by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq generated a comprehensive response strategy, the No Lost Generation, by the United Nations and other key members of the international community. It identified the lack of access to education as one of the major challenges that children face unceasingly, as hundreds of thousands of children continue to be out-of-school. As a result of the war and attacks on schools and teachers, children in IDP or refugee communities do not have sufficient access to education. In conflict zones, where political and military actors have provided alternative education and curriculums, the education has as a result been marked by ideological indoctrination. The impact of ideological education and its implications on child recruitment and political brainwashing was analyzed against the backdrop of ethnic and sectarian conflicts. The growing *de facto* power of armed groups in many regions of Syria and Iraq emphasizes the urgency of this matter.

There are still mounting generational risks facing an entire generation of children that has lived through over five years of devastating war. The long-term consequences of the ongoing conflicts are dangerous for future generations, and risk perpetuating violence and instability. Current patterns of child recruitment and lack of access to education are ample driving factors in this regard. Major challenges remain despite significant mobilization by the humanitarian community, through the NLG strategy, in particular in regions controlled by armed groups. And unquestionably, more resources must be dedicated to the NLG strategy, and furthermore for research on generational and long-term impact on children in today's violent conflicts in Syria and Iraq.