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Reintegrating Children Formerly Associated with ISIL: A Critical Next Step for Iraq's Development and Recovery

Watchlist Calls on the Government of Iraq and Its International Partners to Strengthen Measures to Reintegrate Children Formerly Associated with ISIL

NEW YORK, MARCH 29, 2021 – Children who were recruited and used by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have not received the recovery and reintegration support they need to successfully return to civilian life in Iraq, said Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict in a new [policy brief](#). Children formerly associated with the armed group are either held in detention on terrorism charges or lack the assistance they need to rejoin their communities.

The 26-page report, [Bridging the Gap: Bringing the Response to Children Formerly Associated with ISIL in Iraq in Line with International Child Protection Standards](#), highlights the lack of a national strategy or legal framework to guide the government of Iraq's response to children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups. To the extent reintegration support is provided, it is primarily led by humanitarian and protection actors, often on a limited and short-term basis.

“As the government of Iraq and its international partners work towards the country's long-term recovery, it is critical that they develop a rights-based strategy with adequate support from the international community to address and reintegrate thousands of children associated with ISIL and other parties to the conflict,” said Adrienne Lapar, Director for Watchlist. “Not only is there a legal and moral imperative to support these children's return, but it is also a critical component of peace and stability in the region.”

The fall of ISIL in December 2017 did not mark the beginning of a formal reintegration process for the thousands of children in its ranks. Instead, Iraqi and Kurdish authorities have detained children formerly associated with the group on terrorism charges, sometimes absent evidence they committed any violent crime, stretching juvenile facilities in Baghdad-controlled Iraq far beyond capacity. In limited instances where children have been allowed to return home, girls and boys often lack access to the services needed to reintegrate into their communities. The recently adopted Yezidi Survivors Bill aims to provide survivors of crimes by ISIL from some minority groups with reparations and reintegration support.

“Under international law, all children recruited and used by armed groups are victims first and foremost and are entitled to recovery and reintegration support,” said Lapar. “The emphasis should be on investigating and, where appropriate, prosecuting the adults who preyed upon and recruited these children.”

Iraq is party to a number of key conventions that provide a robust framework for the treatment of children associated with armed forces and armed groups. The government of Iraq, with the support of the international community and child protection actors, should take steps to fulfill its commitments and bridge the gap in its response.

In addition to developing and adopting a national reintegration program, the government of Iraq should release children detained solely for their association with ISIL. Children who have committed violent

crimes should be treated in line with international juvenile justice standards, which stress restorative justice and reintegration. In these cases, detention should only be used as a measure of last resort and for the shortest period of time. Authorities should also strengthen the legislative framework for the treatment of children formerly associated with armed groups and forces. Where relevant, the government should support the right to reparations for children who suffered serious violations at the hands of ISIL, including through the swift and effective implementation of the Yezidi Survivors Bill.

These measures are long overdue and particularly crucial in light of the pending return of more than 30,000 Iraqis, primarily women and children, from Al-Hol displacement camp in northeast Syria, some of whom may be children formerly associated with ISIL.

“Failing to meet the needs of children formerly associated with armed groups would not only be a violation of their rights, but may also undermine efforts to consolidate peace, security, and stability in Iraq,” said Lapar.

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict is a New York-based global coalition that works to end violations against children in armed conflicts and guarantee their rights. For more information, please visit: <https://watchlist.org/>.

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