

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Distinguishing Children From ISIS-Affiliated Families in Iraq and Their Unique Barriers for Rehabilitation and Reintegration

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Abstract: Over 25,000 Iraqis (90 percent of which are women and children) currently reside in al-Hol camp in Northeastern Syria, and the government of Iraq has started to return some of these families back to Iraq via a rehabilitation and reintegration programme. This population is perceived to have an ISIS affiliation, along with thousands of other persons across Iraq. But what exactly does having an 'ISIS affiliation' mean practically for children from these families, and what are the implications of it for their rehabilitation and reintegration? Building off a gap in the literature around children with perceived affiliation to terrorist groups, this article utilises Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model to help distinguish the current challenges faced by children from ISIS-affiliated families in Iraq. It considers the implications of familial affiliation in areas including family life, education, camp and detention settings, media coverage, returning to their communities, and legal aspects. It also considers which of these features are shared with ISIS-affiliated children outside of Iraq. The aim is to create a stronger and shared baseline for understanding the unique features of such children, and how their healthy development may be negatively or positively impacted on multiple levels when their family is affiliated with a terror group. In turn, this understanding can better shape and target the interventions or support they may receive in response to these.

Keywords: ISIS, Iraq, children, terrorism, rehabilitation, reintegration, Bronfenbrenner

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Introduction

Over a period of several years after announcing their so-called caliphate in 2014, ISIS took over, held, and administered an area the size of Britain across Iraq and Syria, and controlled the lives of 10 million at its peak.¹ In Iraq itself, ISIS held up to 40 percent of the country and there were serious concerns that they would move into the capital Baghdad. The group was territorially defeated in Iraq at the end of 2017, and in Syria in 2019, yet today ISIS remains a security threat in both countries. A 2022 CENTCOM report broke this threat down into three categories: ISIS members still at large; ISIS leaders and fighters in detention (20,000 in Iraq, 10,000 in Syria); and importantly for this article “the potential next generation of ISIS,” particularly those children who remain in the al-Hol camp in Northeast Syria (NES).² Today over 25,000 Iraqis (90 percent of which are women and children) currently reside in al-Hol camp in NES, amidst a total population of nearly 50,000. The CENTCOM report notes, “These children in the camp are prime targets for ISIS radicalization. The international community must work together to remove these children from this environment by repatriating them to their countries or communities of origin while improving conditions in the camp.”³ Al-Hol camp has also been referred to as a ‘ticking time bomb’ by the UN⁴ and Iraqi stakeholders.⁵ There are thus ongoing security concerns of ISIS fighters, those in detention, and a notable focus on children who remain in al-Hol camp who are seen as vulnerable to recruitment into a potential future iteration of ISIS or other armed groups — a concern shared with other children from families with links to ISIS outside of al-Hol.

Yet, for the tens of thousands of Iraqi children which are currently perceived as ‘affiliated’ with ISIS, to view them all uniformly and exclusively through a risk-oriented security lens is deeply problematic. Perceived affiliation currently takes many forms, though the most common is through a familial connection (e.g., through a parent or sibling who was actively involved with ISIS).⁶ Such a threat-dominated approach risks securitising an incredibly diverse and highly vulnerable population who faces a myriad of challenges in their lives that extend well beyond possible recruitment to armed groups.

This article focuses on the current situation of ISIS-affiliated children from Iraq, particularly those affiliated through their familial connections. It lays out their status, describes what is unique about these families, and examines the current barriers to their rehabilitation and reintegration. Some authors have noted that rehabilitation and reintegration as a phrase is often used in criminal justice terms for those exiting prisons and returning to society, but that “these terms have not been clearly defined or operationalized,” resulting in a lack of clarity around their ultimate goals, who should provide these, and in which order these should happen. It also means that goals discussed in programs could range from clear support to practical needs (e.g., housing) while others were “viewed as instrumental to ensuring long-term desistance from extremism, but were admittedly aspirational.”⁷ The term rehabilitation in this context of this article is used in the most basic sense of restoring normal lives for these children while accounting for their needs, while reintegration refers to returning and reintegrating them into local communities in Iraq. Risks in this context are discussed as “characteristics at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that precede and are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes.”⁸ This definition highlights the myriad of ways in

which their lives may be negatively impacted, while also not excluding future potential security concerns.

Children who have been affiliated with ISIS have been the focus of a growing body of literature. Yet, a significant portion of this literature has focused on western case studies or contexts such as central Asia, or (often male) child soldiers who were recruited and forced to fight on behalf of the group, with a significant focus on foreign children. Important research has also been conducted on children who have been affected by terrorism and conflict. Yet, children who are perceived and labelled as ‘affiliated’ with ISIS within Iraq remain an underexplored and undistinguished group in current literature.

This article builds on and extends from current literature in several important ways. First, it examines and distinguishes the broader category of children with a familial affiliation to ISIS. Second, it highlights the case of ISIS-affiliated children in Iraq – a case study largely overlooked in current literature, yet which has the highest number of affected persons out of any country globally along with Syria. Third, it highlights the myriad of coordinated, interlinked, and tailored responses that will be required to meet their needs. Fourth, from a policy perspective, thousands of foreign children from around the world also lived under ISIS and have returned to their home countries, or may do so in the coming years.⁹ While their situation is unique for many reasons (most specifically not returning to a country which was occupied or as heavily affected as Iraq, and the much smaller caseloads), there are many shared challenges these children face in their rehabilitation and reintegration as Iraqi children (e.g., missing/dead parents, stigmatisation, disrupted education, etc.). This article can thus help identify and encourage a more comparative global analysis of similarities and distinctions of this group of children from families affiliated to terrorist groups.

The article proceeds as follows: first, it discusses the methodology, and the body of research literature to which this analysis contributes. This is followed by a description of the situation of ISIS-affiliated children in Iraq today. It then outlines key barriers to rehabilitation and reintegration along several thematic areas as informed by Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model. Finally, it concludes with a discussion about the implications of this analysis. This article also highlights the value of a multi-disciplinary approach to this problem—which can help to identify the key concerns facing children more clearly today beyond exclusive security concerns—and the complexity of the status and circumstance of ‘ISIS-affiliated children’ and calls for more nuance and increased research on this topic.

Methodology

This article is informed by nearly nine years of research on this population of ISIS-affiliated families by the author. During this time the author has conducted eight trips to Iraq between 2018 and 2023, for which open-source information is drawn on in this report.¹⁰ A field visit to Iraq specific to this analysis was conducted in 2022 which involved eighteen semi-structured interviews and two additional focus groups which are integrated throughout as primary source materials. Interviews were conducted with practitioners such as case workers and service providers, and with persons from ISIS-affiliated families which included two focus groups

(one with men only, one with women only) and one-on-one interviews in the Jeddah 1 (J1) Rehabilitation Centre, Khazar camp, and Hassan sham U2 and U3 camps with residents (males and females aged 18+).¹¹

Interviews were conducted in English or Arabic and interviewees were presented with a list of questions in advance. All interviewees had a chance to review questions, ask follow-up questions, and could refuse to answer any questions they chose. When conducted in Arabic, a translator facilitated the live, recorded interview while a second translator confirmed the transcript via verbatim transcription for accuracy. Information from interviews was triangulated for accuracy from other open-source reports. The author reviewed all transcripts and used structural coding to organise themes discussed in the interviews. The names used in this article are not their real names to protect their identity. A recent EU-funded project led by the author also considers how the life of the child is impacted when a family member is involved in violent extremism, which includes ISIS-affiliated families in Europe.¹² This has helped inform the comparative view of challenges for children in Iraq and other contexts.

Literature Review – Children and Terrorism

There is a notable body of literature on children in relation to terrorist groups, specifically literature on children in ISIS, which has been established since 2014. This article will ultimately contribute to both, as current literature does not sufficiently account for the diverse ways that children are affected when they are *affiliated* with armed groups via their familial links, and how perceived familial affiliation affects their lives, which limits their categorical similarities and distinctions. This contrasts with other fields such as that on child soldiers, or children generally affected by the fight against terrorism, which are more widely examined (though the case study of Iraq is also under-researched). The following literature review is not comprehensive but does highlight the current gaps in this field of research to which this analysis directly contributes.

Children and Armed Groups

Research on children and armed groups have often focused on child soldiers, which can consider their rehabilitation and reintegration. This includes child soldiers involved in conflicts in Africa in countries such as Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and Uganda, where children were forcibly recruited, coerced, or in some cases willingly joined.¹³ In Sierra Leone, findings from one study noted that child soldiers who had higher levels of war exposure (and thus violence) needed prioritised support over those exposed to less violence, as this ‘higher war exposure group’ ultimately had more PTSD symptoms, hyperarousal symptoms, and difficulties in emotional regulation.¹⁴ In Bosnia, the private and public narratives around former child soldiers have been highlighted.¹⁵ Special attention has also been paid to the often overlooked roles of girls in armed groups, and implications for their rehabilitation in countries like Colombia,¹⁶ Sierra Leone, and Uganda, amongst others,¹⁷ particularly in cases where they themselves did not conduct violence and were excluded in Disarmament, Demobilisation and Rehabilitation (DDR) and other post-conflict processes. Child soldiers often face educational disruption or cessation as well, alongside issues such as societal or familial rejection or stigmatisation. Research on child soldiers has considered concepts and constructions of child soldiers; agency, capacity, and resilience; legal considerations; and aspects of transitional justice.¹⁸ Children have also

been researched as militants in countries such as Pakistan, where in some cases they have been suicide bombers.¹⁹

There has also been a body of research which considers the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers, particularly concerned with harms such programs may cause.²⁰ As Shepler notes in her book on child soldiers in Sierra Leone, children who participated in UN- and NGO-sponsored programmes for child soldiers may have unintended consequences including child soldiers performing (or refusing to perform) as the 'child soldier' to "gain access to the resources available for their reintegration into normal life."²¹ This raises important considerations in Iraq around programming targeted at 'ISIS-affiliated families', where access (or lack thereof) to support for them may be contingent on this perceived affiliation (and also to the exclusion of non-ISIS affiliated children, who may nonetheless face similar challenges around trauma, educational disruption, etc.). Concerns have also been raised by scholars about the framing of 'child soldiers' from the global south.²²

Since ISIS established its caliphate in 2014, the subject of children in relation to the group has been an area of international attention, including scholarly focus. This has focused particularly on the issue of child soldiers, which includes research on how they have been used in propaganda,²³ how they have been recruited and what their roles have been,²⁴ legal definitions and considerations around their roles,²⁵ and the impacts and implications of these roles on the well-being of the child.²⁶ Other research has more quantitatively looked at children from around the world who have been taken to—or born into—the Islamic State (and thus ISIS-affiliation).²⁷

Rehabilitation and reintegration of ISIS-affiliated children has been examined in recent years, though much of this literature sits outside of academic journals, and is action-oriented, focusing more on policy and practice considerations around ISIS-affiliated children.²⁸ These papers discuss aspects such as: supporting children's physical and psychological health; addressing indoctrination and issues such as stigmatisation; gender- and age-appropriate considerations in programming; coordination of activities amongst various stakeholders; legal and human rights considerations; practical advice for practitioners including lessons from adjacent fields; and practical case studies from around the world. One rapid review which is intended to inform rehabilitation and reintegration of ISIS-affiliated children highlights notable crossover in experiences of ISIS-affiliated children and refugee children, war-impacted children, child criminal gang members, child victims of maltreatment, and victims of sex trafficking. Notable shared adversities from these groups included: prior childhood adversity and trauma, family violence, community/political violence, combat involvement, indoctrination, family loss and separation, and displacement and adjustment stressors.²⁹ Another recent article highlights a "5R approach" to rehabilitating and reintegrating ISIS-affiliated families which addresses repatriation, resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and resilience as key programmatic areas of focus.³⁰ This body of literature is useful to inform approaches to ISIS-affiliated children, and can be used to inform rehabilitation and reintegration of ISIS-affiliated children in Iraq. Nonetheless, it does not necessarily describe the factors that make children from ISIS-affiliated families distinct, nor looks at practical cases of children from such families in the unique case of Iraq.

Armed Conflict and Childhood Development

The impacts and implications of conflict on child health and development have also been widely researched in the field of health and is a useful adjacent field to help distinguish unique and shared features of ISIS-affiliated children. One systematic review notes that children can be impacted in relation to conflict through “mortality, injuries, illnesses, environmental exposures, limitations in access to health care and education, and the experience of violence, including torture and sexual violence” and “conflict-related social changes affecting child health.” Notably this review states, “The geographical coverage of the literature is limited. Data on the effects of conflict on child development are scarce.”³¹ Children impacted by armed conflict are analysed in Afghanistan, where long-term impacts and implications of armed conflict on children are recorded, including psychological, the loss of a parent to conflict, exposure to extreme violence, and recruitment of children into the Taliban,³² which mirror many aspects of life for children in Iraq.

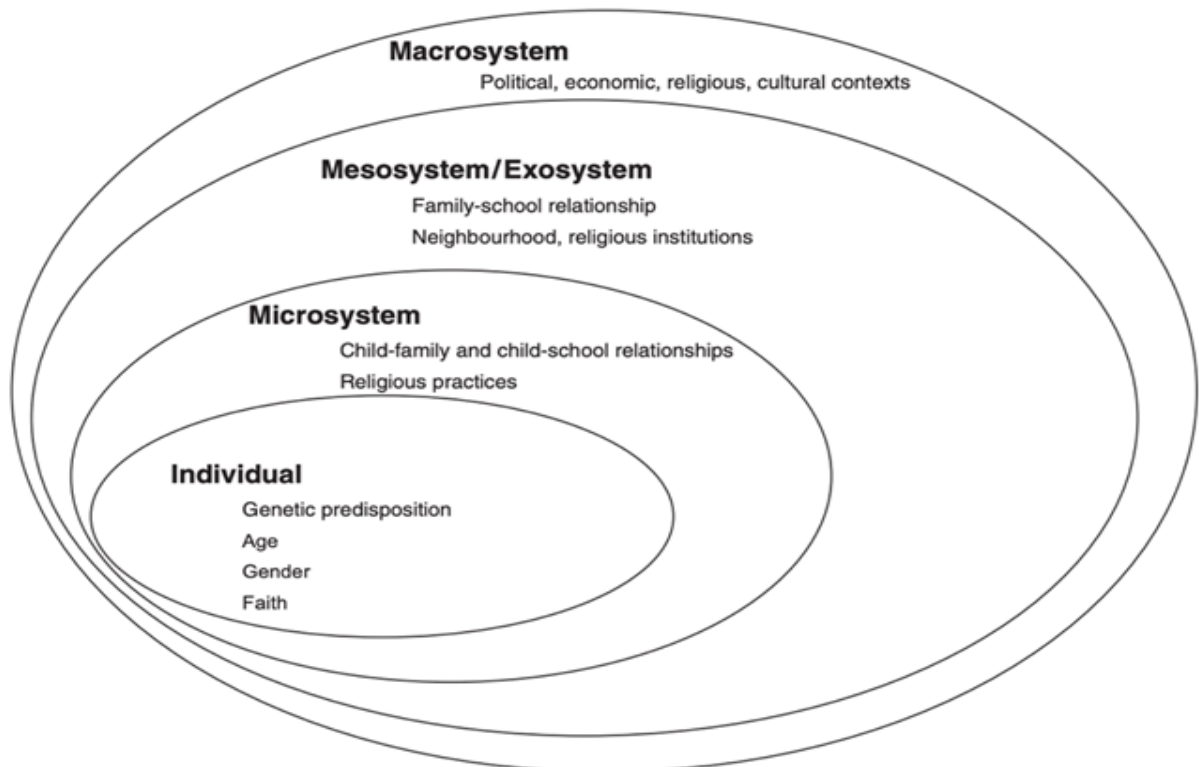
How conflict has affected children in Iraq has been examined in the academic literature to some extent, in part due to the history of conflict facing the country in recent decades. Issues noted have included reduced enrolment in education (especially for boys),³³ and negative impacts on physical development for children including their growth which was particularly pronounced in the most conflict-affected region.³⁴ In a study by Médecins Sans Frontières of 9,587 Iraqi children they supported in Iraq, mental health problems associated with armed conflict were the most common reason children sought care, with anxiety-related complaints (including PTSD-related symptoms) as the most prominent (38 percent).³⁵ Other key presentations for armed conflict-related issues included witnessing abuse, injury, or death; intentional psychological violence; abuse in detention; and deprivation and discrimination, all of which were uniquely impacted by the children’s age and gender. 37.4 percent of children were assessed to have childhood mental disorders as impacted by war and violence.³⁶ Domestic discord and violence was also an important and common precipitating event for care.³⁷ Next door in Syria, a closely comparable region, recent research has also examined the impact of conflict and violent extremism on adolescents in NES. It noted that several topics impacted on youth lives including the ‘normalisation’ of violence, a worsening economic crisis and disrupted education (which limits options), a lack of trust in government and sense of marginalisation, frayed social cohesion, trauma, and a sense of uncertainty and diminished hope for the future.³⁸

This research has been valuable for better understanding children’s roles within armed groups and in ISIS in particular (especially the more militant roles they held), practical ongoing efforts to ‘rehabilitate and reintegrate’ ISIS-affiliated children, and experiences of conflict-affected children more generally. However, there is still a significant gap in research on children who come from ISIS-affiliated families more generally and what distinguishes children from these other categories. Based on the government of Iraq’s commitment to return its citizens in ISIS-affiliated families from al-Hol camp, thousands of children will have to undergo some level of rehabilitation and reintegration based on this perceived affiliation. This mirrors a general approach by governments around the world who are also ‘rehabilitating and reintegrating’ these children from families affiliated with ISIS around the world. This article thus contributes to new knowledge on children affiliated to terrorist groups by further distinguishing this unique population through the case of Iraq.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model

This analysis uses Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to guide its analysis of children from ISIS-affiliated families,³⁹ in part because Bronfenbrenner's model focuses on child development and can help avoid solely security-oriented assessments of children as described in the introduction. Development is defined as "the person's evolving conception of the ecological environment, and his relation to it, as well as the person's growing capacity to discover, sustain, or alter its properties."⁴⁰ Bronfenbrenner's approach simplistically identifies how a child exists in a "world of relationships, roles, activities, settings, all interconnected" and develops in this system as they grow up.⁴¹ A child's development is viewed through different levels (micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chrono-systems), the interrelationships between these levels, and how these interact. It also accounts for biological differences that could include age and gendered considerations, and the specific needs of children (e.g., physical or mental disabilities) in terms of how that affects the development of children throughout their lives, and how they interact with the environment around them (and how that environment interacts with them based on those features). This model can thus help assess in a structured manner how a child's life may be impacted at different levels by a family member's involvement in ISIS (see figure 1).

Figure 1 – Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory⁴²



As Bronfenbrenner notes, "the ecological environment is conceived as extending far beyond the immediate situation directly affecting the developing person—the objects to which he responds or the people with whom he interacts on a face-to-face basis," that is, the microsystem of actors with which the child most regularly interacts. Of equal importance are "connections between other persons present in the setting, the nature of these links, and their indirect influence on the developing person through their effect on those who deal with him at first hand."⁴³ The microsystem is described as "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal

relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics.”⁴⁴ The mesosystem and exosystem focus on the interconnectedness between settings, “in which the developing person actually participates and those that he may never enter but in which events occur that affect what happens in the person’s immediate environment.”⁴⁵ Specifically the mesosystem “concerns the interaction of two or more settings of relevance to the developing child – between the child’s family and school settings, or among the family system and the child’s extended social network.” The exosystem is “an extension of the mesosystem and includes societal structures, both formal and informal” which can include “government structures, major societal institutions, both economic and cultural, as well as informal concepts like the neighbourhood.”⁴⁶ Finally, the macrosystem constitutes “the complex of nested, interconnected systems” and is “viewed as a manifestation of overarching patterns of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture.”⁴⁷ Bronfenbrenner notes,

*By analyzing and comparing the micro-, meso-, and exosystems characterizing different social classes, ethnic and religious groups, or entire societies, it becomes possible to describe systematically and to distinguish the ecological properties of these larger social contexts as environments for human development.*⁴⁸

This model supports a more systematic mapping and assessment of the environment of the life of a child on multiple levels, in a particular social context, and thus helps us assess how and where the development of a child may be impacted either positively or negatively by that environment. As Betancourt and Khan highlight in their use of this model in relation to children impacted by conflict,

*War represents a fundamental alteration of the social ecology and infrastructure which supports child development in addition to risk of personal physical endangerment. Restoration of a damaged social ecology is fundamental to improving prevention and rehabilitative interventions for war-affected children.*⁴⁹

Furthermore, the authors note that “Bronfenbrenner’s classic ecological model of child development (1979) provides a central framework for analysing the interrelated settings and relationships involved in the psychosocial impact of armed conflict on children,” and further “allows us to consider the role or status of children in their ecological context to assess opportunities and limitations inherent in working on their behalf.”⁵⁰

For the purposes of this article, the group being examined is comprised of children whose families have a perceived affiliation to ISIS in Iraq. These children are not only impacted by the conflict itself (which would mirror the situation of other war-affected children who experienced the conflict between 2014 and 2017), but they have the additional implications that come with their familial affiliation with ISIS (which shares some of the same features as child soldiers). Bronfenbrenner’s model can help better map out this social ecological environment and highlight considerations relevant for their rehabilitation and reintegration both generally as a population, and also on an individual basis. This model is also already being used to assess

how the life of the child is impacted when a family member is involved in violent extremism in Europe,⁵¹ and has also been used to look at youth radicalisation,⁵² which encourages further exploration of the model for children in ISIS-affiliated families. It is also inter-disciplinary in its aims to highlight the important bridge between social science research, which focuses on the social and political features of children from ISIS-affiliated families, and research on childhood development, which informs these children's well-being and rehabilitation.

The Situation of ISIS-Affiliated Iraqi Children Today

With the incredibly large population that was forced to live under ISIS, as well as the significant numbers of Iraqis who participated in ISIS,⁵³ tens of thousands of Iraqis today are seen as affiliated with ISIS. The scale of this population is alarming. At one point immediately after ISIS was pushed out of Iraq, 19,000 persons (largely adult males) accused of links to ISIS and charged with terrorism-related offences were held in Iraqi prisons.⁵⁴ 3,000 Iraqis sit amongst prison populations next door in NES today.⁵⁵ A notable number of women and youth are in detention in both NES and Iraq on suspicion of terrorism-related offences. Figures from 2022 noted over 1,000 children are detained as ISIS suspects in Iraq.⁵⁶ Iraqi children also remain in detention in NES including some who are believed to have been involved in crimes, but who have not been charged with any crimes, and those forcibly removed and separated from their families in al-Hol camp when they reached adolescence.⁵⁷ There are also some very young children who are in custody with their imprisoned mothers in Iraq and Syria.⁵⁸ ISIS child soldiers are not the main focus of this article, but represent yet another important and linked population, where youth who have been involved in crimes should be addressed via juvenile justice principles which prioritises their rehabilitation and reintegration.⁵⁹ The findings from this analysis could be extended to consider their needs more directly, as well as (where applicable) issues related to their families who may today be viewed as ISIS-affiliated.

Some ISIS-members, or those suspected of having been with ISIS, may be in prison currently, or have spent some time in detention, even if they were not ultimately convicted of ISIS-affiliation, and are largely an adult male population. It is their family members who are most widely seen as ISIS-affiliated families. ISIS-affiliated families comprise a significant proportion of women and children and are largely in four positions today. First, they remain in camps in NES primarily al-Hol and al-Roj camps, similar to other non-Iraqis with perceived ISIS affiliation, and are anticipated to largely return to Iraq through Iraqi government-led, and internationally supported processes through the J1 Rehabilitation Centre in Ninewa in federal Iraq, which receives al-Hol returnees exclusively. J1 residents are generally viewed as not having had any active role within the group, nor have they faced any criminal charges if they are involved in formal return processes including rehabilitation and reintegration programs in J1. Regarding this group, between 2014 (when al-Hol camp opened) and 2021 when Iraqis started to be returned from NES, the Iraqi population in al-Hol peaked at 30,000 individual Iraqis. Two-thirds of these were children (20,000). Due to the ongoing dangers within the camp, in 2021 the government of Iraq started a repatriation process, and publicly declared it will bring all its citizen's home from al-Hol to Iraq.⁶⁰ Iraqis from al-Hol include those who were displaced prior to 2019,⁶¹ and those who arrived in al-Hol after the battle to liberate Baghouz,⁶² the last ISIS stronghold in Syria in 2019. As of August 2023, 5,565 individuals (1,383 households) have been

returned from al-Hol to J1. At J1, all residents – adults and children – undergo some level of ‘rehabilitation’ which largely focuses on physical and psychosocial support.

Second, ISIS-affiliated families are in other camps (alongside non-ISIS affiliated families) within Iraq which houses internally displaced persons (IDPs) including Khazar, Hassan sham U2 and U3, which are based in the Kurdish region of the country. Hassan sham U2 and U3 camps host 9,034 individual residents, of which 2,668 are females seventeen and under, and 1,695 are males seventeen and under (child total is almost 50 percent).⁶³ Hassan sham U3 is also unique in that it also has a population of 200 males who are youth (including some former child soldiers) and adults who have been detained and released/served their sentences but are unable to return to their communities for several reasons discussed later. Often, they cannot leave camps either due to a lack of documentation or not having government approval to leaving camps, despite a lack of clear legal basis to hold them in these camps. Jeddah 5 (J5) in federal Iraq previously had 3,953 residents—of which 1,275 were girls seventeen and under, and 1,257 boys were seventeen and under (child total is 64 percent)—but this was hastily closed by the Iraqi government in May 2023.⁶⁴

Third, ISIS-affiliated families have returned to their original communities in Iraq of their own accord (including some who never left their communities), or fourth they have returned to a secondary location in Iraq when they could not return home. For children in the third and fourth categories, rehabilitation may be ongoing, but programming would largely focus on reintegration, though programming here would be less formal or prevalent than for the categories above. These second, third and fourth categories receive less attention and support due to the prioritisation of al-Hol returnees and international efforts to address perceived risks presented by that camp.

It is unclear how many of these ISIS-affiliated families (adults specifically) believe in ISIS ideology or support the group. These families can be understood as representing a spectrum that ranges from adults who are fully ideologically and physically separated from the group (including those who never had any engagement with, or support for, ISIS at all), to a minority who are highly ideologically committed, though who have not been charged with any offences. They also comprise families in different locations which have been affected by ISIS to differing extents, and families at different stages in this reintegration process. Nonetheless, they all share the same label as ‘ISIS-affiliated’ today.

While children from families associated with armed groups are not new, there are several features of the Iraq case study which make it particularly unique. First, the case load of ISIS affiliates is the largest in the world by a significant number, the majority of which are children.⁶⁵ Second, many of these children are returning to Iraq after travel to NES and thus additional legal/screening considerations and procedures are involved (e.g., verification/issuing of legal documentation, birth certificates, etc.). Though informal returns from NES have occurred, this al-Hol population is currently returning through a government-facilitated process and thus state actors have oversight and control over large segments of this work, providing an important opportunity to support children in the most targeted and effective way possible. Third, these children comprise infants and youth up to age eighteen, boys and girls — meaning

that children from all ages and levels of development must be accounted for in rehabilitation and reintegration, not just child soldiers or children affected by war. Fourth, these children and adults do not face criminal charges and have been cleared of any involvement in crimes, but nonetheless are still viewed uniquely by the community, often with suspicion, anger, and fear, or seen as 'risks' in a security sense.

The discussion will now outline some of the general recorded features of the lives of ISIS-affiliated children who have returned to (or are currently in) Iraq at the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-levels. These environmental considerations are specific to their familial affiliation with ISIS, and consider their status in their family life, education, camp and detention settings, media coverage, returning to their communities, and legal aspects. This article identifies the specific concerns raised in each setting which may impact on a child's development. This analysis does not determine the developmental outcomes anticipated by such factors, which are more personal and individualised to each child. However, in working with policy makers and practitioners today it is clear that each of these areas described has the potential to impact negatively on the development of the ISIS-affiliated and should thus be holistically accounted for by practitioners working with these populations in rehabilitation and reintegration work. These examples are not applicable to every child but are indicative of many of the most prominent challenges facing this population today.

Microsystem: Families and Education

While a strong body of literature has identified how a child's personal situation can be affected in conflict, for ISIS-affiliated families additional features can be found that can directly impact the relationships of children to immediate family members, and in their education. In this section the microsystems of family and education are examined.

The Family

Children's family lives are impacted in several ways when an immediate family member is involved with ISIS, including broken and divided families where an immediate male family member (often the father, or older male sibling) is in prison, dead, or missing, or family rejection from extended family (e.g., grandparents, aunts, etc.) due to ISIS affiliation.

Like the experiences of many families exposed to conflict (including those not affiliated with ISIS), ISIS-affiliated families may have experienced general insecurity, bombings and fighting, and a lack of food and water during the battle against ISIS. Children also frequently lacked basic security in home environments in some cases, where wartime stress and factors wreaked havoc in families. However, when an immediate family member was affiliated with ISIS, additional strains could be seen including family separation and the death of a family member (especially if family members were away fighting on behalf of the group).

The general structure of the family was noted to have changed significantly due to absent or missing male family members for both Iraqi and non-Iraqi ISIS-affiliated families. In al-Hol camp, approximately 90 percent of families are now female-headed households – a number much greater than the general population, even accounting for the high number of casualties

experienced in the most recent conflicts. In one camp, a case worker estimated that over half of the children had missing fathers due to their roles within ISIS.⁶⁶ As one camp manager noted, these included “widows, divorce cases, separations, and missing husbands” and for many of these women, it was due to their ISIS affiliation that they could not return home from IDP camps within Iraq.⁶⁷

Frequent cases of broken and separated families, including cases of abandonment, were highlighted by case workers and families themselves. One case worker offered some illustrative examples. In one case, the child’s father had been in ISIS and the mother divorced the husband and remarried. Yet, upon being remarried, the child could not accompany the mother to the new home and had to stay with grandparents due to the ISIS affiliation of their father. In another example, a father and male child had been involved in ISIS and the mother had returned to her parents’ home, leaving other remaining children in the family at the camp. In another, an Iraqi woman had married a foreign man, had children with him, and now he was in prison but she would not pursue a divorce because she still loved him. Cases of children being left behind when mothers remarried were noted by other interviewees as well, which also included cases of children being left in orphanages, or with extended family.⁶⁸ One case worker referred to this situation as a loss of “responsibility and motherhood.”⁶⁹ These children were noted to face significant stigma as the new spouses or other family members may not want to have ISIS-affiliated children in their homes, as they may face harassment or stigma in their communities.⁷⁰ Many of these female-headed households were also obliged to move in with relatives, who in many cases could not support them and their kids due to financial or spatial constraints.⁷¹ Extended family members may also not want to care for them based on their family’s ISIS affiliation, according to one case worker.⁷² Families could also be divided in return processes. For returnees from al-Hol, several women in one focus group discussed having to return to Iraq without their husbands who remained in custody in NES.⁷³ The thousands of men in Iraqi prisons speak to the scale of this issue of family situation due to imprisonment.

Children in ISIS-affiliated families often faced many other concerns in this period including negligence and violence towards children (by parents), “Most of the different cases were negligence and violence,” noted one case worker.⁷⁴ Family members involved in ISIS could also directly impact their families. An interviewee named Asma noted that when her husband joined ISIS, he became depressed, “we know this way ends in death or with getting arrested. There’s no stability... we were unsafe.” The husband’s role in ISIS also caused strain with her parents – her dad told her “Don’t let him go in that direction!”⁷⁵ A family member’s affiliation to ISIS thus directly impacted family bonds with that person, including strains in both the immediate and extended family, and could affect all (Iraqi and non-Iraqi) affiliated families. This could also reflect strains faced by families who had family members in prison more generally.

Family dynamics could impact boys and men in particularly gendered ways as well. One case worker discussed that if a father joined ISIS, the sons may also be obliged to do so, “his father joined ISIS, so he automatically joined because he can’t not follow his dad’s direction/ footsteps... this was normal.”⁷⁶ The case worker further noted in cases where wives also joined, the whole family was more likely to join ISIS. Here, familial involvement with ISIS could mean direct involvement of the family in some cases.

Family separation was also commonly experienced by those who were young men or boys when ISIS came, and who are viewed (either correctly or incorrectly) as having had some role in the group. Hasam was sixteen when ISIS took over Mosul and discussed going to ISIS schools for a year and a half, but then left to escape to the Kurdish region. He was subsequently arrested at a checkpoint and spent two years in prison because they suspected him of being with ISIS. In this period, he was kept with adults, and he could not see his family. Today he is no longer in touch with his family, “they can’t defend me... If my [brother] was to call me and someone finds out, they would take him.”⁷⁷ Suhel also described how “we can’t see our families. There is no future.” When he joined ISIS as a teenager his family disowned him, and today they are still not in touch for fears of being pushed out of their neighbourhood.⁷⁸ This was a similar experience to that of Muhammad from Salah al-Din, who—though still a teenager—also left his region when ISIS came. As the elder male child in the family, he wanted to pursue education and crossed into Kirkuk. He also was arrested, but released without charge, and now he does not communicate with his family. This lack of communication with family was also highlighted in a focus group of men, as for males there was a concern that security forces would harass their families if they were still in contact.⁷⁹ Noor also confirmed that in cases where children were forced to join ISIS, “sometimes they would disown their children, or the boy would go and never come back.”⁸⁰ This highlighted concerns of not only family separation, but rejection or loss of contact with families due to affiliation with ISIS, even in cases where family may help facilitate disengagement from the group or support their reintegration into society. The case of teenage boys also highlights gendered considerations, whereby these boys would have been more likely than girls to leave their family and in some cases were rejected by them or grew up in formative years without family structure or guidance.

Gendered dynamics were also unique to Iraqi women, as many women from ISIS-affiliated families were obliged to undergo *tabriya* – a tribal-based disavowal process by which a female publicly disavows male family members (often husbands) in order to be accepted back into a community and advance legal processes such as getting civil documentation. While this is not legally required and is viewed by many as a form of collective punishment, it is still a prominent practice and could cause severe tensions with extended family who may resent their male family member being labelled as ISIS. In some cases, *tabriya* was required to get a divorce, which may be necessary to obtain other legal documentation for families (e.g., national identification), even if that family member was not affiliated with ISIS.⁸¹ This could cause significant distress for women who were viewed as ‘ISIS-affiliated’, especially in cases where their husbands may have in fact been killed by ISIS or who had no role with the group, where they would be compelled to accuse them of having been in ISIS in order to obtain a divorce certificate and subsequently gain their own legal documentation. “Sometimes in these cases, the in-laws [husband’s parents] would say that she is trying to frame him, that he is part of ISIS”, noted a case worker.⁸² Such a process could also have significant implications for children who may thus be disavowed from their father publicly, and also identified publicly as belonging to an ISIS-affiliated family. It could also be quite expensive for families with few resources.⁸³ “I worked for a year and the money I made was all spent on transactions for [*tabriya*]” noted Asma.⁸⁴ *Tabriya* was thus another feature largely unique to ISIS-affiliated families and proved to have legal, social, and financial implications for the lives of children.

Education

For children generally across Iraq during the conflict, educational disruption was prevalent due to the presence of ISIS-controlled schools which followed ISIS curriculum, or where children were prevented from attending ISIS-run schools. However, in cases where families were affiliated with ISIS, educational implications could be more pronounced. For example, in some cases families may have intentionally sent their children to ISIS schools where they were taught ISIS curriculum and in some cases received training.⁸⁵ Asma noted of schools that ISIS took over, “they kicked girls out, and kept the boys in school” which suggested gendered implications for already poor educational opportunities in the conflict zone.⁸⁶ Educational disruption was also impacted if families moved during the conflict and were not able to access education (e.g. getting pushed back in the offensive against ISIS in cases of families travelling with male family members). In many cases, families simply prevented their children from attending ISIS-run schools in order to limit their exposure to the group.

Children from ISIS-affiliated families may also face longer periods of disrupted education. In camp settings in NES such as al-Hol some mothers had prohibited their children from going to school in the camp, which could be seen as *haram* in cases of ideologically committed families or prevented them from attending education for fear of having their family targeted by violent extremists in the camp. Education in camps was also generally viewed as limited. For example, a focus group of women noted in al-Hol “kids do nothing in school.”⁸⁷ Educational experience could continue to be disrupted for returning Iraqis due to their absent documentation which prevents children from enrolling in schools. Missing documentation is a common issue with many ISIS-affiliated families who are unable to get national documentation, and thus cannot access education. One case worker noted she cannot register some children for school in the camp as “instructions came [from the government] to not let in any student that has a statement or any affiliation with ISIS,” such as ISIS-issued birth certificates.⁸⁸ For those now above the age of eighteen who were not able to complete their education, they also may need to catch up, which could become more complex if they now had children of their own or could not access schools.⁸⁹

Other children had untreated mental health concerns and were not deemed physically or mentally able to attend school. Asma noted of her children, “my daughters developed a mental condition. They would faint, scream, and I even applied for them to go to school since we got displaced, but the school refused their application because of their mental condition.”⁹⁰ One case worker noted the following barriers that impacted children’s return to, or participation in school, “PTSD, trauma, depression, isolation, behavioural problems, aggression, anger, male discrimination against female children, girls not allowed to finish school and child marriage being encouraged [where girls would drop out].”⁹¹ This experience is similar to other children from conflict zones. As Betancourt and Khan note, “The quality and nature of relationships in more distal settings such as schools and neighbourhoods are also implicated in the mental health and adjustment of war-affected youth.”⁹² Yet, there were additional barriers due to accessing schools that also affected children from ISIS-affiliated families, including limits around documentation, and ideological principles imposed by the group such as gender inequality.

The issue of stigma was also particularly acute for children from families affiliated with ISIS in school settings. Interviewees noted that this stigmatisation could be faced from other children/their parents in educational settings, or by teachers or community members upset at 'ISIS-affiliated families'. Several interviewees noted that other families would not want their children to go to school with a child from an ISIS-affiliated family. There was a concern about bullying or other stigmatisation for children upon return to school, where children may face discrimination from peers. This may include false accusations being levelled against them, or fear of revenge acts against their families and children.⁹³

Regardless of the reason their education was disrupted (often for multiple years), many ISIS-affiliated children had never attended a normal school, particularly if they were in camp settings for prolonged periods.⁹⁴ While some of these issues are shared to an extent by other non-ISIS affiliated war affected youth, such as mental health concerns or disrupted education, children from ISIS-affiliated families (including non-Iraqi affiliated families) could be more predisposed to additional concerns such as longer periods where they are deprived of education, longer periods of disrupted education, or stigmatisation and bullying at school by peers and staff due to their familial status. This puts them at a significant disadvantage to their peers. In cases in Iraq where families have no other source of income, children may be encouraged to drop out of education to engage in labour, or become child brides which could be further exacerbated by employment limitations for female-headed households.⁹⁵ Limiting children's access to education is one of the most consequential barriers they face today, and thus far there have been no active steps taken by the government of Iraq to address this.

Mesosystem and Exosystem: Camps and Detention, Media Coverage, and Communities Receiving ISIS-Affiliated Families

This section will discuss the broader issues at the level of the meso- and exosystem faced by children from ISIS-affiliated families, specifically camps and detention, media narratives discussing ISIS-affiliated families, and returning to communities.

Camps and Detention

As highlighted above, tens of thousands of ISIS-affiliated families remain in camps, and this environment impacts their lives directly. One of the key concerns relevant to ISIS-affiliated children today is the ongoing lack of physical security and stability faced by many, particularly those who remain in al-Hol camp (including non-Iraqis), which was recently described as "the most dangerous place in the world to be a child."⁹⁶ For example, in 2021, there were 85 crime-related deaths in the camp, and 30 attempted murders. In total, 79 children have died in the camp comprising 35 percent of the total deaths.⁹⁷ For Iraqi children returning to Iraq via J1, the safety situation greatly improves compared to that in al-Hol, but there are ongoing security concerns for children who return to their communities, including revenge attacks committed against the families.

For those who remain in camp settings in NES, particularly al-Hol, violent extremist ideology and actors are still active and present a direct risk factor to children who are forced to be in these environments. Children are also exposed to extreme violence, and experience malnutrition,

deprivation of education, and general instability.⁹⁸ This situation changes for Iraqis who return to Iraq, and particularly J1, where the improved quality of services and level of safety are considerable. One woman in a focus group noted that “J1 was 200 times better than al-Hol,” while another said, “we were so surprised at how the welcome was [to Iraq], it was excellent.” Other camps in the Kurdish region, while more secure than al-Hol, also faced issues related to electrical cuts which were tied to issues such as harassment, rape, and violence. Such camps also noted budgetary constraints and residents faced low living standards. Prolonged presence in camps limits children from returning to normal lives. The standard of the camp and its general security and services thus directly affect the lives of children.

For children seen as affiliated with ISIS in detention centres in NES and Iraq, including those who have not been charged or convicted of crimes, they continue to experience prolonged detention where they are often exposed to adult populations including dangerous criminals and terrorists, and have limited access to education, psycho-social support, and other rehabilitative programming. This detained youth population in particular has been the focus of the UN Special Rapporteur due to the grave situation that they face, and who has referred to these conditions as “abhorrent” and “which meet the threshold for torture and inhuman and degrading treatment under international law.”⁹⁹ The impacts on childhood development for this population cannot be understated.

Media Coverage

Generally, the media attention that has discussed ISIS-returnee families has been largely negative,¹⁰⁰ often citing security concerns from deeply impacted communities or references to families as ‘time bombs’.¹⁰¹ In some cases, media interviews with returnees have also highlighted some returnees’ ongoing commitment and support to ISIS, only validating concerns by survivors of ISIS.¹⁰² However, there has also been notable international praise for the government of Iraq for supporting this work,¹⁰³ and more neutral reporting which more generally discusses repatriations from al-Hol. More positive international media campaigns have been conducted by the Global Coalition Against Daesh and other international organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme, the International Organisation for Migration, and Human Rights Watch, some of which are also produced in Arabic and accessible to Iraqi audiences.¹⁰⁴ How this media coverage, and strategic communications around ISIS-affiliated families, unfold will directly impact public attitudes towards these populations in Iraq and beyond, but already these children face a media burden based on their familial status which directly impact public perceptions of this population.

Returning to Communities

The process of reintegration and returning to communities that have been impacted by ISIS have direct implications for childhood development. For many ISIS-affiliated families returning to their communities, concerns largely focus on housing, employment opportunities, personal security, stigmatisation, and community acceptance or rejection. In one focus group, women described how “we don’t have houses – what do we do when we leave?” Another noted, “I have no housing to return to. Nobody to ask about me or visit me. My family and community have

rejected me.” Another explained that her house is now occupied – how could she move home? Many women echoed the point that “documentation and housing are our biggest concern.” For women who would return to their communities without a male family member, several noted they “needed a male protector.”¹⁰⁵ Asma echoed this point, “the problem is I have no economic capital [to return to Mosul].”¹⁰⁶ Noor noted that she only wished “stigma would be removed” so that women and children could return to their communities.¹⁰⁷ Many houses were also destroyed in the conflict. For returnees who go through formal return channels, they require local sponsorship, and many noted they were unable to secure local sponsorship and thus had no route to return to their community, including some losing tribal protection due to their family’s links to ISIS.

A significant number of returning ISIS-affiliated families are female-headed households due to the large numbers of adult males in prison, missing, or killed in the conflict. For many female-headed households then, how they are received or supported in the community directly impacts the status of the family and children. This was particularly highlighted in relation to access to housing, opportunities for paid employment, and tribal protection. In the context of Iraq, particularly where females had not worked before, the large number of female-headed households have significant implications for the living situation more generally of families where a male guardian could impact their ability to access housing and their return to communities. Skills and employment training are currently available to some women in camps in Iraq, most prominently J1, and in many cases, they have not been in paid employment before.

Concerns about revenge attacks, particularly targeted at male youth, were highlighted where these could be seen in relation to ‘the sins of the father’ (targeting the male youth in the absence of the father for ISIS-affiliated crimes committed). As Sarah explained, “my son is older, and if I were to return to my area they would take him and say that’s revenge because of his father.”¹⁰⁸ One case worker noted, “People in the neighbourhood would start talking about how he [the father] was with ISIS, and so they think the child is also with ISIS.”¹⁰⁹ Sarah discussed fear of revenge killings if she moved back to Mosul with her children.¹¹⁰ In local neighbourhoods, children were also noted to be from ‘ISIS families’, and non-ISIS affiliated families may restrict their children from playing or interacting with them. Male youth face particular hurdles to reintegration based on cultural perceptions of the roles of males and male youth that were seen during the conflict which particularly frame them as security risks.

Community perceptions and acceptance of returnees, including children, are crucial to their rehabilitation and reintegration. In cities that were impacted the most by ISIS and the war against it, public opinions have differed on whether women and minors should be approached as victims or as potential risks. There are also other concerns more generally around limited resources for victims of the conflict, particularly minorities who were targeted in the ISIS genocide and IDPs who still face significant challenges in the country. Here frustrations could be compounded by support for ISIS-affiliated family members of perpetrators if those who suffered at ISIS are not seen to receive sufficient support. An encouraging (though small-scale) UNDP community survey noted that communities are generally more willing to accept back women and children from ISIS-affiliated families, but noted that certain conditions must be met to do so including psychological rehabilitation (75 percent), disavowal of families in courts (68

percent), public apology (59 percent), and community service (22 percent) amongst others.¹¹¹ Yet, many ISIS-affiliated families still felt rejected by their communities even after going through these steps. Sarah, whose husband had joined ISIS and died, and who now headed her household with five children, described how “our conditions are hard. Children don’t have paperwork and the government wants the divorce paper. And we are ready to divorce our husbands because they got onto that path, but we want a guarantee that if we would go into the centres they wouldn’t talk about us or arrest us.”¹¹²

Currently, some community-based programmes include Local Peace Committees which are comprised of local leaders who help facilitate the return and protection of returnees and have been running in Iraq since 2017. Similar Youth and Women’s Peace Committees also exist. While such programmes have been viewed in positive terms, some reports have noted that Local Peace Agreements

*helped communities move away from sweeping perceptions of collective guilt, [but] these security clearances still applied to the family unit, meaning that if the head of household failed the vetting process, his wife and children would similarly be without a clearance. Equally, women whose husbands were missing or imprisoned often struggled to obtain a security clearance.*¹¹³

How ISIS-affiliated families were generally received at the community level differed region to region and was based on highly individualised and localised factors. Their acceptance to be returned as well was significantly impacted by local perceptions of, and approaches to, ISIS-affiliated families and ultimately the children.¹¹⁴ Both interviewees and other reports have generally expressed a desire for the Iraqi government to take responsibility for reintegration, with religious actors viewed as having a limited impact.¹¹⁵ Notably, religious factors including religious leaders or tenets were not actively highlighted or discussed in relation to ISIS-affiliated families in this returns process.

While this article focuses on children from ISIS-affiliated families, this cannot be separated from the broader post-conflict context. Many Iraqis who suffered from the conflict have not been able to return home, and in 2022 Iraq had 1,177,234 internally displaced people and nearly five million IDP returnees.¹¹⁶ These needs are particularly acute for minority groups who were targeted in a genocidal campaign by ISIS, including Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, and other groups. Notably, there are also large numbers of female-headed households from non-ISIS-affiliated families in Iraq, and who are also in need of skills training and access to employment.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, no formal transitional justice processes have been conducted in Iraq, and many war-affected Iraqis have not received compensation offered by the government, which has continued to impact communities who would be receiving ISIS-affiliated families. This return process and many of these features discussed are unique to Iraq, though similar concerns around stigmatisation, access to housing, community rejection, and challenges for female-headed households carry over to ISIS-affiliated families outside of Iraq.

Macrosystem: Political and Cultural Context

The macrosystem, according to Bronfenbrenner, includes customs and laws which do not directly interact with the child, but directly impact the life of the child. Here, the issue of documentation has been highlighted as one of — if not the biggest — barriers to the rehabilitation and reintegration of ISIS-affiliated youth. This is due to key factors including the lack of recognition of ISIS-issued documentation which affects children born under the ‘caliphate’, and an inability for many ISIS-affiliated families to meet the thresholds of documentation and evidence required to obtain national documentation for children such as birth certificates or national identification cards. This is particularly difficult if male family members are dead, missing, or in prison. This has the ripple effect of preventing children from being enrolled in school or having their families access government support and services including healthcare or pensions which could also have health and financial implications for children. Sarah, whose husband was a member of ISIS noted that, “those children if they grew up and were told that the government doesn’t let you have an identification, I swear they will be monsters. What will they be? I swear they will take the same path and we don’t want them to take the same path.”¹¹⁸ ISIS-issued documentation is not recognised in Iraq, impacting birth certificates, as well as marriage certificates. The issue of statelessness is also a significant ongoing concern with these children unless citizenship can be conferred. Such cases become more complex when the mothers were minors at the time of birth, where child marriages are not legally recognised, and in cases where women have had multiple children with multiple fathers (e.g., where men died, and women remarried, sometimes multiple times). The sustained government support for this process will also be crucial.

Iraq has also experienced sectarian violence in recent decades including the Iraq War, and under ISIS communities saw Sunnis who had joined ISIS target Shi’as and other minority ethnic groups. While sectarian tensions have reduced in recent years, increased levels of sectarian strain or violence could directly impact groups such as ISIS-affiliated families in the future.

Conclusion

This analysis has drawn on Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems model to map out, examine, and describe the situation of children from ISIS-affiliated families in Iraq. Due to spatial constraints, this article could not discuss in detail all features of life for children in ISIS-affiliated families, but it has highlighted several key features that are currently affecting their lives. These features will continue to impact how they can grow up and develop within the country, and thus their future prospects as they become adults.

This article builds on and extends the existing body of relevant literature in several important ways. First, it examined and distinguished the broader category of children with a familial affiliation to ISIS, to child soldiers, or war-affected children. Similar to child soldiers, children from ISIS-affiliated families may have been exposed to ISIS ideology and indoctrination (such as at ISIS-run schools) and be required to participate in government-led interventions (particularly those from al-Hol). They may have also experienced community or political violence, communal or familial rejection, family loss and separation, educational disruption, mental health and physical health concerns, and domestic violence – features also shared with

war-affected children. These points all broadly extend to children from ISIS-affiliated families outside of Iraq as well.

However, children from ISIS-affiliated families in Iraq are distinct from child soldiers and war-affected children in several ways including their legal status, social and tribal status, and the length of time in which they may experience the shared issues discussed in the previous section. Legal barriers include their access to documentation, and issues such as *tabriya* that uniquely affect their female family members thus disavowing them from their male family members. They require sponsorship to return to their communities (often from tribal figures and other community leaders), which can be directly linked to protections afforded to them when they return. They also have limited freedom of movement in cases where they are restricted to camp settings, and an inability to freely return to their communities (though their families have not been charged with crimes) – points also shared with many non-Iraqi ISIS-affiliated families in camps in NES. There are related social considerations which include incredibly high numbers of female-headed households, tribal considerations, and concerns about revenge attacks directed at male youth. Several of the concerns described above could also be exacerbated or experienced for longer periods of time in the case of ISIS-affiliated children including family separation, disrupted education, and limited rehabilitative support for mental and physical health needs (especially the longer they are confined to camps like al-Hol) which can negatively impact child development.

Second, it highlighted the myriad of coordinated and interlinked responses that will be required to be tailored to meet their needs that are directly linked with the points above. This includes support on a personal level to deal with micro-level factors in the immediate life of the child, addressing psycho-social support, family, and educational considerations. They also include meso-, and exo-level considerations, such as those supporting communities receiving these families, reducing stigmatisation, improving housing and employment prospects for ISIS-affiliated families, media coverage, and strategic communications around ISIS-affiliated families. Macro-level considerations account for current legal barriers to documentation, sustained government support for this rehabilitation and reintegration process, and sectarian tensions in the country.

Each of these levels and their relevant considerations will have to be addressed for successful rehabilitation and reintegration of children. For example, a child returned to Iraq who cannot access documentation will not be able to catch up on education, nor integrate with peers in school settings. A child who receives sufficient psycho-social support will still be impacted if their family cannot access housing or employment, or if they face stigmatisation or violence upon returning to their community (especially if those communities themselves are still dealing with effects from the conflict). Thus, coordination and shared understanding of these related issues must be acknowledged and jointly addressed by all parties involved in these processes including government actors, international and domestic NGOs, and community leaders, amongst others. As one case worker, who had a child killed by ISIS, noted:

*We need to work together, and the government needs to work and see these people as humans. Why should that person be blamed because of his father's or brother's crime, or any other family member? We should not let the government think of these people as ticking time bombs – that is the first thing. If these [people] are not treated humanely, have no rights, are treated as threats, they will become 'ticking time bombs.'*¹¹⁹

Using the systematic approach above can help inform a more holistic approach to working with affected children, which focuses first on their healthy development, and not their perceived security risk, and addresses their needs at different levels. The developmental risks faced by these children are likely to predispose them to disproportionately negative outcomes in relation to their peers, and directly impede their reintegration. These could be related to, for example, their healthy personal development, and factors that could make them more vulnerable to negative outcomes as they become adults. Oppositely, when these issues discussed are addressed and protective factors in their lives are enhanced, their chances to develop in healthy ways can increase dramatically.

This research also encourages more systematic assessment at each level of these features across families affiliated to terrorist groups internationally by researchers and actors working with this population to identify shared and distinct features on a country-by-country basis and identification of successful practices. Currently, both national and international actors are investing heavily into rehabilitation and reintegration efforts for ISIS-affiliated families around the world. In Iraq, international aid and development agencies are focusing largely on rehabilitation and reintegration support on individual and group levels for ISIS-affiliated families. Iraqi efforts on the national and regional level are commendable, but also differ region to region, and require more integrated coordination. Legal regimes around documentation or post-conflict support to affected communities can only be addressed by national government actors in Iraq, similar to issues such as *tabriya*. Unless the key factors relevant to rehabilitation and reintegration at each level are effectively coordinated and addressed by all actors, the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of ISIS-affiliated children will not be achieved.

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61 This pre-2019 population is generally viewed to comprise IDPs, though due to their time in al-Hol still have some stigma related to the camp and its notoriety. There are still some who may have real familial affiliation to ISIS.

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68 Interview 12, Noor.

69 Interview 9, Nadja.

70 Interview 12, Noor.

71 Interview 13, Rana; Focus group, women.

72 Interview 11, Abu Jassim.

73 Focus group, women.

74 Interview 2, case worker.

75 Interview 1, Asma.

76 Interview 11, Abu Jassim.

77 Interview 4, Hasam. The author could not independently verify that no crimes had been committed by young men who spent time in prison, in which case they would be considered child soldiers. In Hassan sham camp this group of 200 males are largely viewed as having been child soldiers or some role with the group (even if they didn't commit a crime), or otherwise had joined with ISIS and almost all had spent time in prison. However, the vast majority of males had been released from prison, had no outstanding criminal charges against them, though could not return to their communities for fear of re-arrest or targeting if they were to leave the camp.

78 Interview 15, Suhel.

79 Focus group 3, males.

80 Interview 12, Noor.

81 Interview 13, Rana.

82 Interview 10, Nadja.

83 Interview 13, Rana.

84 Interview 1, Asma.

85 Interview 11, Abu Jassim.

86 Interview 1, Asma.

- 87 Focus group, women.
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About

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