

No Choice

It takes a world to end
the use of child soldiers
Country Case Study:
Iraq

Developed by Child Frontiers for World Vision International. The opinions expressed by the authors do not necessarily reflect those of World Vision.

Child Frontiers Ltd.

Suite A 15/F | Hillier Commercial Building
65-67 Bonham Strand East
Sheung Wan, Hong Kong
Child Frontiers is a registered company
(No 1275515)

© World Vision International and *It takes a world to end violence against children.*

Design: hartfordesign

Cover photograph Chris Weeks.

The names of all children quoted in this report have been changed to protect their identities.

Brief overview

Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is an autonomous region of northern Iraq also known as Iraqi Kurdistan. This region and Mosul have been selected as the focus of this case study because this is where World Vision has its majority operational presence within Iraq.

With the ongoing conflict in Syria and advances made by ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) in 2014–17, both KRI and Mosul have seen very high levels of displacement, with people often having to move multiple times. Since August 2014, more than 1 million Iraqis have fled to KRI to seek safety and shelter from ISIL. According to the 2018 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan, 30 per cent of displaced Iraqis and nearly all of the 250,000 Syrian refugees in the country are living in KRI (UNHCR 2018). Most of these internally displaced people (IDPs) live in the 22 camps that have been set up across the region. This influx of people has put enormous strain on local services, including education, health, hygiene and protection, which has led to a significant decline in living standards across KRI (UNHCR 2018). Even after Iraqi forces recaptured Mosul last year, families continue to live in camps, unable and/or unwilling to return to their communities because of personal safety concerns, homes have been destroyed and basic services are non-existent, or because they didn't pass the security clearance by Iraqi Government (interview with World Vision).

Living in such precarious and volatile conditions heightens children's risk of recruitment into armed groups (Terre des Hommes 2016), and according to an assessment by UNICEF on the push and pull factors of children associated with armed actors in Iraq, recruitment rates were especially high in recent years in direct correlation with the rise of ISIL and the June 2014 Fatwa of Al-Sistani (UNICEF and Transition International 2017). Armed actors are present in and around

the camps in KRI and in Mosul, including ISIL, which have targeted boys and girls directly, forcing them to become associated in various ways (UN University 2018; UN Security Council 2018). While exact figures are unknown, armed actors on all sides of the conflict in KRI and Mosul are known to recruit and use children to varying degrees (UN University 2018; interview with International Rescue Committee [IRC]). However, while some children are still joining armed groups in KRI and Mosul, it appears to be on a smaller scale than in previous years (interview with World Vision).

Iraq has ratified all of the major international treaties, which KRI complies with, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified in 1994), the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (ratified in 2008) and the International Labour Organization's Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (ratified in 2001). Iraq has also endorsed a national child protection policy which includes a focus on the release and reintegration of children and sets a minimum age requirement for recruitment at 18 years for regular armed forces. A high-level inter-ministerial committee on monitoring and reporting has been established to better address grave violations against children in armed conflict, and a national security advisor has been appointed as a focal point for ongoing dialogue with the United Nations (UN Security Council 2018). The Kurdistan Regional Government has further drafted a number of domestic laws to protect the rights of IDPs and address children's rights, including the Constitution and the Child Protection Law ratified in 2013. A child rights hotline has also been established to provide advice and receive complaints on child rights issues.

Overview of children who join armed groups and forces

A note on terminology

A child is defined, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Iraqi Constitution, as any person under the age of 18. A number of regional studies, however, highlight that definitions of childhood are culturally relative and vary across the region. Local understandings of childhood relate less to age and more to physical, emotional and social developments in a person (UN University 2018). In an effort to understand motivations behind children's voluntary recruitment and strategies to help prevent it, differing contextual understandings and perspectives on childhood need to be considered.

There is much debate around what constitutes voluntary recruitment. For the purposes of this research it is defined as someone joining of his or her own free will, without being physically forced or coerced. However, what constitutes free will or choice is frequently a moot point, and the line between real choice and coercion, or necessity and survival is often blurred. Some of the literature notes that it may be a 'choice', but one among a highly constrained set of options based on community expectations, opting for the best available means of finding a way to survive and/or to protect oneself and one's family (UN University 2018).

Children who join fighting forces

Overall, there appears to be very little data or evidence on children's association with armed actors in KRI and Mosul, or Iraq more generally. As a result, it is not possible to obtain specific figures on children's involvement with armed actors in KRI and Mosul. Cases documented by the United Nations for Iraq suggest that boys are considerably more likely to join armed groups than girls. This was corroborated by interviews with World Vision and IRC with respect to KRI and Mosul.¹ In 2018, the United Nations documented 523 cases of children recruited by armed actors in Iraq. Of the 109 cases verified, 101 were boys and 8 girls. Over half of the boys and all eight girls were associated with ISIL (UN Security Council 2018). Numbers of children being held in detention centres in KRI for the alleged association with ISIL are high. In 2017, the UN reported that 'at least 1,036 children (1,024 boys, 12 girls), including 345 from KRI, were in juvenile detention facilities on national security-related charges, mostly for their alleged

association with ISIL' (UN Security Council 2018). Because boys appear to make up the vast majority of recruits in KRI and Mosul, much of the data reported in this case study is relevant to boys.

According to Terre des Hommes (2016), children, especially boys, living in camps in areas controlled by KRI and ISIL, such as Mosul, are highly vulnerable to recruitment and have joined up in large numbers. Children who have been orphaned or have become heads of households, without adequate support or care, are equally vulnerable (UN University 2018). Typically, boys join around the ages of 15–16 years, and most report becoming active participants in combat (UNICEF and Transition International 2017; interview with World Vision). Their roles, however, are fluid and evolve over time. As well as combative roles, boys are used as suicide bombers, for logistics purposes and for manufacturing explosive devices. Some provide support roles such as cooking, cleaning, and security and protection to the group. Girls tend to be affiliated by marriage, becoming 'wives' for the fighters, rather than as active combatants (UN Security Council 2018; UN University 2018; interviews with IRC and World Vision).

How boys and girls come to join fighting forces

In KRI, recruitment in the IDP camps appears to be most common where armed actors openly set up awareness days and recruitment drives for youths to volunteer (interview with IRC). In 2016, it was estimated by Terre des Hommes that one in three boys interviewed in KRI had been approached for recruitment by armed groups. In extreme cases children were forcibly recruited by ISIL, particularly in and around Mosul during the time it was under ISIL control. In some instances children are recruited by several actors at the same time for different purposes.

Large numbers of boys join with friends or family members, a decision that is often made together, influenced by preexisting social and family networks (UNICEF and Transition International 2017; UN University, 2018; interview with IRC). A significant number of children interviewed during the UNICEF research mentioned that they first heard about armed actors from family members, and over half of the children reported having at least one family member in either the army or with armed actors, an influential feature in a

¹ Semi-structured interviews were conducted with World Vision and IRC staff working in Iraq in November 2018. These interviews sought to better understand issues pertaining to children's involvement in armed conflict specifically in KRI and Mosul.

child's decision to join (UNICEF and Transition International 2017; Revkin 2017; UN University 2018).

Although to a lesser extent in KRI compared with southern Iraq, religious leaders also play a role in motivating children to join by calling on people to defend their country. Regardless of the circumstances, once a child decides to join, the most common way of coming into contact with an armed actor is by the child finding the relevant recruiting officers and approaching the group directly or through a family member or friends (UNICEF and Transition International 2017).

Why are boys and girls joining armed actors?

There are multiple, overlapping and interrelated drivers of child recruitment in KRI and Mosul.

Economic demands

Among these drivers are economic demands (UNICEF and Transition International 2017; World Bank Group 2017; UN University 2018; interviews with World Vision and IRC). A recent World Bank report highlighted the lack of jobs as the main reason for young people to join ISIL, coupled with a sense of purpose and authority that their association with a group provides. This was substantiated during interviews with World Vision. It appears that for some boys armed actors can fill this void by 'offering marginalised youths a sense of identity, as well as opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility' (World Bank Group 2017). Young boys can earn between US\$400 and US\$1,200 a month as a combatant with ISIL, which is considerably more than is earnable in the precarious labour conditions experienced elsewhere in the country (World Bank Group 2017; interview with World Vision). This money is beneficial to all families, but especially to female-headed households, wherein boys, regardless of age are expected to earn money to support their families and to take on the role of provider and caretaker in the absence of their fathers. When armed groups offer one of the few opportunities for decent employment, while also controlling much of the economic and social life of a community, joining may seem like the only realistic option for survival. This reality applies to KRI and Mosul, where unemployment is very high and there are few alternatives for boys and girls to support themselves and their families (World Bank Group 2017; UNICEF and Transition International 2017; UN University, 2018; interviews with World Vision and IRC).

Desire to Serve or Defend

Coupled with economic demands is the desire to serve and defend or liberate the nation, which is hugely compelling for boys living in KRI and Mosul and provides a sense of purpose

and belonging (UNICEF and Transition International 2017; Revkin 2017; UN University, 2018, interviews with IRC and World Vision). However, the overlap between ideological and other factors is often blurred. In the UN University report it is argued that boys may join to earn a living or protect their family, but that over time 'they may reframe their motivations in terms of ideology as a result of constant exposure to non-state armed groups' propaganda and the peer effects of living among "true believers" (UN University 2018).

Children's involvement with armed actors has historical and cultural roots in Iraq, which continue to motivate children to join today. Children grow up thinking that being part of the military and defending one's land and way of life is an expected part of being a responsible member of society, weapons are readily available and young boys are taught how to use them by male family members. Family and community expectations that a male child will serve are equally high, thus when boys decide to join, families usually support it (interview with World Vision; United Nations University, 2018).

Revenge

Revenge for family members killed by ISIL is another significant driver in Mosul and KRI, where death and levels of violence have been especially high. The desire to avenge the death of a family member or other traumatic incidences motivates many children to become engaged with armed actors (UN University 2018; interview with World Vision).

Out-of-school children

High levels of out-of-school children in the IDP camps is also a driver for recruitment. Children living in IDP camps in the north are less likely to be attending school due to a shortage of teachers and adequate educational facilities, which heightens the risk of recruitment, especially for boys (UNICEF and Transition International 2017; interview with IRC).

Lack of opportunities and mistrust of government authorities

Lack of opportunities coupled with a mistrust of government authorities has been shown to foster radicalisation and influence boys' decisions to join armed actors (World Bank Group 2017). That said, lower levels of radicalisation were found in the UNICEF (2017) report than anticipated. In KRI causes of radicalisation are overwhelmingly attributed to religious extremism, followed by sociopolitical marginalisation, media and a lack of education (UNICEF and Transition International 2017).

Why some children in similar circumstances are not joining

While it is evident that the challenges mentioned above present significant motivating factors for children's enrolment into armed groups, it is less clear what prevents children in similar circumstances from joining. With the caveat that this literature search could not be exhaustive within our timeframe, we could not find references in the literature that offer insights into why some children 'choose' not to join. During interviews with IRC and World Vision it was suggested that some children do not join or leave after joining because conditions are not good, promises of salaries are not fulfilled and medical care is inadequate. This is an area, however, that would benefit greatly from additional research as it would help to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex realities that push and pull boys and girls into and out of military groups. It would also provide important evidence to inform the focus of programme priorities and interventions.



© World Vision/Sacha Myers

Overview of prevention strategies

Very little documentation exists for KRI and Mosul in terms of what communities, families and children are doing specifically to prevent the recruitment of children into armed groups. According to a report by Action Contre la Faim, coping strategies among individuals and families in camps around Mosul are heavily compromised, and people tend to have to cope without any external support. However, bonding with other community members and supporting one another in the camps emerge as critical, as does families supporting one another (Action Contre la Faim 2017). The importance of family as a primary protective force in children's lives is well documented in the literature on child recruitment and in research on the resilience of children living in adverse circumstances, such as in situations of war and displacement (see, for example, UN University 2018; Boyden and Mann 2005; Tolfree 2004).

There is a reasonably high expectation among children and families that from the age of 15 or 16 years boys should defend their land; doing so is considered a key role for young men in this context and a source of pride for their families (interview with World Vision). Understanding this norm is essential when considering prevention strategies and responses. The reality is that any intervention that does not engage with this understanding of boys' roles and responsibilities is likely to have limited success.

Organisations that are working on prevention note the importance of addressing factors that push and pull children to join armed actors as critical to reducing children's likelihood to join (UNICEF and Transition International 2017; World Bank Group 2017; interviews with IRC and World Vision). Several initiatives focus on addressing these factors, including:

- using a multi-sector approach through the No Lost Generation initiative to protect children and reduce vulnerabilities, for example, by increasing access to education
- providing opportunities for children to increase their social, decision-making and coping skills by building confidence and self-esteem, promoting youth associations and supporting peer-to-peer initiatives
- improving intergenerational dialogue and sharing information with parents and adolescents on child recruitment
- providing children and young people with access to religious education that focuses on tolerance, peace, diversity, inclusivity and resilience
- providing greater livelihood opportunities, for example, through vocational training, income-generating activities, mentoring and job creation to help increase families' ability to meet basic needs. In KRI, jobs in the oil industry and agriculture are identified as promising sectors (although it is recognised that engagement in these sectors brings an additional set of risks and concerns) improving access to education.

World Vision's priority interventions in KRI and Mosul focus on a number of these areas, such as income-generation opportunities, technical-skills training, life-skills coaching, apprenticeship placement and support services for youth (World Vision 2018).

Concluding remarks

There is very little documentation on the issue of children's involvement with armed actors in KRI and Mosul specifically or in Iraq more generally. This case study relies heavily on two or three relevant documents and interviews with key informants. Further investigation to better understand the scale and scope of the issue would be helpful, as well as factors at the family and community level that help to prevent children from joining armed actors.

That said, from the available data it is clear that boys from the age of approximately 15 are considerably more likely to join armed actors than girls. Regional concepts of childhood are not clearly demarcated by age and relate more to physical, emotional and social development. Thus, boys who are reaching 15 or 16 are considered by themselves, their families and their communities to be transitioning to adulthood. Boys' roles in armed groups vary from combative to support roles. Those girls who are associated with armed groups are rarely combatants and are more likely to be affiliated to armed groups by marriage.

There are high numbers of children who are displaced or who have lost one or both parents in KRI and Mosul;

these groups emerge as significantly more vulnerable to recruitment. Armed actors in KRI and Mosul use and recruit boys for different reasons and to different degrees. Some actors, such as ISIL, are characterised predominantly by forced recruitment, while others have high numbers of 'voluntarily' child recruits.

Economic demands emerge as a strong push and pull factor, coupled with a desire to defend the nation and avenge attacks and killings. A lack of educational opportunities is also an important driver of voluntary recruitment among boys. The cultural and historical roots of child recruitment in the region also motivate boys who grow up with weapons around them and see many male friends and family members join from a young age. Expectations placed on them by themselves and by family and community members to defend and liberate the country and/or support the family therefore run high. Engaging with this understanding and developing new ways of understanding it are critical, as are interventions that seek to address the structural drivers of recruitment, such as financial need and lack of educational and other opportunities.

Summary Recommendations

No armed actor should recruit children, and no boy or girl under the age of 18 should see joining an armed force or armed group as his or her only or best option. It is therefore imperative to work together to change practices in armed forces and armed groups, prioritise the rights and protection of children and reduce the factors making children vulnerable to recruitment by committing to action on the following:

- All armed forces and armed groups must prohibit the recruitment of children under the age of 18 in policy and practice. This includes appropriate national legislation and its enforcement.
- Effectively and sufficiently resource child protection, education and social protection services in national budgets and prioritise the protection of children from grave violations in national policy.
- Recognise prevention and response to grave violations against children as a life-saving intervention and dramatically increase funding for child protection in conflict settings, including long-term funding for both prevention of and response to violence against children.
- All donors and humanitarian actors should mainstream a systems approach to child protection across funding mechanisms and programmes with the aim of protecting children from the six grave violations identified by the United Nations as well as other violations of their rights.
- Prioritise the participation and empowerment of children and young people in peacebuilding and community life, in programme design and evaluation and in global discussions on issues affecting them.



Children play safely in a World Vision Child Friendly Space in Iraq.

References

Action Contre la Faim. 2017. 'Executive Summary. Mosul Response. Mental Health and Care Practices.' Action Contre la Faim.

Boyden, J., and G. Mann. 2005. 'Children's Risk, Resilience and Coping in Extreme Situations.' In *Handbook for Working with Children and Youth: Pathways to Resilience across Cultures and Context*, edited by M. Ungar. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Revkin, M. 2018. 'How Militants in Iraq and Syria Recruit and Use Children.' *Washington Post*. February 14.

Terre des Hommes. 2016. *Child Labour Report 2016: Because We Struggle to Survive. Child Labour among Refugees of the Syrian Conflict*. Germany: Terre des Hommes International Federation.

Tolfree, D. 2004. *Whose Children: Separated Children's Protection and Participation in Critical Situations*. Stockholm: Save the Children Sweden.

UNHCR. 2018. 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan: Iraq.

UNICEF and Transition International. 2017. *Executive Summary. Assessment of the Push and Pull Factors of Child Association with Armed Actors in Iraq, Opportunities and Capacities to Support Reintegration and Prevention*.

UN Security Council. 2018. *Children and Armed Conflict. Report of the Secretary-General*. New York.

UN University. 2018. *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*. Edited by Siobhan O'Neil and Kato van Broeckhoven. New York: UN University.

World Bank Group. 2017. *Iraq. Systematic Country Diagnostic*. World Bank.

World Vision. 2018. *World Vision in Iraq Country Profile*. World Vision International.

World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian values, we are dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. We serve all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender.

We believe a world without violence against children is possible, and World Vision's global campaign It takes a world to end violence against children is igniting movements of people committed to making this happen. No one person, group or organisation can solve this problem alone, it will take the world to end violence against children.

wvi.org/ittakesaworld



It takes a world
to end violence against children