Syria-Iraq Country Report:
Children & Security

The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative

Updated as of 10 July 2015

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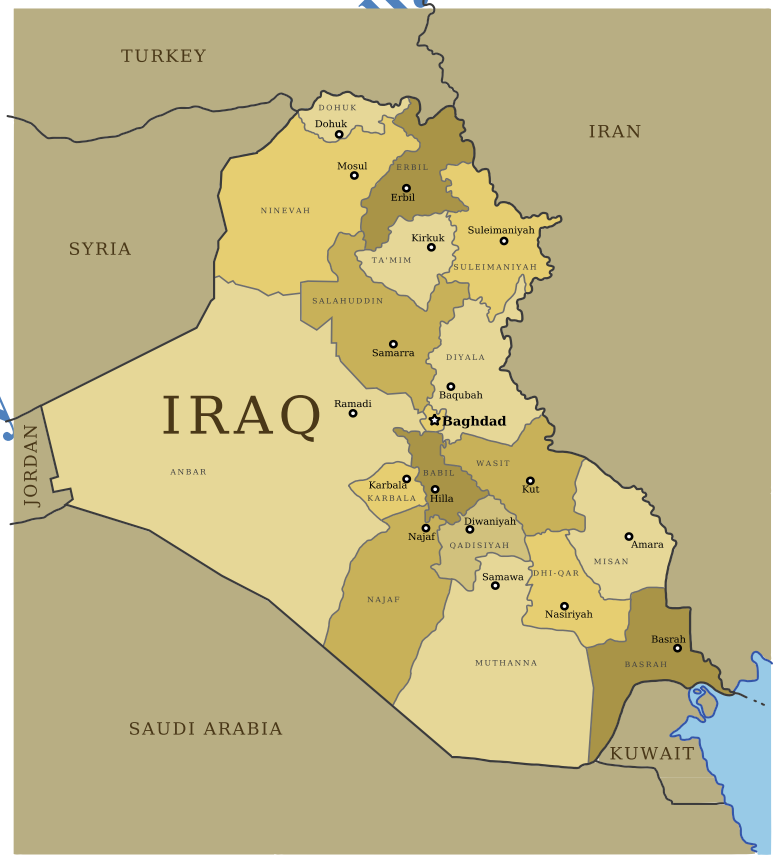
KEY FACTS AND REPORT

Map of Syria and Iraq



Key Facts[1]

	Syria	Iraq
Geography	**Climate:** hot and dry summers (June to August); mild and rainy winters (December to February) **Terrain:** primarily semi-arid and desert; narrow coastal plain; mountainous in the west **Border countries:** Iraq (605 km), Israel (76 km), Jordan (375 km), Lebanon (375 km), Turkey (822 km) **Coastline:** 193 km	**Climate:** hot and dry summers (June to August); mild to cool winters (December to February) **Terrain:** primarily desert and broad plains; mountainous along the borders of Iran and Turkey **Border countries:** Iran (1,599 km), Jordan (179 km), Kuwait (254 km), Saudi Arabia (811 km), Syria (605 km), Turkey (367 km) **Coastline:** 58 km
People	**Population:** 17,951,639 (July 2014 est.) **Median age:** 23.3 years **Languages:** Arabic (official), Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, French, English **Ethnic groups:** Arab 90.3%; Kurdish, Armenian, or other 9.7% **Religions:** Sunni Muslim 87%; Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia 13%; Christian 10%; Druze 3%; Jewish	**Population:** 32,585,692 (July 2014 est.) **Median age:** 21.5 years **Languages:** Arabic (official), Kurdish (official), Turkmen and Assyrian (official in areas where they constitute a majority), Armenian **Ethnic groups:** Arab 75%-80%; Kurdish 15%-20%; Turkoman, Assyrian, or other 5% **Religions:** Shia Muslim 60-65%; Sunni Muslim 32-37%; Christian 0.8%
Economy	**Capital:** Damascus **Major urban areas:** Aleppo 3.164 million; Damascus 2.65 million; Homs 1.369 million; Hamah 933,000 (2011) **GDP:** $107.6 billion (2011 est.) **GDP per capita:** $5,100 (2011 est.) **GDP by sector:** agriculture 17.6%; industry 22.2%; services 60.2%	**Capital:** Baghdad **Major urban areas:** Baghdad 6.036 million; Mosul 1.494 million; Erbil 1.039 million; Basra 942,000 **GDP:** $249.4 billion (2013 est.) **GDP per capita:** $7,100 (2013 est.) **GDP by sector:** agriculture 3.3%; industry 64.6%; services 32.1%
Children and youth	**Population under age of 25:** 53.3% **Unemployment (ages 15-24):** 15.5% (2010) **Child labour (ages 5-14):** 192,915 (2006 est.) **Legal age of conscription:** 18	**Population under age of 25:** 56.3% **Unemployment (ages 15-24):** 28.5% (2010) **Child labour (ages 5-14):** 715,737 (2006 est.) **Legal age of conscription:** 18

Relevant UN Security Council Resolutions

On ISIS – Resolution 2170 (15 August 2014); 2199 (12 February 2015);

On counter-terrorism – Resolution 2178 (24 September 2014)

On humanitarian access– Resolution 2139 (22 February 2014); 2165 (14 July 2014); 2191 (17 December 2014)

On the destruction of chemical weapons – Resolution 2118 (27 September 2013); 2209 (6 March 2015)

On the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq – Resolution 1500 (14 August 2003); Renewed every year since, expanded under Resolution 1770 (10 August 2007)

On the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria – Resolution 2043 (21 April 2012) and 2059 (20 July 2012)

Child Protection Legislation

	Syria	Iraq
National	▪ Syrian Commission for Family Affairs (2003) ▪ National Child Protection Plan (2005) ▪ Legislative Decree No. 3 concerning the prohibition of human trafficking (2010)	▪ 2005 Constitution of Iraq (includes provisions for the protection of the family, maternity and childhood) ▪ Combating Trafficking in Persons Act No. 28 (2012) ▪ Child Protection Act (under consideration) ▪ Child Welfare Authority Bill (under consideration)
International	▪ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1993) ▪ Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2003) ▪ Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2003) ▪ Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2004) ▪ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2009) ▪ International Labour Organization Convention No. 182 (1999) concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (2003)	▪ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1994) ▪ Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2008) ▪ Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2008) ▪ Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2011) ▪ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2009) ▪ International Labour Organization Convention No. 182 (1999) concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (2001)

Impacts of the Conflict on Children

Children have been acutely affected by the violence of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. An estimated 12 million children have been affected by the crises in the two countries, while over 2 million now reside in refugee camps.[2] Within Syria, specifically, a report released by the UN indicates that at least 8,803 children had been killed by the conflict as of April 2014, although the actual number is presumed to be much higher.[3] Many areas under siege have been denied humanitarian access, such that many children and their families are beyond the reach of outside

aid. Mortar shelling, small arms fire, and sniper fire by both government and opposition forces have disproportionately affected civilian populations, leading to the killing and maiming of children across the country.[4] Massacres and summary executions have also been reported; while an estimated 128 children were killed in the chemical weapons attacks of 21 August 2013.[5] Children have been arbitrarily detained by government forces and subject to abuse, torture and, in some cases, disappearances. Both sides of the conflict have also perpetrated sexual violence against boys and girls, although this crime is believed to be largely underreported.[6]

The impacts on the health and well-being of children are equally staggering. Schools and mosques across Syria have been destroyed by indiscriminate bombing or direct targeting. Consequently, about half of the country's school-age population, nearly 3 million children, are unable to regularly attend school.[7] The country's health infrastructure has also been severely degraded, at the same time that the number and severity of diseases such as pneumonia and diarrhoea have increased. Rates of malnourishment are also rising, with potentially negative implications for the long-term, healthy development of children.[8] Nearly 98 percent of children surveyed in refugee camps outside of Syria have shown significant declines in their psychosocial well-being, with parents reporting significant changes in behaviour and attitude and rising rates of self-harm.[9] The incidence of family violence and bullying among refugee children also appears to be on the rise.[10]

II. SECURITY SITUATION

Context

Rising out of the 'Arab Spring,' the civil war in Syria initially began in March 2011 with unarmed, peaceful demonstrations against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. However, unlike its predecessors in Tunisia and Egypt, the situation in Syria quickly escalated as the demonstrators were met with violence and repression. In reaction to the heavy-handed government response against pro-opposition areas, the protests were gradually militarized and eventually replaced by armed militant groups that sought to topple the Assad regime. The standoff has since evolved into an increasingly intractable civil war, with a multitude of armed groups, countless frontlines, and considerable international involvement.

Now in its fifth year, the conflict appears to have no end in sight. In April 2014, the United Nations estimated that the war had claimed over 191,369 lives,[11] while acknowledging that the actual death toll was most likely much higher.[12] Over 3.9 million people are now registered as refugees, while a further 7.6 million are believed to be internally displaced within Syria.[13] Human rights organizations have documented gross violations and war crimes committed by all sides, including widespread attacks on civilians, murder, hostage-taking and disappearances, torture, rape and sexual violence, and the recruitment and use of child soldiers.[14] The breakdown of order has further allowed for the proliferation of extremist groups, several of which are now playing a central role in the conflict.[15] Humanitarian agencies operating within Syria have found themselves "besieged", with much of the response hampered by insecurity, intimidation, limited operational capacity, and external political and organizational agendas.[16]

The war is also no longer confined to the Syrian territory. In April 2013, the Iraqi-based Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) began its operations in Syria, taking advantage of the power vacuum in the northeast of the country. The extremist group soon made significant territorial gains in the eastern and northern parts of Syria, while simultaneously capturing the city of Mosul in Iraq and advancing to the outskirts of Baghdad. Its rapid rise to prominence, brutal tactics and targeting of minority groups, and declaration of a caliphate over the Muslim world all provoked a response from the United States and a coalition of allies, who began targeted air strikes against ISIS in Iraq in August 2014 and in Syria in September 2014. Throughout the conflict, regional and international players have also backed armed groups and factions on both sides of the war through the provision of weapons, financing, training, and direct military assistance.

III. State, Non State, and International Actors

Syria

Syrian Government Forces

The government forces consist principally of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), as well as its naval, air, and air defense forces. Prior to the outbreak of the crisis, the SAA's total force was estimated at 295,000 personnel. As a result of defections and casualties, it is currently thought to command a third of this total force.[17] Despite this significant drop in numbers, the paramilitary

National Defense Force as well as a number of domestic and foreign militia groups have reinforced the SAA, including Lebanese-based Hizbollah (see below). Nonetheless, regime forces remain constrained in their ability to maintain intensive military operations in more than one region at a time, and for this reason tend to concentrate their resources in targeted operations.[18]

Despite strengthening its own laws on the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict in June 2013, Syrian regime forces and associated armed groups have reportedly continued to use child soldiers. In the fighting around Aleppo, for instance, children aged 16 and 17 have been captured as fighters by opposition groups. Children between the ages of 6 and 13 have also been used as messengers, spies, and guards, which then exposes them to retaliation and punishment.[19] Other reports suggest that pro-government groups have intimidated and seized males under the age of 18 at checkpoints and during raids, in an attempt to force these young people to join their ranks.[20]

In its 2015 Annual Report, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC) did not list the Syrian Government Forces in its annex for the recruitment and use of children.[21] However, the report highlighted several grave violations committed against children by the Syrian Armed Forces, specifically the detention of children, indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations, sexual violence against children and the destruction of schools, and attacks on medical facilities.[22]

The Syrian government and its military arm have used increasingly heavy-handed tactics in combatting the opposition movement. In the early months of the uprising, opposition protests were violently repressed, while pro-opposition areas were periodically attacked by SAA infantry and tanks. Beginning in January 2012, the regime escalated its attacks, employing attack helicopters, fixed-wing jet aircraft, and highly destructive 'barrel bombs—"Barrel bombs accounted for almost one third of child casualties inflicted by Syrian Government forces."[23]

Its brutal and often indiscriminate methods, which have frequently involved siege tactics, sustained bombardment of encircled towns and cities, arbitrary arrests, disappearances, torture, and murder, have contributed to high civilian casualties and the considerable destruction of infrastructure.[24] By the end of 2012, the first allegations surfaced regarding the use of chemical weapons.[25] In August 2013, substantive evidence emerged regarding the government's use of

chemical weapons against civilians in two separate attacks outside of Damascus, killing an estimated 355 to 1,300 civilians.[26]

Free Syrian Army

From the beginning, the Syrian opposition movement has faced significant challenges of coordination and collective action, particularly with the proliferation of armed factions and extremist groups. The Free Syrian Army (FSA), formed in the early days of the resistance, is now more of an umbrella label incorporating various nationalist and secular groups.[27] In December 2012, these groups formed the Supreme Military Council (SMC) to serve as a central coordinating structure for the more moderate armed groups. The SMC, however, has struggled to unite the various groups under its authority, which included more than 70 factions as of November 2014.[28] Competition among the various armed factions for external support and weaponry has further fragmented the opposition.[29] The opposition movement has thus been characterized by shifting alliances and considerable infighting among its members, which has hampered its overall military effectiveness. More recently, it has been squeezed between regime forces and ISIS, which has significantly weakened more moderate elements of the opposition. Like the Syrian regime, opposition groups in Syria have been implicated in various violations against civilian populations in government-controlled areas, including indiscriminate shelling, the use of car bombs and improvised explosive devices, and the targeting of religious minorities.[30]

Among the more moderate opposition groups, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) has served as their main political body since November 2012. Composed largely of exiled political and religious leaders, it incorporates groups and figures from across the ideological spectrum and provides a direct link to the international community. Like its military counterpart, however, it too has witnessed considerable infighting over the objectives of the coalition and the future of Syria

Groups affiliated with the FSA have used children in both combat and support roles, using high salaries for their child recruits as "an incentive for children and their parents under difficult economic circumstances."[31] Due to the fragmentation of the FSA, the recruitment and use of children has varied amongst the various factions. Children as young as 14 have been used to load ammunition, carry food and supplies, inform on enemy movements, and evacuate the injured, while children as young as 16 have been used as combatants.[32] Recruitment is often facilitated by

an older male relative or friend, and frequently occurs along clan- or village-based lines.[33] Groups affiliated with the FSA have also been among the most active in recruiting among refugee populations in neighbouring countries.[34] In March 2014, the Syrian National Coalition announced that it would begin training among its constituent members to eliminate the recruitment and use of children in conflict, and engaged with the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict in this regard.[35]

Hizbollah

The government forces in Syria have benefited from the military support of Lebanese-based Hizbollah, which has long enjoyed the support of the Assad regime. Hizbollah first entered the Syrian conflict in mid-2012, when rebel gains across much of the country were viewed as a viable threat to the survival of the regime.[36] At first, the group mainly helped to train and arm Shiite militias, in the process further flaming the sectarian nature of the conflict. In May 2013, the group became actively involved in the conflict, when it led the regime offensive against the border town of Qusayr. Since then, Hizbollah has contributed to other theatres of operation, and has played a key role in training government forces and militias in urban warfare—it is estimated to have deployed 3,500 to 7,000 fighters in Syria.[37] Although the SRSG CAAC does not officially list Lebanon in its 2015 annual report, Hizbollah has been reported to recruit and use children in small numbers in its efforts to assist the Syrian Government Forces.[38]

Kurdish Defense Groups of Syrian Kurdistan

The Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD), a Syrian Kurdish faction, first emerged in 2003 as a proxy of the PKK, a Turkish insurgent movement. With the outbreak of the Syrian conflict the group expanded its presence. It filled the vacuum left by the withdrawal of regime forces in 2012 and assumed governing authority in Kurdish-populated areas across the north of the country. In what appears to be a tacit alliance with the Assad regime, the group has since avoided confrontation with regime forces and has instead seized further territory from opposition and jihadi groups.[39]

In September 2014, the Kurdish town of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), located along the Syrian-Turkish border, came under siege by ISIS forces. Despite downplaying its strategic significance, many of the first US-led air strikes in Syria aimed to slow the ISIS advance towards the town. The US further directed weapons and supplies to PYD fighters within the town. Generating

significant media attention, it was soon believed that an ISIS victory in Kobani would deal a 'symbolic blow' to the US-led coalition.[40] While Turkey initially refused to aid the Kurdish forces, given their ties to the PKK, it later allowed Iraqi Kurdish forces to cross its border en route to Kobani. In January 2015, ISIS withdrew from the town following sustained attacks by PYD forces and US-led air strikes.[41]

The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ), the military wing of the PYD, have been reported to recruit and use boys and girls, some under the age of 15 years old, within its ranks.[42] The YPG/YPJ adopted a conscription strategy targeting children—" in March, a 13-year-old girl was taken to Ras al-Ayn for military training and the requests by her parents to see her were refused."[43]

Islamic Front

The Islamic Front (the Front) was formed in November 2013 when three factions previously aligned with the SMC joined forces with four other Islamist groups. The Islamic Front is currently thought to represent the single most powerful opposition alliance in Syria, with an estimated strength of 50,000-60,000 fighters.[44] While its seven component groups are broadly committed to the goal of forming an Islamic state in Syria governed by Sharia law, they are in fact widely separated in their understanding of what this would entail in practice. Some are more closely aligned with Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (see below), while others are more moderate in their orientation.[45] These differences have played out on the battlefield, where in spite of their seemingly united front, its component groups have continually made independent decisions in fighting regime forces and ISIS.[46] Consequently, the Front has been unable move towards a unified command-and-control structure and improve the efficiency and coherence of its decision-making.[47]

Groups affiliated with the Islamic Front, including Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, and Amar ibn al-Aas Brigade, have used children as young as 15 in combat roles. Children in these groups are believed to have joined as a result of poverty or being separated from their family, or after participating in anti-government protests or serving with other armed groups. They attend military training camps along with adults, where they receive military and weapons training and religious instruction, and have participated in battles as fighters or in support roles. Younger members are typically given non-combat roles, serving as guards or lookouts, while those participating in battles are viewed as 'adults'.[48]

Jabhat al-Nusra

Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) is al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria, and has received considerable financial backing from al-Qaeda and private donors abroad. It was originally established in mid-2011 as part of the Iraqi-based Islamic State of Iraq (see below); divisions between the two, however, later led to their separation. Despite its hardline stance, JN has nonetheless maintained pragmatic relations with many of the country's opposition groups. It has prioritized the war against the regime, rather than exercising unilateral control over a set territory or imposing its ideology over other groups.[49] It further enjoys significant popular support in territories under its control, as a result of its provision of social services and protection of the civilian populations under its control.[50] In contrast to ISIS, it has largely avoided the imposition of extreme punishments against the civilian population.

Jabhat al-Nusra has also actively recruited children through schools and education programs, targeting children as young as 14. They attend training camps alongside adults, and are then used in military operations.[51]

Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham / Islamic State

First established by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2004 in Iraq, ISIS was initially linked to al-Qaeda and known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Following the death of al-Zarqawi in June 2006, the group merged with a number of other radical groups and rebranded itself as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). It became widely known for igniting a sectarian war with Iraq's Shiite community and for its use of particularly brutal tactics.

In 2011, ISI helped found Jabhat al-Nusra, marking its first entry into the Syrian conflict. After a falling out between the two groups in April 2013, ISI commenced its own operations in Syria, in the process rebranding itself as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham.[52] The militant group soon made considerable territorial gains in the eastern and northern parts Syria, with harsh punishments, kidnappings, imprisonment, and executions all accompanying its rise in influence and power. Its brutality and refusal to cooperate with other Islamist groups led to its near-total isolation among the opposition movement, and its disavowal by al-Qaeda early in 2014. On June 29th, two weeks after capturing Mosul, Iraq's second city, ISIS declared the creation of a caliphate over the Muslim world and rebranded itself as 'the Islamic State' in recognition of its global ambitions.[53]

Following the commencement of the US-led air strikes in Syria and Iraq, ISIS has significantly altered its strategy. In response, ISIS has positioned its fighters and supplies in civilian areas, resulting in some civilian casualties by coalition air strikes.[54] At the same time, it has attempted to maintain its operations around Kobani, Mosul, and other areas, which have included both suicide bombings and coordinated assaults.[55]

ISIS continues to recruit in Iraq and Syria, as well as internationally. As of December 2014, it was estimated to command between 30,000 and 35,000 fighters, one-third of which are believed to be foreign jihadis.[56] The majority of the latter are thought to come from Arab countries, while a smaller number are from Western states. The group has actively promoted its brutality through publications, photographs, video footage, and social media, in an attempt to consolidate its authority, attract recruits, and threaten those that challenge its ideology.[57] Extremist groups in Libya, Egypt, and Nigeria, among others, have pledged their allegiance to ISIS leadership, although the latter appears to have little operational control over these groups.[58]

In its areas of control, ISIS has systematically targeted voices of dissent and threatened, detained, tortured, or killed activists, journalists, and aid workers. Women and girls have been largely confined to their houses and expelled from public life, while reports of sexual violence, rape, and enslavement for the purposes of sexual slavery are widespread.[59] Children have been executed for their alleged affiliation with other armed groups, and have been systematically recruited by ISIS fighters in areas they control.

ISIS has reportedly recruited children as young as 8, and has extensively used young people in both support and combat roles, including suicide bombing missions.[60] It actively recruits in areas under its control, with members of the group entering schools and mosques to provide weapons and jihadist indoctrination training, often under the guise of education.[61] In interviews with former ISIS fighters, one report suggests that 'many' of the trainees in ISIS training camps are under the age of 18, although exact numbers are unknown.[62] Recruits are typically exposed to extreme violence and videos of beheadings, while those who resist are beaten or killed.[63] According to the UN Human Rights Council, the group has established a number of camps in both Syria and Iraq, indicating that ISIS is systematically recruiting children into its ranks in an effort to "build a new generation of fighters".[64] Children recruited by ISIS have been used in a variety of capacities, serving as fighters, human shields, suicide bombers, and guards at checkpoints and on patrol.[65]

CASE STUDY – Children and ISIS

ISIS has been able to gain attention, following and support while spreading fear and horror worldwide through its sophisticated use of digital content disseminated through social media networks. A key theme that is apparent within its social media strategy is the use of children. Depicted in many of its videos, children are seen in ISIS training camps, dismantling weapons, running military style drills, and engaging religious lessons.[66] Throughout these short videos, one child in particular has been prominent—he has identified himself as Abdullah, and in one of the more recent short films, he executes an ISIS prisoner on film.[67] Abdullah has become the face of the Islamic State's campaign to train and indoctrinate children in an effort to create fighters for the future.[68]

Iraq

Iraqi Security Forces

The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are composed of the military, intelligence, and law enforcement branches of the Iraqi government. Following the withdrawal of the last active US combat brigades from Iraq in August 2010, a sizeable contingent of advisory troops, assistance brigades, and special operations forces remained to advise, train, and assist the ISF. Nonetheless, the latter was largely unprepared for the early departure of its American advisors at the end of 2011. Although the ISF had an estimated 271,000 active personnel at the time, it was still dependent on US support for a number of key functions.[69] Many of its units lacked effective support and command structures and logistical capabilities, and were not yet ready for independent operations. At the same time, the ISF was also divided along ethnic and sectarian lines, heavily politicized, and plagued by corruption. Consequently, the ISF was unable to prevent a steady increase in violence in Iraq through 2012 and 2013.[70]

The weakness of the ISF was further exposed following the ISIS surge through Iraq in the summer of 2014. The takeover of Mosul in June, for instance, resulted in significant ISF losses, including the destruction of one division, severe damage to three others, and the capture of both equipment and personnel.[71] Ongoing conflict with ISIS has continued to degrade ISF units, many of which are now considered under-strength. While the ISIS advance through Iraq has now effectively stalled, this success is largely due to US-led air strikes in the area and the activity of

Shiite militia and Kurdish Peshmerga forces.[72] At the end of 2014, the US announced the deployment of 1,500 troops to train and assist the ISF.

The ISF lacks clear recruitment procedures, specifically regarding age verification. Further, "the draft National Guard law that was presented to the Council of Representatives in early March includes exceptions related to the age of recruitment, which would allow children associated with the pro-Government militias to join the National Guard."[73]

Although there are no official reports of children being recruited and used by the Iraq Security Forces there are several reports of children being actively used by local militias and armed groups that actively support the ISF (see below).

Peshmerga Forces of Iraqi Kurdistan

The Kurdish Peshmerga are the armed forces of Iraqi Kurdistan in northern Iraq. Once divided between the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, its brigades have been increasingly centralized in recent years under the single command of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Although Peshmerga forces participate in operations with the ISF, they remain independent of the latter. Its size is unknown, with estimates ranging anywhere from 70,000 to 190,000 personnel.[74]

The Peshmerga initially encountered significant losses against ISIS in the summer of 2014, when the extremist group approached the city of Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Peshmerga has since recovered with the support of US-led air strikes and training and equipment from coalition allies.[75] The frontline against ISIS is now considered to be well-defended and able to resist most incursions.[76] The UN has reported cases of children, boys and girls, being used by Peshmerga forces, however exact numbers have not been verified.[77]

Hashid al-Shaabi

Hashid al-Shabi is an umbrella organization of Shiite militias fighting in Iraq. Many of these militias first emerged in the summer of 2014, in response to the collapse of ISF under ISIS pressure and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's call for a 'Popular Mobilization Movement' to defend the Shia homeland.[78] Supported by Iran and under the guidance of Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders, these militias have led the majority of attacks against ISIS in the northwest of Iraq. Although significantly bolstering the military capabilities of the ISF and nominally answering to the Iraqi government, they have operated with relative impunity.[79] Some reports

suggest that these militias have, much like ISIS, flamed sectarian divisions, through reprisals against Sunni Arabs, indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations, and the displacement of Sunni populations.[80] While instrumental to the defence against ISIS, many fear that these militias are further entrenching sectarian divisions in Iraqi society.[81]

The UN has reported children, some as young as 10 years old, actively taking part in patrols and manning checkpoints alongside adult militia members.[82]

Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham / Islamic State

ISIS has committed horrific human rights abuses against children in Iraq. According to the UN, approximately "1,297 children (685 girls, 612 boys) were abducted in 320 incidents, marking the highest number since 2008 and despite significant underreporting."[83] Children continue to be recruited by the Islamic State to be used as soldiers, sex slaves, human shields, and in some instances "they had been forced to donate blood for treating injured…fighters."[84]

International

United States

The United States was initially supportive of the opposition movement and its attempts to oust the Assad regime. Along with its European allies, the US brought together a number of opposition-supporting countries under the umbrella of the 'Friends of Syria' group. However, given its recent history in the Middle East, the US lacked the political will and public backing to directly intervene in Syria. While continuing to support moderate rebel groups, it pressured all sides to reach a political compromise, in the belief that the conflict can only be solved through negotiations.[85]

In response to ISIS provocations, including the beheadings of two American journalists, the clear danger posed to the Yazidi people in northern Iraq, and the looming threat to Baghdad, the US and a coalition of like-minded allies began targeted air strikes in Iraq in August 2014 and Syria in September 2014. In the first 3 months of the campaigns, the US alone was involved in over 800 strikes in the two countries, and deployed over 1,500 troops to Iraq in non-combat roles.[86]

Russia

From the beginning, Russia has been one of the Syrian regime's primary backers. It has provided the regime with both small arms and advanced weaponry, giving the SAA and other regime forces a significant advantage over the comparatively weaker opposition. In the UN Security Council, Russia (along with China) has blocked any consideration of an intervention on humanitarian grounds and has hampered efforts to impose sanctions against the Assad regime.[87]

Regional Actors

Iran has remained Syria's principal ally in the region, and has provided the Assad regime with extensive financial and military assistance. Personnel from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have further provided regime forces with training and advice in coordinating its military operations against the rebels.[88] Given its support of and influence over Hizbollah, it is also likely that Iran encouraged the militia's entry into the war.[89] While not a member of the US-led coalition against ISIS, Iran has also been active in the fight against the extremist group in Iraq, by supporting local Shiite militias and sending troops, jets, and humanitarian aid to the country.[90]

Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are the most important regional backers of the opposition groups, yet their own rivalries and political incentives in the conflict have further undermined the prospects of cohesion on both the military and political fronts. Turkey and Qatar have generally supported the mainstream Islamist groups, while Saudi Arabia has supported the more nationalist and moderate rebel factions. All have backed the formation of overarching opposition structures, such as the SMC and SNC (see above), and have provided extensive funds and weaponry, diplomatic backing, and logistical support.[91]

Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as Bahrain, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, have also participated directly in the air strikes against ISIS. A number of other Arab states have further contributed military and humanitarian assistance.[92] While committed to the fight against ISIS, Turkey has not, to date, allowed the US or its allies to launch air strikes from Turkish bases along the border. It also initially refused to help the Syrian Kurds besieged by ISIS in the border town of Kobani, given the association of the PYD with Kurdish separatist groups in Turkey.

IV. Child Protection Concerns

Recruitment of Child Soldiers

Various groups have reportedly recruited and used children on all sides of the conflict, including the Syrian government, several groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army / Supreme Military Council, the Islamic Front, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, among others. Most are believed to use children as combatants and for the purposes of logistics, handling ammunition, and manning checkpoints.[93] Other roles include as cooks, informants, first responders, and porters.[94] ISIS is not short sighted, rather it sees the recruitment of children as an investment for the future—"there can be no doubt that it has embraced the need to groom the next generation."[95] Most have received a monthly salary in fighting or working for an armed group.[96] Children have also been reported to move between groups, often training and serving with one group before moving to another. The number of children who have served or are currently serving in armed groups in Syria is unknown.[97]

Among the opposition groups in Syria, reports suggest that children have joined these groups for a number of reasons. Some are thought to have joined out of a sense of familial or communal obligation, particularly among groups that are clan or village-based.[98] Their association with armed groups may also help to obtain income, status, or protection.[99] Others have reportedly joined opposition groups after participating in political protests, being forced out of or expelled from school, being detained and tortured by regime forces, or following the death of their parents or relatives.[100]

Recruitment has generally been facilitated by familial or communal links to armed groups, and is thought to be largely 'voluntary' in nature. The risk of recruitment is believed to be higher for boys and for children of ages l4 and higher.[101] Reports also indicate that children in the refugee camps in neighbouring countries are being pressured to join the armed groups in Syria,[102] at times with the consent of their guardians.[103] In a survey of 648 refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, 71 percent of respondents believed that the recruitment and use of children by armed groups was increasing, while 40 percent personally knew children who had joined an armed group in Syria. Almost half of the respondents further knew of families that had sent their children out of Syria to avoid recruitment.[104] In Lebanon, reports also suggest that sectarian

groups aligned with various armed factions in Syria have pressured children into joining their allies in the conflict.[105]

Trafficking and Child Labour

Prior to the current crisis, Syria was primarily a destination country for the trafficking of women and children. Coming from Indonesia, the Philippines, Somalia, and Ethiopia, among other countries, these victims were often recruited as domestic servants but then subjected to conditions of forced labour. There was also some evidence at the time that Syrian children were being used in street begging rings. Others were trafficked to Lebanon for the purposes of prostitution, often under the guise of early marriage.[106] Iraq has long been a source and destination country for the trafficking of men, women, and children. Children, in particular, have been subject to sex and labour trafficking within Iraq and to Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, typically for the purposes of prostitution, 'temporary marriages', forced begging, and other forms of forced labour.[107] Among the large Iraqi refugee population outside the country, women and girls have reportedly been trafficked by their families or criminal gangs, and subsequently placed into nightclubs or sold for the purposes of prostitution. Despite some modest steps towards strengthening their anti-trafficking laws and protecting victims, the efforts of both countries' governments were generally seen as lacking in this regard.[108]

Many of these trends have intensified in the current context of armed conflict in Syria and Iraq. Both countries are now viewed as destinations and sources for human trafficking. There is significant evidence of the use of children and youth as child soldiers, considered one of the worst forms of child labour. Incidences of trafficking for the purposes of forced labour or servitude, street begging, prostitution, and sexual exploitation have also increased, both within the two countries and to other Arab countries.[109] In ISIS-controlled areas, some reports suggest that abducted children belonging to minority groups have been sold through sexual slavery 'markets'.[110] Among the refugee populations in neighbouring countries, UNHCR and other aid agencies have observed that a significant number of children, mainly boys, have been taken out of school and are currently engaged in child labour. In Jordan, for instance, an estimated 47 percent of refugee families have children in the workforce, where many have no legal rights and are at a high risk of exploitation and violence.[111] Aid agencies have also reported rising numbers

of underage marriages among refugee populations. 'Temporary marriages' to men from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries, typically for the purposes of prostitution or sexual exploitation, have also been reported.[112] The financial burdens facing refugee families are thought to be the main motivation for the rising rates of child labour and trafficking.[113]

Sexual Violence

Both government and opposition forces in Syria have reportedly committed acts of sexual violence throughout the conflict. Regime forces have perpetrated acts of sexual violence against both girls and boys during raids and at checkpoints. The threat or act of sexual violence has also been used as an instrument of torture, in order to obtain information or confessions while in detention.[114] Reports of the abduction and rape of women and girls by opposition groups have also surfaced, and have been cited as one of the main reasons for displacement from conflict-affected areas. While the extent and magnitude of sexual violence inside Syria remains largely unknown, 74 percent of refugees in a survey reported an increase in sexual violence in their area of departure.[115] Women and girls in refugee camps outside of Syria are also thought to be at a heightened risk of coerced marriage, primarily to lessen the burden on family households.[116] Despite these incidences of sexual violence, it is assumed that many survivors have not sought out help or support out of fear of stigma, shame, social exclusion, or reprisals.[117]

In ISIS-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq, thousands of women and girls have been reportedly abducted by the group, and forcibly married to ISIS fighters, sold as slaves in auctions, or subjected to sexual and gender-based violence. Women and children from diverse religious and ethnic communities have been particularly vulnerable. Women in these areas have had many of their rights curtailed and have been subject to harsh punishments, while the education of girls has been significantly limited.[118]

CASE STUDY – Yezidi Women and Children

In August 2014, ISIS systematically targeted and attempted to destroy the ethnic Yezidi population in Iraq. Yezidi men and boys, some as young as 14, were separated from the women and systematically shot, while women and children were separated and were kept as "spoils of war."[119] While in captivity young girls, some as young as 6 years old, were prepared for rape, referred to as "marriage" by their captors.[120]

V. TIMELINE OF NOTABLE EVENTS[121]

1990

August: An estimated 100,000 Iraqi troops invade Kuwait, beginning what would become known as the first Gulf War. An American-led military coalition, including Syria, forces Iraq to withdraw by February 1991.

1995

April: Beginning of the United Nations-mandated "oil-for-food" programme, allowing the partial resumption of Iraqi oil exports in exchange for food and medicine.

1998

December: The United States and United Kingdom launch "Operation Desert Fox", a bombing campaign designed to destroy Iraq's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programmes.

2000

June: Syrian President Hafez al-Assad dies and is succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad.

November: New Syrian President Al-Assad orders the release of 600 political prisoners.

2001

April: The outlawed Muslim Brotherhood resumes political activity in Syria.

May: Pope John Paul II visits Syria.

September: Al-Assad orders the detention of politicians and other pro-reform activists, bringing an end to what some had called the 'Damascus spring'. Emergency rule is enacted through much of the following decade. The terrorist attacks of September 11 are carried out in New York and Washington.

2002

May: Amid worsening tensions with the United States, Syria is accused of acquiring weapons of mass destruction

November: UN weapons inspectors return to Iraq. The US threatens serious consequences if Iraq is found to have breached its previous obligations.

2003

March: Beginning of the US-led war in Iraq. In May, American President George Bush proclaims victory in Iraq.

August: A suicide truck bomb destroys UN headquarters in Baghdad, killing 22 people including UN envoy Sérgio Vieira de Mello. A car bomb in Najaf kills 125 people including Shia leader Ayatollah Mohammed Baqr al-Hakim.

October: Israel carries out an air strike against Palestinian militants near Damascus. Syria accuses Israel of "military aggression".

December: Saddam Hussein is captured in Tikrit.

2004

March: An estimated 25 people are killed in clashes between Kurds, Arabs, and the police in north-eastern Syria

May: The US imposes economic sanctions against Syria for supporting terrorism and allowing militants to enter Iraq

2005

January: Eight million people vote in elections for a Transitional National Assembly in Iraq.

February: Former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri is killed in Beirut. Anti-Syrian protests spread across Lebanon, opposing Syria's political influence in the country

April: Syria withdraws its forces from Lebanon

May onwards: An escalation of violence in Iraq sees numerous car bombs, explosions and shootings across the country, particularly among civilian populations.

December: The first full-term government and parliament since the US-led invasion is elected in Iraq.

2006

June: The leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, is killed in an air strike.

September: The US embassy in Damascus is attacked by four gunmen.

December: Saddam Hussein is executed for crimes against humanity

2007

January: The US announces a new counter-insurgency strategy in response to the upsurge of sectarian violence in Iraq. An additional 30,000 American troops are deployed to Iraq in the following months.

September: Israel carries out air strikes against what it claims to be a covert nuclear facility in northern Syria. The United Nations nuclear watchdog, the IAEA, begins an investigation in Syria.

2008

September: An explosion outside Damascus kills 17. Islamist militants are blamed for the attack.

2009

January: Iraqi forces take over control of security in Baghdad.

March: Newly elected US President Barack Obama announces the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq by the end of August 2010. The first troops begin to pull-out by June, formally handing over security duties to Iraqi forces.

2010

March: Parliamentary elections are held in Iraq.

May: The US renews sanctions against Syria for its support of terrorist groups, including Hizbollah, and for seeking weapons of mass destruction

August: The last US combat brigade leaves Iraq

2011

March: Protests against the al-Assad regime begin in the cities of Damascus, Deraa and Banyas. Following the regime's heavy-handed response, protests quickly spread across much of the country.

May: Syrian Arab Army (SAA) tanks enter the cities of Deraa, Banyas, Homs, and suburbs of Damascus.

June: SAA troops enter the city of Hama in response to widespread protests. By August, an estimated 200 civilians had been killed in the city.

October: Formation of the Syrian National Council, the first coalition of opposition forces. The SNC eventually become part of the Syrian National Coalition, formed in November 2012.

December: Arab League observers enter Syria. Bombings in Damascus kill at least 44 people. The Arab League suspends its observer mission in January as a result of worsening violence. In Iraq, the last American troops leave the country.

2012

January onwards: A number of bomb and gun attacks are carried out across Iraq, sparking fears of a new wave of sectarian violence. The attacks continue throughout the year.

February onwards: SAA forces bombard Homs and other cities. Over the year, the regime gradually escalates its attacks, employing attack helicopters, fixed-wing jet aircraft, and 'barrel bombs'.

July: A rebel offensive in Syria seizes control of the eastern half of Aleppo. Opposition groups also make gains in the south and east of the country.

December: Formation of the Supreme Military Council, which has served as a central coordinating structure for the more moderate armed groups in Syria.

2013

March: Syrian warplanes bomb the city of Raqqa after it falls to opposition forces.

April: ISIS begins its first operations in Syria. By the end of 2013, the group had consolidated control over significant parts of the north and east of the country, including the city of al-Raqqa.

April-June: In Syria, a regime offensive between April and June secures central Damascus and regains control over key transportation routes towards Homs and Aleppo in the north and Tartous and Latakia in the west.

July: At least 500 prisoners, including senior al-Qaeda members, escape from the Taji and Abu Ghraib prisons in Iraq.

August: The al-Assad regime allegedly uses chemical weapons against civilians in the opposition-controlled Damascus suburbs of Eastern and Western Ghouta. An estimated 355 to 1,300 civilians are killed

September: A series of bombings occur across the Iraqi Kurdistan capital of Erbil.

November: Formation of the Islamic Front, composed of seven Islamist groups.

2014

January: ISIS fighters in Iraq infiltrate and capture the city of Fallujah.

March: SAA and Hizbollah forces recapture the city of Yabroud on the Lebanese border.

May: Opposition forces evacuate the city of Homs, ending the regime's three year siege on the city.

June: ISIS fighters capture the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit. On June 29th, ISIS declares the creation of a caliphate over the Muslim world and rebrands itself as 'the Islamic State'

August: ISIS surrounds and threatens the annihilation of tens of thousands of Yazidis in the north of Iraq. The United States and a coalition of allies begin targeted air strikes against ISIS in Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki resigns and is replaced by Haider al-Abadi.

September: The US and coalition allies begin targeted air strikes against ISIS and other extremist groups in Syria. Many of the first strikes centre on the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa and the Kurdish town of Kobani, besieged by ISIS forces.

2015

January: Kurdish forces push ISIS out of Kobani, ending four months of fighting

March: Opposition offensives in Syria result in the capture of Idlib, the provincial capital of western Idlib province, and Nassib, on the Jordanian border.

April: Iraqi government forces regain control of Tikrit from ISIS, ending a month-long siege of the city. In Syria, ISIS forces capture most of Yarmouk, a Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Damascus.

May: ISIS forces capture the Iraqi city of Ramadi. In Syria, they capture the strategic site of ancient Palmyra, and the last border crossing to Iraq.

ANNEX I: RECOMMENDED READING

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