



# Security Council

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## Children and armed conflict in Iraq

### Report of the Secretary-General

#### *Summary*

The present report is the third on children and armed conflict in Iraq submitted by the Secretary-General. It contains information on the six grave violations against children and, more broadly, on the situation of children affected by conflict during the period from 1 July 2015 to 31 July 2019.

The report contains descriptions of disturbing trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children, notably high numbers of verified child casualties resulting from extreme violence perpetrated by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and military operations by parties to the conflict, including shelling, air strikes and mortar and rocket attacks. Most attacks carried out by ISIL were in direct contravention of international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. The scale of recruitment and use of children illustrates how children were used in the armed conflict. The high numbers of attacks on schools and of the military uses of schools testify to the grave impact of the conflict on children and raise serious concerns over the respect for international humanitarian law. In the report, perpetrators of grave violations are identified, where possible. The report also provides an outline of the challenges and progress made in improving the situation of children in Iraq and includes recommendations to enhance the protection of children.

It is also noted in the report that the security situation has sometimes resulted in limiting access for the purposes of monitoring and documentation and that the figures and incidents contained therein only partially reflect the scope of grave violations against children.

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## I. Introduction

1. The present report, prepared pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, provides information on grave violations against children committed by all parties to the conflict in Iraq between 1 July 2015 and 31 July 2019.
2. The report contains descriptions of disturbing trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children since my previous report ([S/2015/852](#)). It outlines challenges and progress made in the situation of children since the adoption by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of the Security Council in March 2016 of its conclusions on Iraq ([S/AC.51/2016/2](#)) and includes specific recommendations to strengthen the protection of children affected by armed conflict in Iraq. Where possible, perpetrators of grave violations are identified. In the annexes to my most recent report on children and armed conflict ([A/73/907–S/2019/509](#)), Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is listed for recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction and attacks against schools and hospitals. The Popular Mobilization Forces are listed for child recruitment and use under list B, which contains the parties that have put in place measures aimed at improving the protection of children.
3. The information included herein was documented and verified through the monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict, established pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and led by the United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting. The monitoring and reporting of grave violations against children in Iraq was severely constrained by the presence and activities of ISIL, by ongoing military operations, in particular between 2015 and 2017, and by a lack of resources for child protection. Therefore, the incidents and trends described below only partially reflect the scope of violations committed against children.

## II. Overview of political and security developments

4. From mid-2015 to the end of 2017, intense and highly volatile military confrontations between ISIL, the Government of Iraq, its allies and other parties to the conflict continued, mainly in northern Iraq. These were tragic years for children, who suffered from elevated levels of all grave violations. During 2018 and until mid-2019, the security situation progressively stabilized, while pockets of ISIL presence retained the capacity to carry out military operations.
5. Around mid-2015, following the declaration by ISIL of a so-called “caliphate” in northern Iraq and the neighbouring Syrian Arab Republic in 2014 and ensuing offensives, the group exerted control over a large territory in Iraq, including in Anbar, Ninawa and Salah al-Din Governorates and parts of Kirkuk and Diyala Governorates. Thousands of civilians, mainly men, from across the world joined ISIL and, over the subsequent years, Iraqi security forces, supported by the international counter-ISIL coalition and other parties, including the Peshmerga, the Popular Mobilization Forces and local and tribal fighters, launched military operations to defend and recapture territory from ISIL. By the end of 2015, the Government had regained control over the cities of Tikrit, Sinjar and Ramadi, and in June 2016 it recaptured the city of Fallujah. By August 2017, the entire Ninawa Governorate was under government control. Operations in Ninawa, Kirkuk and Salah al-Din Governorates at the end of 2017 consolidated governmental control and, following significant territorial regains, the Government declared ISIL defeated on 9 December 2017.

6. These events had a devastating impact on children in northern Iraq. ISIL committed widespread violations, such as the deliberate targeting of ethnic minorities and people in vulnerable situations, attacks against civilians, including killings, torture, rape and sexual slavery, forced religious conversion, child recruitment and forced displacement. ISIL imposed strict regulations on daily life, established a bureaucratic and legal system, imposed rents, collected taxes, controlled dress codes and implemented its own educational curriculum. Punishments for violating ISIL rules were severe, including beheading, crucifixion, death by stoning, immolation and other forms of execution, in addition to amputation, torture, flogging and other cruel punishment, including against children. ISIL forced children to commit crimes, including executions. Such acts committed by ISIL may have amounted to violations of international criminal law, international human rights law and international humanitarian law, some of which may constitute crimes against humanity or war crimes.

7. Military operations against ISIL involved shelling, air strikes, mortar and rocket attacks and incidents of crossfire. Iraqi security forces adopted a “humanitarian concept of operations” for its Mosul military campaign to mitigate casualties. Nonetheless, in 2016 and 2017 the air strikes and shelling carried out as part of the campaign severely affected children. The United Nations received reports of pro-government armed elements operating outside government control and perpetrating violations in areas recently liberated from ISIL. Starting in 2016, as ISIL continued to lose territory, it adapted its tactics by combining traditional warfare with the use of explosives dropped from drones and improvised explosive devices, often targeting densely populated areas and causing significant casualties, including by using children to carry out suicide attacks. Between April and September 2016, more than 800 attacks involving improvised explosive devices were recorded in civilian areas in Baghdad Governorate alone, many resulting in child casualties.

8. This situation unfolded into a humanitarian and protection crisis, with more than 2.2 million civilians, including at least 1 million children, internally displaced during the reporting period.<sup>1</sup> Internally displaced persons often faced dire living circumstances, with limited access to basic primary services, including health and education. Hundreds of schools were used by internally displaced persons for shelter and safety, further hampering access for children to their normal education facilities. Even after the military defeat of ISIL, as the security situation largely stabilized, the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, as well as contamination by explosive remnants of war, represented a significant risk to civilians, inhibiting returns to areas of origin and access for children to education or other civilian services.

9. The Government faced political and economic challenges, including the high cost of military campaigns against ISIL, increased humanitarian needs and plunging oil prices. In response to public demands, the Government implemented reforms to strengthen its democratic institutions, counter corruption and address the economic situation.

10. The Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella organization composed of volunteer fighters responding to the fatwa of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to join the fight against ISIL, were formally integrated into the Iraqi security forces in November 2016. The process of integration continued throughout the reporting period through several executive decisions, such as Executive Order No. 91 of 22 February 2016, the Popular Mobilization Commission Law (No. 40 of 2016), Executive Order No. 85 of 8 March 2018 and Executive Order No. 237 of 1 July 2019. These

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/>.

regulations confirmed the integration of the Popular Mobilization Forces into the State security architecture, with the Prime Minister as their commander-in-chief.

11. In 2017, tensions between the Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government mounted as the Kurdistan Regional Government conducted a referendum on independence on 25 September. On 16 October, the Government deployed forces to re-establish federal control over territories controlled by the Kurdish Peshmerga since June 2014, as well as over external border crossings, resulting in violent clashes and verified child casualties. On 20 November 2017, the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq ruled that the referendum was unconstitutional and void.

12. Following disputed parliamentary elections in May 2018, the formation of the Government was delayed. The Prime Minister of Iraq, Adil Abd al-Mahdi, was appointed on 2 October 2018, but the Council of Representatives only approved the key positions of Minister of Defence, Minister of the Interior and Minister of Justice in June 2019 and the Minister of Education later on. This delayed the full constitution of the interministerial committee on grave violations of the rights of the child, the main counterpart of the United Nations in Iraq for issues related to children and armed conflict.

13. In June 2018, unrest swept across southern governorates, with demonstrators demanding improved public services and employment opportunities from the Government. Starting in Basrah, the demonstrations quickly spread north to Karbala' in central Iraq. Demonstrations continued in Iraq throughout 2019.

14. At the end of 2018, Turkish armed forces (TAF) conducted operations against elements of the People's Defence Forces of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (HPG/PKK) in northern Iraq, some of which resulted in civilian casualties, including two children.

### **III. Main actors involved in the armed conflict in Iraq**

15. The following section provides updates to my previous report on children and armed conflict in Iraq related to the main parties involved in the armed conflict and provides descriptions of new actors that emerged during the reporting period.

#### **Iraqi security forces**

16. The Iraqi security forces, including entities such as the Iraqi police, under the Ministry of the Interior, and the Iraqi armed forces, under the Ministry of Defence, played a key role in recapturing ISIL territory.

#### **Popular Mobilization Forces**

17. Following the capture of Mosul by ISIL in June 2014, the Popular Mobilization Forces, operating as an umbrella organization composed primarily of Shi'a but also Sunni tribal mobilization groups and minority groups (for example, brigade 36, comprising Yazidis and Turkmen), supported the Government in combating ISIL. On 26 November 2016, pursuant to the Popular Mobilization Commission Law, the Popular Mobilization Forces were recognized as an independent military formation within the Iraqi armed forces under the direct command of the Prime Minister. In July 2019, Mr. Abd al-Mahdi issued an executive order reconfirming the Popular Mobilization Forces as an integral part of the Iraqi armed forces, subject to the laws and regulations of the armed forces and under his direct command. Through these measures, the Popular Mobilization Forces are expected to be integrated into the Iraqi security forces and transformed from an umbrella group into formal brigades, with an increasingly diversified force recruited from various parts of Iraqi society.

### **International coalition to counter Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant**

18. The international counter-ISIL coalition, comprising 81 nations, was formed in September 2014 and supported the Government's fight against ISIL. Coalition partners' contributions included advising and assisting the Government to plan or execute ground operations; providing air cover; and training and equipping the Iraqi security forces and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. The coalition also committed to dismantling the financing and economic infrastructure of ISIL; preventing terrorist fighters from crossing borders; and supporting the restoration of essential public services to areas retaken from ISIL.

### **Other actors engaged in the fight against Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant**

19. Kurdish actors in Iraq contributed significantly to the fight against ISIL, notably the Kurdistan Regional Government, including the Kurdish Peshmerga (the armed forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government), the Peshmerga Zeravani (the military police) and the Peshmerga Asayish (the internal security forces).

20. HPG/PKK also conducted operations in Iraq.

21. The Sinjar Resistance Units, established in 2007 to protect Yazidi communities, has played a key role in the fight against ISIL in and around Sinjar since 2014. The Protection Force of Ezidkhan, a Yazidi armed group established in 2014, also supported efforts against ISIL.

### **Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant**

22. ISIL is included in the United Nations sanctions list. While ISIL progressively lost territory from 2015 until its military defeat in December 2017, pockets of ISIL presence remain in Iraq and the group has carried out isolated asymmetric attacks throughout the country, such as burning crops in northern Iraq to prevent normalization and reconstruction in areas it formerly occupied. ISIL still has fighters and supporters in Iraq and continues to operate in some locations, mounting regular attacks to show its potency and undermine public confidence in local authorities. Pursuant to Security Council resolution [2379 \(2017\)](#), I established the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant to support domestic efforts to hold ISIL accountable by collecting, preserving and storing evidence in Iraq of acts that may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide committed by ISIL in Iraq.

## **IV. Grave violations against children**

23. Children were affected in multiple and compounding ways as a result of all six grave violations. During the reporting period, the United Nations verified 2,114 grave violations against children: 296 children were recruited and used, 1,722 were killed or maimed, 10 were subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence and 86 were abducted. A total of 236 attacks were conducted on schools and 24 were conducted on hospitals. Verified grave violations peaked in 2015 and 2016 during military confrontations and most occurred in Ninawa and Salah al-Din Governorates. As the verification of grave violations is an ongoing process, and as late verification was possible after December 2017 owing to improved security and access, the data reflected in the present report are higher than the data included in my most recent report on children and armed conflict.

## A. Recruitment and use

24. The United Nations verified the recruitment and use of 296 children (287 boys and 9 girls), 27 of whom were recruited in the second half of 2015, 114 in 2016, 109 in 2017, 39 in 2018 and 7 in the first half of 2019. The United Nations also received allegations of the recruitment and use of 652 children (522 boys and 130 of sex unknown) that could not be verified.

25. More than 50 per cent of the children were recruited and used by ISIL (151), followed by the Popular Mobilization Forces (70), Sunni tribal mobilization groups (42), HPG/PKK (19), the Sinjar Resistance Units (4), the Protection Force of Ezidkhan (1) and the Peshmerga Zeravani (1). Eight children were recruited and used by the Iraqi security forces, namely, the Iraqi police (5) and the Iraqi army (3).

26. A total of 199 of the children (67 per cent) were used as combatants, 37 (13 per cent) were used in support roles and 14 (5 per cent) were used to carry out suicide attacks with improvised explosive devices. A majority of the children (177, representing 60 per cent) were recruited and used in northern Iraq in Ninawa (126) and Kirkuk (51) Governorates; followed by the Kurdistan region (42), including Sulaymaniyah (23), Dahuk (10) and Erbil (9); and in central Iraq (43), including in Anba (11), Baghdad (9), Salah al-Din (9), Karbala' (6), Diyala (6), Babil (1) and Wasit (1) Governorates. The remaining children were recruited in southern Iraq (31), including in Basrah (15), Najaf (12), Dhi Qar (2), Maysan (1) and Muthanna (1).

### Recruitment and use by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

27. The recruitment and use of children constituted a central component of the political, military and ideological aims of ISIL in Iraq, with 151 children (143 boys and 8 girls), some as young as 7 years old, verified as having been recruited and used, mainly in Ninawa and Kirkuk.

28. Methods employed by ISIL for recruiting children ranged from abduction to coercion, manipulation and inducement. Incidents of mass abductions of children for the purpose of recruitment were verified, often targeting the most vulnerable parts of the population. In 2014, 33 Yazidi boys between the ages of 11 and 14 were abducted, trained in both Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic and deployed to fight in Dayr al-Zawr, the Syrian Arab Republic. Seven of these boys were either rescued or managed to escape in 2018, while the whereabouts of the others are unknown. In March 2016, ISIL abducted 25 boys between the ages of 10 and 17 from an orphanage in Zuhur, Mosul, and brought them to a training camp in Tall Afar, Ninawa Governorate. ISIL also threatened families to hand over their children, risking severe punishments if they refused. Iraqi authorities received information about higher numbers of Yazidi children abducted and used by ISIL.

29. The ideological and manipulative components of the ISIL recruitment methods were elaborate, and children's participation was used both to spur further recruitments and to intimidate and humiliate dissidents. ISIL used media centres, in particular in Ninawa, to encourage children to join ISIL, displaying videos idealizing its role and promising them power and economic support. Children between the ages of 10 and 15, referred to as the "cubs of the caliphate" by ISIL, were often sent to training centres. Children received military training, were indoctrinated and were desensitized to extreme violence, including by performing executions and undertaking suicide attacks. Children committing acts of extreme violence, including executions of dissidents and adults accused of infringing ISIL rules, appeared in ISIL videos on social media and websites. The United Nations received reports of children being forced or induced to take drugs during their recruitment to numb and embolden them.

30. Children also joined ISIL to support their families facing economic hardship. As the humanitarian situation deteriorated in ISIL-held areas, the number of children who joined ISIL for survival increased. For example, in 2015, a 16-year-old boy joined the ISIL logistics team in Mosul, Ninawa, as he could no longer trade tobacco, following its prohibition by ISIL.

31. Most of the children, 68 per cent, were used by ISIL in active combat, with surges during the intensification of operations at the end of 2015 in Ninawa and Anbar and in Mosul in 2017. Children who rebelled were severely punished, including by being detained or executed. In January 2016, two boys were captured and executed by ISIL for escaping the battle for Ramadi in 2015.

32. A total of 12 per cent of the children were used in support roles, including manufacturing and planting improvised explosive devices, cooking, cleaning, transporting weapons or operating checkpoints. Children were used as informants, including on the political affiliations of Iraqis, often for subsequent punishment by ISIL.

33. Sexual violence was at the core of the ISIL operational strategy to spread terror, persecute ethnic and religious minorities and suppress communities opposing its ideology. Following its seizure of Mosul and surrounding areas in August 2014, ISIL instituted a pattern of sexual violence, abduction and human trafficking for sexual exploitation. During the Mosul operation, women and girls were forced to marry ISIL fighters, were sold and used as sex slaves, human shields and suicide bombers, were forced into early marriages and were executed in public. Multiple cases of girls being forced into marriage by their parents, including following threats, were verified, and girls were reportedly used in support roles, including for manufacturing explosive devices.

34. ISIL used children, many of them girls, to carry out suicide attacks, in particular as the military pressure and defections from its ranks increased. A total of 14 children were used for this purpose, often causing high numbers of civilian casualties. In some cases, the children were apprehended by the Iraqi security forces before they were able to detonate their vests. In April 2017, the Iraqi security forces dismantled an explosive vest carried by a 7-year-old girl who had managed to escape ISIL after having been abducted. Children who perished in suicide attacks were lauded and portrayed by ISIL as martyrs.

#### **Recruitment and use by the Popular Mobilization Forces**

35. A total of 70 boys were verified as having been recruited and used by the Popular Mobilization Forces in the context of military campaigns against ISIL, 12 of whom were recruited and used by the Forces in 2015, 57 in 2016 and 1 in 2019. Of the 70 boys, 73 per cent were used in active combat, while 27 per cent were used in support roles, mainly in northern Iraq. The children were both encouraged to join and coerced into joining the Forces. In November 2016, following the adoption of the Popular Mobilization Commission Law, the Popular Mobilization Forces formally integrated into the Iraqi security forces and ceased to be a non-State actor.

36. Between 2015 and 2017, military training sessions were offered to boys between the ages of 15 and 18 during summer holidays, mainly in southern Iraq, but also in Kirkuk and Erbil Governorates. The training sessions were publicized, including on social media. In June 2015, the Ministry of Youth and Sports issued a letter encouraging governorates to provide youth clubs and sports clubs with military training during the summer. Between 2015 and 2017, the United Nations received unverified reports of parents in the southern governorates being encouraged by local authorities to send their children to join the Popular Mobilization Forces in return for flexibility with regard to their school attendance and promises that the children would

receive higher grades. The exact number of children who joined these military training sessions remains unknown, yet reports indicate that hundreds of children undertook training that lasted up to three months. Children also joined the Forces seeking economic rewards, as a result of peer pressure and to gain status and influence in their communities. In 2015, cases were verified of eight boys who were coerced by the Popular Mobilization Forces, which was an armed group at that time, into participating in a military training camp.

37. Some children recruited and used by the Popular Mobilization Forces died during operations. In October 2015, a 17-year-old boy recruited and trained by the Forces was killed in Bayji, Salah al-Din, while fighting ISIL.

38. A total of 42 boys were recruited and used by Sunni tribal mobilization groups. In 2016, 12 boys were recruited in Ninawa and deployed to secure recaptured areas on the front line, to control their villages or to recapture new areas. In November 2017, 30 boys were recruited and trained in Kirkuk Governorate to provide security.

#### **Recruitment and use by Iraqi security forces**

39. The eight verified cases of recruitment and use by the Iraqi security forces, all in Ninawa Governorate, involved the use of five boys by the Iraqi police to operate a checkpoint in 2018 and the use of three boys by the Iraqi army to operate a checkpoint in 2019.

#### **Recruitment and use by other parties to conflict**

40. Between 2015 and 2017, 25 children were recruited by HPG/PKK (18 boys and 1 girl), the Sinjar Resistance Units (4), the Protection Force of Ezidkhan (1) and the Peshmerga Zeravani (1) in Sulaymaniyah (including Halabjah), Dahuk and Erbil Governorates to support military operations against ISIL. In late 2016, a 16-year-old boy joined HPG/PKK in Dahuk Governorate because of economic hardship. The boy received military training for a month before being deployed to the Sinjar mountains in November 2017 to operate a checkpoint. In 2016, credible reports indicated that numerous children were abducted by HPG/PKK and brought to training facilities in the Qandil mountains on the border with the Syrian Arab Republic, while their families were prevented from contacting them. The United Nations also verified the recruitment and use of three Syrian children by HPG/PKK in Sulaymaniyah. In 2015, one 15-year-old boy joined the Sinjar Resistance Units because of economic hardship. He completed his military training and three months later decided to leave the group after his father died. The boy confirmed that two other boys, aged 10 and 13, had also participated in the training.

#### **Deprivation of liberty of children for their alleged association with armed forces or armed groups**

41. Children in detention in Iraq remained critically vulnerable and in urgent need of specific individualized care and protection. Hundreds of children were deprived of liberty by Iraqi security forces and the Kurdistan Regional Government for their actual or alleged association with ISIL. As at June 2019, at least 778 children (743 boys and 35 girls), most between the ages of 15 and 18 but some as young as 10 years old, remained in pretrial or post-trial detention on national security-related charges.

42. Children with alleged links to ISIL are stranded in crowded camps or detained in Iraq, where they suffer from limited access to basic humanitarian services, such as food, water, shelter, medical care and other essential services, along with a lack of respect for due process, the right to a fair trial and other fundamental rights. Detained children were further exposed to a heightened risk of violence, including sexual

violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. Some of these children had witnessed or experienced terrible violence in their pasts.

43. Children of foreign origin were also detained for their actual or alleged association with ISIL. Many countries of origin have refused to have them repatriated. Some children were prosecuted according to the Iraqi justice system for terrorist-related charges. Throughout the reporting period, there were serious concerns of a lack of due process and respect for international juvenile justice standards in prosecuting children on security-related charges.

44. Many civil registry documents, such as birth certificates, for these children have been confiscated or lost, complicating access to social services and education upon release, and making it difficult to establish whether they are below or above the age of criminal responsibility.

## **B. Killing and maiming**

45. The United Nations verified the killing (741) and maiming (981) of 1,722 children (1,062 boys, 462 girls and 198 of sex unknown), 387 of whom were killed or maimed in the second half of 2015, 408 in 2016, 750 in 2017, 132 in 2018 and 45 in the first half of 2019.

46. The largest number of children killed or maimed was attributed to ISIL (462), followed by the Iraqi security forces and the international counter-ISIL coalition in joint operations (142), the Popular Mobilization Forces (9), the Peshmerga (34), TAF (2), unidentified armed elements (93) and explosive remnants of war (126). Over 40 per cent of the casualties occurred in Ninawa Governorate (716), followed by Diyala (283), Anbar (170), Kirkuk (160) and Salah al-Din (156) Governorates. The United Nations also received allegations of the killing or maiming of 1,068 children (438 boys, 104 girls and 526 of sex unknown) that could not be verified.

47. Alarming levels of child casualties were verified throughout 2016 and 2017 owing to extreme violence perpetrated by ISIL and intense fighting among opposing parties. During 2018 and until mid-2019, almost half of the child casualties (47 per cent) were due to explosive remnants of war in territories previously held by ISIL. The United Nations faced difficulties in ascertaining the perpetrators of air strikes, artillery shelling and mortar and rocket attacks because of limited access to conflict-affected areas and late verification.

48. Of the total number of child casualties, 46 per cent (790) resulted from clashes between ISIL and the Iraqi security forces and affiliated groups, including through air strikes, artillery shelling and mortar and rocket attacks, 41 per cent (713) were due to the use of improvised explosive devices, including 14 children used to carry out suicide attacks with such devices, 7 per cent (126) were due to explosive remnants of war and the remaining 6 per cent (93) were due to extrajudicial killings, torture or physical ill-treatment.

49. Throughout the reporting period, there were serious concerns about the lack of compliance with international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution, as well as about the lack of compliance with the prohibition on indiscriminate attacks, and concerns about the conduct of hostilities affecting children and civilians in general.

50. Extreme acts of violence perpetrated by ISIL against civilians and civilian locations caused a high number of casualties in areas under its control. Methods of targeting included shelling, mortar rounds, sniper fire, landmines, car bombs and explosives dropped from drones. Reports were received of ISIL employing chemical weapons during attacks in and around Mosul. In 2018 and 2019, the United Nations

identified more than 200 mass graves in areas previously held by ISIL containing the remains of victims of ISIL, including children.<sup>2</sup>

51. Children were particularly affected by fighting during the battle for Mosul in 2016 and 2017. In June 2017, 8 children were killed and 18 were injured when fleeing Mosul as ISIL members hiding in a hospital opened fire on them, using mortar shells and sniper fire. The United Nations verified cases of ISIL using families, including children, as human shields. In April 2017, families, including an estimated 200 children, were forced to leave their homes and move to a building at risk of attack near the Nuri mosque in Mosul. Some were forced to accompany ISIL fighters retreating from the front line. Incidents were reported of ISIL placing children, and civilians in general, in the streets in Mosul between its positions and those of the Iraqi security forces. In several instances, ISIL shot dead those who tried to escape.

52. Child casualties also occurred as families were caught in the crossfire or targeted during their escape. In April 2016, in Kirkuk Governorate, a family, including three girls and one boy, was executed by machine gun fired by ISIL while the family was trying to escape.

53. Air strikes and artillery shelling had a devastating impact on children seeking refuge in civilian structures. In April 2016, two children were killed and five were maimed in neighbouring houses when an unattributed air strike hit the Firdaws mosque in Fallujah, Anbar Governorate, allegedly being used by ISIL. In May 2017, in Mosul, Ninawa Governorate, six children were killed and five were maimed as a result of an unattributed air strike on a school hosting families of ISIL fighters. Separately, 39 children were killed and maimed in crossfire between the Iraqi security forces and the Peshmerga after the referendum in 2017.

54. The second largest cause of child casualties was the use of improvised explosive devices (713 children: 486 boys, 163 girls and 64 of sex unknown), including 14 children used to carry out suicide attacks. ISIL was responsible for 75 per cent (534) of these casualties, while the remaining cases could not be attributed. ISIL targeted public areas and property, as well as gatherings and the homes of people perceived as opponents. ISIL also planted improvised explosive devices along roads in and out of areas under its control to prevent civilians from fleeing and to hinder the movement of Iraqi security forces. In August 2015, 9 children were killed and 17 were maimed when a truck rigged by ISIL with improvised explosive devices detonated in a market in Diyala. In March 2016, in another incident attributed to ISIL, 23 boys were killed and 58 were injured when a 15-year-old child detonated the improvised explosive device he was carrying in a football stadium in Babil Governorate.

55. Explosive remnants of war caused 126 child casualties (107 boys, 15 girls and 4 of sex unknown), representing the third major cause of casualties, more than half of which occurred in 2018 as a result of widespread contamination of areas previously occupied by ISIL, exposing returning families to high levels of risk. In May 2018, six boys were seriously injured playing football as an explosive remnant of war exploded in a village previously held by ISIL in Kirkuk.

56. The fourth leading cause of killing and maiming of children was extrajudicial killings, torture and physical ill-treatment, resulting in the killing or maiming of 93 children (71 boys, 20 girls and 2 of sex unknown), more than 90 per cent of which were perpetrated by ISIL (85), followed by the Iraqi security forces (5), the Popular Mobilization Forces (2) and the Peshmerga Asayish (1). ISIL committed horrifying violence against children, using executions, amputations, physical mutilation and

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Unearthing atrocities: mass graves in territory formerly controlled by ISIL", 6 November 2018.

other brutalities to ensure obedience, instil fear and exert control and as a form of revenge and intimidation. In January 2016, two Shabak boys were shot dead in public by ISIL following accusations of spying for the Iraqi security forces in Mosul. In February 2016, ISIL used a sword to publicly amputate the right hands of three boys in Mosul, following a judgment for theft by an ISIL “court”. In April 2016, in Tall Afar, Ninawa Governorate, ISIL killed a 15-year-old boy accused of being a disbeliever, by tearing him apart between two cars driving in opposite directions.

57. Children with actual or alleged affiliation with ISIL, including through family ties, were also vulnerable to harassment and torture and killing and maiming. In May 2017, four boys were arrested by Iraqi police in Karbala’ and subsequently interrogated and tortured, resulting in the death of one boy. On 28 September 2017, a 16-year-old boy, detained with his father on 21 August by the Popular Mobilization Forces for their alleged affiliation with ISIL, died following torture in Ninawa Governorate.

58. In 2018, eight children were injured in two separate explosions in weapons and ammunition storage facilities belonging to Popular Mobilization Forces near or in residential areas in Karbala’ and Salah al-Din Governorates. Two girls were killed during operations conducted by TAF in Ninawa Governorate, one targeting an ISIL weapon storage and another one targeting the “Makhmur camp”.

### **C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence**

59. The United Nations was able to verify rape and other forms of sexual violence against 10 children (3 boys and 7 girls). One of the cases occurred in 2016 and nine occurred in 2017; eight were perpetrated by ISIL and two by the Popular Mobilization Forces. All incidents occurred in Kirkuk and Ninawa Governorates. Girls in camps for internally displaced persons were particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and harassment owing to their restricted movement, the lack of access to services and civil documentation, and economic hardship.

60. The verified incidents attributed to ISIL involved the forced marriage of seven girls between the ages of 16 and 17 to ISIL fighters and one incident of rape of a boy by an ISIL leader. In one case, in May 2017, a 17-year-old girl from Hawijah, Kirkuk Governorate, was forced by her family to marry an ISIL fighter; the pregnant girl subsequently fled to an area held by Iraqi security forces in October 2017. The United Nations received credible reports of systematic and large-scale sexual abuse of children by ISIL. The group deliberately targeted religious and ethnic minorities, including Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen and Shabak, as well as Shi’a and Sunni populations, using sexual violence as a means of control and intimidation. Children were also trafficked, sold and traded by ISIL in Iraq as well as to the Syrian Arab Republic. In 2015, the United Nations received information about the abduction of 875 girls for sexual exploitation and abuse. The girls managed to escape ISIL control throughout the reporting period, and many of the victims of sexual violence testified to facing stigma, including repudiation, upon their return to their communities. In addition, Iraqi authorities received information from Yazidi communities about several thousand women and girls abducted by ISIL, who may have been subjected to sexual violence.

61. The cases of sexual violence attributed to the Popular Mobilization Forces occurred during the detention of two boys with actual or alleged association with ISIL. One 17-year-old boy detained for two months was raped by officers of the Popular Mobilization Forces.

62. Rape and other forms of sexual violence against children were significantly underreported, including because of stigma, the lack of access to appropriate services

or fear of retaliation. The actual scale of these violations is estimated to be significantly larger.

#### **D. Attacks on schools and hospitals**

63. Throughout the reporting period, there were serious concerns related to attacks on civilian infrastructure by parties to conflict that may have violated international humanitarian law. However, the lack of access to conflict-affected areas during active hostilities and the crossfire nature of many incidents, as well as late verification, complicated the attribution of attacks to specific parties to conflict.

64. Elevated numbers of attacks on schools (236) and hospitals (24) were verified, as well as a high number of military uses of schools (79) and the military use of 1 hospital. The United Nations also received reports of 60 attacks on schools (35) and hospitals (25) and 7 military uses of schools (5) and hospitals (2) that could not be verified.

##### **Attacks on schools**

65. The United Nations verified 236 attacks on schools, 53 of which occurred in the second half of 2015, 10 in 2016, 151 in 2017, 21 in 2018 and 1 in the first half of 2019. The largest numbers of attacks on schools occurred in Anbar (78) and Salah al-Din (54). In most attacks (227), schools were damaged or destroyed in crossfire or as a result of the use of improvised explosive devices. Eight of the remaining attacks involved the targeting of education personnel and one involved threats by ISIL against education personnel to comply with the ISIL-imposed curriculum.

66. In one example, a secondary school in Mosul was severely damaged in an air strike by the international counter-ISIL coalition targeting a nearby ISIL-held centre in February 2016. In October 2016, a United Nations-supported school in Kirkuk was damaged during crossfire between Iraqi security forces and ISIL. Education personnel were directly targeted and subjected to physical injury, abduction, killing, torture and threats. In December 2015, in Mosul, a female teacher was tortured to death in public for refusing to follow the ISIL-imposed curriculum. ISIL implemented its own curriculum in certain areas under its control, exposing children to a highly militarized radical ideology, including military training and the use of weapons.

##### **Military uses of schools**

67. A high number of schools (79) were verified as being used for military purposes between early 2015 and 2017; a total of 63 of these incidents were attributed to ISIL and 10 to the Iraqi security forces, including 7 to the Iraqi army and 3 to the Iraqi police. Five of the remaining incidents were attributed to the Popular Mobilization Forces and one to the Peshmerga.

68. ISIL used schools as depots, training centres, interrogation sites or as military bases to launch attacks. It also used schools for indoctrination, exposing children to a heightened danger of counter-attacks. Other parties mainly used schools as screening centres and military bases. For example, in January 2019, the United Nations verified the use by a group affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces of a high school in Salah al-Din as a military base, at the moment when the group vacated the premises.

### **Attacks on hospitals**

69. The United Nations verified 24 attacks on hospitals, 9 of which occurred in the second half of 2015, 8 in 2016, 3 in 2017, 3 in 2018 and 1 in the first half of 2019. A total of 8 of the attacks were attributed to ISIL, 4 to the Iraqi security forces and their allies, 1 to the Popular Mobilization Forces and 11 to unidentified armed elements. The largest numbers of attacks occurred in Diyala (9) and Ninawa (5) and included the targeting of medical personnel (13) and damages caused by crossfire between the parties to conflict (10).

70. In August 2015, a children's hospital in Anbar was hit by an unidentified air strike, causing serious damage to the facility and resulting in the killing of 23 newborns and the maiming of another 27 children. In November 2016, a hospital in Salah al-Din was damaged by several rockets launched from an ISIL-held location.

### **Military use of hospitals**

71. The United Nations verified the military use of one hospital in Ninawa in 2017 by ISIL, using it to target civilians trying to flee the area.

## **E. Abduction**

72. The United Nations verified the abduction of 86 children (65 boys, 14 girls and 7 of sex unknown), 6 of whom were abducted in the second half of 2015, 12 in 2016, 32 in 2017, 2 in 2018 and 34 in the first half of 2019. A total of 73 of the children (85 per cent) were abducted by ISIL (57 boys, 9 girls and 7 of sex unknown), and 13 were abducted by unidentified armed elements (8 boys and 5 girls). More than 70 per cent of the total number of children (62) were abducted in Ninawa Governorate, followed by 7 each in Anbar and Salah al-Din Governorates. The United Nations also received allegations of abductions of 160 children (27 boys, 4 girls and 129 of sex unknown) that could not be verified. The number of cases of abductions verified by the United Nations is estimated to be considerably lower than the actual number.

73. ISIL abducted children for various reasons, including for recruitment and use and forced military training, for ransom or as a means to punish children or their families for trying to flee ISIL-held areas. In February 2017, 2 families, including 32 children, fleeing an ISIL-held district in Anbar Governorate were abducted and taken to an unknown location by ISIL members. Some days later, seven of the children were found dead. During the reporting period, there were credible indications that the number of children abducted for the purpose of ransom decreased as ISIL diversified its funding. Many children abducted remain missing.

## **F. Denial of humanitarian access**

74. The verification of incidents involving the denial of humanitarian access during periods of active armed conflict is particularly challenging, and significant underreporting must be assumed owing to logistical limitations. Although conflict-related restrictions subsided in 2019, administrative constraints on humanitarian operations are still present. Local authorities often disregard the national procedures to authorize access, and military and civil authorities demand that additional approvals be obtained locally, which has a negative impact on the delivery of humanitarian aid. For example, between May and October 2019, the United Nations in Iraq documented more than 250 reports of humanitarian aid organizations being denied access, directly affecting more than 1 million beneficiaries. Administrative difficulties were most prevalent, followed by interference, violence or threats

targeting humanitarian organizations and restrictions on access for populations to services and assistance.

75. Active hostilities between 2015 and 2017 significantly restricted humanitarian access to conflict-affected areas, in particular to Anbar, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din and Ninawa Governorates. In a number of cities, such as Fallujah, Sharqat, Hawijah and Mosul, populations experienced restricted movement and extremely limited access to commodities and services. Through the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict, the United Nations was able to verify only seven incidents of denial of humanitarian access, four of which occurred in 2016 and three in 2017. Four of the incidents were attributed to ISIL, two to Iraqi security forces and one to an unknown perpetrator. Three incidents occurred in Ninawa Governorate, two in Salah al-Din Governorate and two in Diyala Governorate. Four other incidents were reported but could not be verified.

76. Children were deliberately deprived of access to humanitarian aid by parties to the conflict, with tragic consequences. In December 2015, as the Government launched operations to retake the city of Ramadi in Anbar, it was reported that hundreds of families were prevented by ISIL from leaving the area to seek safety. In 2016, ISIL prevented civilians trapped in Fallujah from leaving the city, while the Iraqi security forces and Popular Mobilization Forces surrounding the city restricted the entry of assistance.

77. Civilians were caught in the midst of conflict, unable to gain access to humanitarian aid. For example, in 2016, it is estimated that hundreds of children and their families were trapped for more than one month in a village in Ninawa between ISIL lines and those of the Popular Mobilization Forces, with no access to services. ISIL eventually captured the area and continued to impose restrictions on access to services.

78. Restrictions of movement or access to services, as well as other administrative impediments, were imposed by the Iraqi security forces and local actors on recipients of such services for their actual or alleged affiliation with ISIL and continue to be observed today. It was reported that the screening of civilians, including internally displaced persons, by the Iraqi security forces and affiliated groups was used to deny access to safe areas and assistance. For example, in November 2015, some 130 Sunni Arab families from villages north-east of Sinjar fleeing military operations were reportedly denied access beyond Peshmerga lines. In December 2015, 1,600 internally displaced persons from Anbar were stopped from crossing a bridge between Anbar and Baghdad and some were abducted, reportedly by elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces. In January 2017, the siege of east Mosul trapped approximately 750,000 persons under the control of ISIL. Residents were reported being targeted and shot as they tried to leave the city or attempted to secure food and other resources. The United Nations noted that the number of those who had died, including children, from the secondary effects of the violence, such as the lack of access to food, water or medicine, could not be determined.<sup>3</sup>

79. Families reportedly lacked birth certificates or identification, without which they cannot have access to public assistance or basic services (namely, education and health). The lack of identification cards exposed children to a risk of arbitrary arrest and detention, as security forces interpret the lack of identification as resulting from the denial of security clearance owing to past association with ISIL.

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report on the protection of civilians in the context of the Ninawa operations and the retaking of Mosul city, 17 October 2016–10 July 2017".

80. In 2018 and 2019, civilians living in camps hosting families and relatives with actual or alleged affiliation with ISIL were still largely deprived of access to humanitarian aid. The deteriorating situation faced by thousands of people, mostly women and children, stranded in overcrowded camps in Iraq is untenable. These individuals have limited access to food, medical care, consular services and other fundamental rights and services. Many of the children have been subjected to grave violations and exposed to extreme acts of violence, with little or no access to appropriate medical, psychosocial and other forms of support for their rehabilitation and reintegration. The provision and funding of tailored reintegration services with the best interests of the child as guiding principle are essential elements for addressing the issue of children with actual or alleged affiliation with ISIL.

## **V. Progress and challenges in ending grave violations against children**

81. The United Nations engaged with parties to conflict in Iraq on measures aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children. However, these efforts were significantly constrained by active hostilities, lack of access and the limited capacity of the interlocutors.

82. Between mid-2015 and 2017, the United Nations strengthened the monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict. The country task force on monitoring and reporting conducted training sessions for international and national non-governmental organizations, strengthening the capacity of 900 personnel involved in child protection.

83. During 2016, the United Nations systematically promoted the establishment of an interministerial committee on grave violations of the rights of the child, in line with recommendations made by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict in October 2011 (see [S/AC.51/2011/6](#)) and August 2016 (see [S/AC.51/2016/2](#)). On 23 November 2017, the then Prime Minister of Iraq, Haider al-Abadi, established the interministerial committee and its terms of reference, which are focused, inter alia, on raising awareness and building the capacity of parties to conflict on child protection, undertaking legal reform and supporting the collection of information on grave violations against children. A representative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs chaired the committee, composed of representatives of the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other entities, including the Popular Mobilization Commission and the secretariat of the Council of Ministers.

84. However, the committee was active only to a limited extent during the reporting period, stalled by delays in ministerial appointments following the parliamentary elections in 2018. The committee resumed its activities in July 2019. Dialogue continued with the Government on an action plan to end and prevent recruitment and use by the Popular Mobilization Forces. In April 2019, the United Nations engaged with the National Security Adviser of Iraq, the focal point for the action plan, who expressed his commitment to its development. There has been a significant decrease in cases of recruitment and use by the Popular Mobilization Forces and government forces.

85. In 2017, the United Nations supported the Government in a review of domestic legislation to identify gaps and formulate recommendations with a view to harmonizing with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other frameworks. The review will constitute the basis for a comprehensive law on the rights of the child, criminalizing child recruitment. While recruitment below the age of 18 has been prohibited in Iraq since 2010, child recruitment is not criminalized. In December

2017, the national child protection policy of Iraq was finalized, with input from the United Nations, and adopted. It includes a focus on preventing recruitment and use and ensuring the release of children.

86. Regarding measures taken by international forces, the international counter-ISIL coalition reported that it implemented a thorough and extensive programme of compliance with international humanitarian law and adopted measures to mitigate civilian casualties, including through assessments and investigations of reported casualties.

87. Starting in 2017, the United Nations offered reintegration programmes for 517 children, some of whom had been associated with ISIL, in Dahuk, Erbil, Karbala', Najaf, Ninawa, Dhi Qar and Qadisiyah Governorates. In other areas, the United Nations conducted reintegration and social cohesion workshops for detention staff, community, tribal and religious leaders, civil society and media to reverse negative perceptions and attitudes towards returning children with actual or perceived ties to ISIL.

88. The United Nations engaged with the Government on non-judicial measures, including reintegration, as alternatives to prosecution and detention. Starting in 2016, the Government granted the United Nations access to juvenile detention facilities to support children in detention. In 2018, 60 boys between the ages of 15 and 17 detained for actual or alleged association with ISIL attended workshops to build their resilience against re-recruitment. The United Nations also provided legal representation before, during and after their trials.

89. Between 2016 and mid-2019, more than 350,000 children received educational messages about the risks of explosive hazards, and a total of 1,207 schools were rehabilitated and made functional by the United Nations.

## **VI. Observations and recommendations**

**90. I strongly condemn the grave violations committed against children in armed conflict by all parties, in particular the abhorrent violations and extreme violence committed by ISIL, which may amount to violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, some of which may constitute crimes against humanity or war crimes. I remain concerned about its continued ability to attack civilians, including children.**

**91. All parties must respect international humanitarian law. I call upon all parties to end the killing and maiming of children, respect the civilian character of schools and hospitals, cease the military use of schools and hospitals, cease attacks and threats against protected personnel and end all other grave violations against children.**

**92. I call upon the Government to abide by its obligations under international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law and ensure the protection of civilians. I urge the Government to ensure that the rules of engagement of all security forces, including government-affiliated armed groups, include child protection measures.**

**93. I am concerned about the impact on children of the contamination of Iraqi territory by explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices and of the hazards associated with weapons storage facilities.**

**94. I commend the Government for finalizing its national child protection policy in December 2017 and call for its implementation. I encourage the**

Government to adopt a comprehensive law on the rights of the child criminalizing the recruitment of anyone below the age of 18.

95. I encourage the Government to continue to engage with the United Nations to develop, adopt and implement an action plan to end and prevent recruitment and use by the Popular Mobilization Forces, in addition to releasing any children associated with the Forces, ensuring their reintegration, in cooperation with child protection partners, and engaging with tribal mobilization groups and religious leaders. I also encourage the Government to engage with the United Nations to ensure the reintegration of all other children associated with parties to the conflict.

96. I call upon the Ministry of Defence to develop and enforce age verification procedures for recruitment by government forces and government-affiliated armed groups.

97. I urge the Government to ensure strong accountability measures for perpetrators, including conducting comprehensive, independent and prompt investigations into alleged violations against children, in particular for war crimes or crimes against humanity. The Government should also exclude those found guilty from any government security forces.

98. All measures taken by Member States for the protection, prosecution, repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration of children should be in compliance with their obligations under international law, including international human rights law, international humanitarian law and international refugee law, as well as international standards and relevant Security Council resolutions. General Assembly resolutions must also be taken into consideration. Children should be treated as victims and their treatment must be determined with the best interests of the child as the primary consideration.

99. When children are suspected of having committed criminal acts, due process and fair trial standards, including the presumption of innocence and the right to an appeal, must be adhered to, with appropriate consideration given to age and gender. Any prosecution of children should respect internationally recognized standards of juvenile justice. When relevant, these children should be repatriated to their country of nationality for judicial proceedings. Children linked with United Nations-listed terrorist groups should be detained only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time. Alternatives to detention should be prioritized. I call upon Member States to enforce the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

100. Furthermore, I call for the immediate repatriation of all children and the development of specialized child protection programmes to ensure their full reintegration. I urge all States concerned to collectively develop solutions for those children, whose human rights are under grave threat. In line with the principle of keeping the best interests of the child as the primary consideration, decisions affecting children should be made on an individualized basis, including in relation to maintaining family unity, such that children should be repatriated with their siblings and primary caregiver.

101. I urge the Government to strengthen child reintegration programmes, including educational, health, mental health and psychosocial programmes, in particular specialized and gender-sensitive services for victims of sexual violence, including those from ethnic and religious minority groups.

102. I call upon the Government to ensure that all children, irrespective of their perceived status or affiliation, benefit from humanitarian assistance without discrimination and according to the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality. Children in detention should urgently benefit from specific individualized care and protection, including access to food, to medical and psychosocial care and to fundamental rights and services, including judicial due process. I call upon the Government to issue birth certificates and identification cards, allowing children to have access to public assistance and basic services.

103. I welcome the Government's special administrative process to register children born of rape and I encourage its deployment at the national level.

104. I call upon the Government to ensure the application of international juvenile justice standards in the administration of justice.

105. I encourage the interministerial committee on grave violations of the rights of the child to continue its cooperation with the country task force on monitoring and reporting.

106. I call upon donors to redouble their efforts to provide additional financial support, in particular towards reintegration programmes for children, as well as to continue to support access to decontamination efforts and ammunition management efforts.

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