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LEGAL PROTECTION OF CHILDREN RECRUITED AND EXPLOITED BY TERRORIST GROUPS AND DEVELOPMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE REHABILITATION, REINTEGRATION AND LEGAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

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INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is not only a collection of individual violent crimes, but also a special method of coercion: violence or the threat of its use is directed against immediate victims to create fear among a wider audience and thereby achieve a political, ideological or religiously motivated goal. In training materials from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), this construct is described as a *"terrorist triangle"*[1]: an actor influences a victim to induce a third party - a population, a state or an international organization - to change its behavior[2]. This working understanding allows us to identify three interrelated elements: the serious violent act, the purpose of intimidation or coercion, and the impact beyond the immediate victim.

However, international law still lacks a single universal definition of terrorism. The existing treaty system is built primarily on a "sectoral" model: universal conventions criminalize specific acts - hijacking an aircraft, taking hostages, terrorist bombings, financing terrorism and other forms of behavior - but do not establish a comprehensive general definition. The closest guideline is contained in paragraph 3 of UN Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004): we are talking about criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily harm or to take hostages with the aim of causing a state of terror, intimidating the population or coercing a government or international organization to act or inaction[3]. However, this formula is not a universal treaty definition.

The reasons for the ongoing disagreement are both legal and political. States draw different lines between terrorism, armed struggle for self-determination, the actions of parties to an armed conflict, and state violence; approaches to the motive, range of subjects and scope of application of international humanitarian law also differ. The draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism remains the subject of negotiations: in 2025, the Sixth Committee of the General Assembly re-established a working

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[1] Defined in the Glossary.

[2] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Counter-Terrorism Module 1: Introduction to International Terrorism. Education for Justice University Module Series. Vienna: United Nations, 2018. Pp. 2–6.

[3] Resolution 1566 (2004) / adopted by the Security Council at its 5053rd meeting, on 8 October 2004 // United Nations Digital Library. 08.10.2004.
URL: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/532676?ln=en [Accessed: 07.09.2026]

group to finalize the draft but noted that unresolved issues remained and the need for an internationally agreed definition.

For the topic of this report, this uncertainty has practical implications: the same child may be counted in different systems as a person associated with an armed group, as a victim of human trafficking, as a member of a terrorist organization, or as a minor suspected of having committed a crime. The qualifications which are used by UN bodies and national organs influence statistics, access to protection and the risk that a predominantly punitive approach will be applied to the child.

Recruitment in this report refers to the act of incorporating individuals into an armed group or activities on its behalf - through coercion, kidnapping, deception, pressure, indoctrination, financial incentives, family and social ties, or formally expressed consent. In relation to children, the contrast between “voluntary” and forced recruitment is limited: age-related immaturity, dependence on adults, lack of safe alternatives and manipulation significantly narrow the child’s ability to make a free and informed choice. UNODC views child involvement in terrorist activities as a serious form of coercion and emphasizes that a child's association with a terrorist group should not be perceived as voluntary.

There is no comprehensive official UN global statistics on the number of people recruited by terrorist organizations. UN counterterrorism agencies receive mixed national data on arrests, investigations, return of foreign fighters and online activity, but these indicators do not equate with actual recruitment and cannot be easily added up. The most systematic array is being formed within the framework of the UN monitoring and reporting mechanism on six serious violations against children in armed conflicts. It covers recruitment and use of children by all listed armed forces and armed groups, not just those designated as terrorist organizations. According to the Secretary-General's 2025 report, the UN verified 38,558 serious violations against 24,174 children, including 6,607 cases of recruitment and use; other 5,129 children were abducted. In 2024, 7,402 cases of recruitment and use of

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[4] Measures to eliminate international terrorism (Agenda item 109) // United Nations. URL: https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/80/int_terrorism.shtml [Accessed: 07.09.2026]

[5] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Targeted by Terrorists: Child Recruitment, Exploitation and Reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria. Vienna: United Nations, 2024. Pp. 27-35.

[6] United Nations, Secretary-General. Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General. A/80/723–S/2026/357. New York: United Nations, 2026.

children were verified[7]. However, it is important to understand that these figures are only a confirmed minimum and not a full estimate.

There are also no separate universal statistics on children recruited by terrorist groups. This is due to several reasons. Firstly, the mandate of the UN mechanism is tied to armed conflicts and the categories of “armed forces/armed groups”, while terrorist recruitment is also possible outside the conflict zone. Secondly, lists of terrorist organizations and the composition of relevant crimes vary by state. Third, supporting roles (for instance, forced recruits often act as camp cooks and domestic laborers, etc.), domestic and sexual exploitation of girls, online involvement without formal membership, and cases where age is not documented remain hidden. Observer access to such cases of recruitment is limited by fighting, fear of reprisals and stigmatization of families. Finally, data held by security services are often incompatible with those of child protection agencies and are not published.

For terrorist groups, recruitment serves simultaneously personnel, military, political and symbolic functions. It replenishes ranks after losses, expands the network of control, provides intelligence, communications, supplies and financing, creates attackers and supports the long-term reproduction of the organization. New members are also used for propaganda, to intimidate the local population, to demonstrate the viability of the group and to attract the next generation. Recruitment can be mass or individual, centralized, which means government organised process of involvement in armed conflicts, or through relatives, friends, religious institutions, schools, prisons, displaced persons camps and local intermediary networks.

At one extreme are direct violence, abduction, threats to a child and their family, debt bondage and forced marriage. At the other is gradual inclusion through the promise of income, protection, status, education, adventure, belonging and a “just mission.” In between are deception, breach of trust, exploitation of trauma, retaliation and discrimination, peer pressure, and religious or political indoctrination. In Somalia, the UN recorded abductions, pressure on communities, the use of controlled religious institutions, public mobilizations, material incentives and the work of special recruiters; 563 children, or about 20% of reported cases, were recruited through peers or designated recruiters[8].

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[7] United Nations, Secretary-General. Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General. A/79/878–S/2025/247. New York: United Nations, 2025.

[8] United Nations, Secretary-General. Children and Armed Conflict in Somalia: Report of the Secretary-General. S/2025/735. New York: United Nations, 2025.

Currently, digital recruitment is gaining relevance, the victims of which are predominantly minors. At the same time, digital recruitment does not replace offline connections, but forms a single route with them. Terrorist actors distribute short videos, memes, gaming narratives, and emotionally personalized messages on public platforms before transferring the interested child to a private chat or encrypted channel. According to the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, such funnels can involve social networks and gaming communities, including Facebook*, Instagram*, TikTok*, Discord*, Steam*[9] and Roblox, and further communication is transferred, for example, to Telegram or Signal[10]. Algorithmic recommendations, anonymity, 24/7 access and the ability to quickly build trust allow the recruiter to tailor the message to the child's age, gender, personal grievances and need for recognition.

The vulnerability of children in the digital environment is not due to “naivety” as an individual shortcoming, but to a combination of age characteristics and platform architecture. A child may not recognize manipulation, strive for group approval, hide communication from adults, and move from viewing content to personal contact unnoticed by the family and protective services.

Children are attractive to terrorist groups due to their dependence on adults, increased suggestibility and relatively less ability to leave a controlled environment. They can attract less suspicion in public places, gain access to families and peers, and their participation creates a strong propaganda and intimidating effect. Groups also take advantage of the erosion of family ties, lack of schools and protection, and sometimes count on lenient criminal treatment of minors[11]. Long-term indoctrination of a child is seen as an investment in a loyal next generation. The activities of recruited children are not limited to direct participation in combat. UNODC and child protection agencies document children’s use as scouts, observers, couriers, guides, porters, security guards, bomb makers or carriers, fundraisers, propagandists and peer recruiters; children also do chores, cook food, and maintain camps. They can be used in attacks and as suicide bombers. Girls and boys are subject to sexual violence, forced marriage and domestic exploitation, and gender stereotypes often make hese forms of participation statistically invisible.

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[9] ***Considered as a terrorist organisation on the territory of the Russian Federation***

[10] United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate. Statement by UNCTED. New Delhi, 2025.

[11] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System. Vienna: United Nations, 2017. Pp. 10-16.

Regardless of the role performed, the child faces the risk of death, permanent disability, trauma, stigmatization and subsequent detention for alleged association with the group.

The greatest number of documented episodes of child recruitment by terrorist and paramilitary groups is concentrated not in a particular culture or religion, but in areas of protracted armed conflict and weakened state presence. These include Somalia and the Horn of Africa, the Lake Chad basin and the Sahel, parts of Nigeria, Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, as well as some areas of South and Southeast Asia. In these contexts, terrorist groups overlap with insurgent, communal, and criminal networks, so legal classifications of entities and statistics vary markedly.

The connection with the internal problems of the state is multifactorial. The risk increases where there are high levels of poverty and youth unemployment, widespread forced displacement, destruction of schools and health care, lack of documentation, discrimination, corruption, impunity, violence by various armed actors and distrust of law enforcement. If a state or community fails to provide security, education, income, and fair resolution of conflicts, a terrorist group is able to present itself as a source of protection, status, income, or order. UNODC describes this as a violation of the social contract: individual “push” and “pull” factors gain strength within a broader crisis of governance and protection.

At the same time, poverty itself does not breed terrorism, and socially advantaged children can also be involved through digital networks, ideological communities and personal crises. It is therefore more accurate to talk about a correlation between the concentration of recruitment and the combination of conflict, weak institutions, service shortages and exclusion, rather than a direct dependence on a country's income level. In states without active armed conflict, the scale of mass forced recruitment is usually lower, but the importance of remote individual recruitment, self-initiated rapprochement with online communities and transnational propaganda increases.

Thus, the protection of recruited children cannot be reduced to either counterpropaganda or criminal prosecution of individual recruiters. It requires a unified early warning system, safe disengagement, age verification, legal assistance, psychosocial and medical support, restoration of education and family ties, economic reintegration and counteracting stigma. The initial presumption should be the status of the child as a victim

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[12] Ibid.

[13] United Nations, Secretary-General. Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General. A/77/895–S/2023/363. New York: United Nations, 2023.

of recruitment and exploitation, which requires the development of universal international standards of juvenile justice and compliance with the principle of the best interests of the child.

CHAPTER 1. CHILD RECRUITMENT: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, CONTEXT

1.1. Children's specific vulnerabilities to terrorist groups and reasons for recruitment

The use of children in hostilities is not a new phenomenon. Back in 1996, Graça Machel presented to the General Assembly a groundbreaking report entitled *"Impact of Armed Conflict on Children"*[14], which revealed to the international community the extent and consequences of recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups. Meanwhile, compared to the recruitment of children by armed groups, the recruitment of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups is a more recent phenomenon, which has undergone notable developments in the past decade[15] and is creating new challenges for policymakers[16]. In recent years, the problem gained greater visibility as reports indicate that thousands of persons below the age of eighteen have been recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups[17].

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[14] Note by the Secretary-General transmitting the report on the impact of armed conflict on children (A/51/306 and Add.1).

[15] UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2017), pp. 10-13.

[16] UNODC, Prevention of Child Recruitment and Exploitation by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2019), p. 2.

[17] UNODC, Targeted by Terrorists: Child Recruitment, Exploitation and Reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria (Vienna, 2024), p. 23, 44

The reasons for engaging children in terrorist activities are multifaceted, and may vary from one case to another. However, one thing critically influences all of the motives: children's specific vulnerability. Besides being often jeopardized by tough social and economic conditions, weak governance and the rule of law in the countries affected by the activity of terrorist groups, this vulnerability is also determined by social and cultural factors – such as children's position in a certain society and the family, perception of their role and respective expectations, a lack of independence, and biological factors – such as incomplete mental and physical development, lesser physical strength compared to that of adults. There are some personal risk factors, such as violent and abusive parents, cultural marginalization, socialization issues, autism spectrum disorder, etc[18]. Finally, living in a conflict zone also plays a role.

At first glance one might think that children are less effective in facilitating the work of terrorist groups compared to adults. In reality, these groups know how and why recruiting children is beneficial to them. It means that children are not simply recruited alongside adults, but are specifically targeted[19].

Generalizing, the following reasons may be outlined[20]:

- **Visibility and propaganda.** Children are perceived by terrorist and violent extremist groups as a powerful tool of influencing the public. The analysis of a six-month data set of ISIL propaganda revealed a total of 254 events that included images of children, with 38% of the images showing children engaged in acts of violence or being exposed and normalized to violence. These photographs are aimed both at shocking people and at showing the brutality of the group[21].
- **Demography**. In some poor countries the percentage of children in the overall population is considerably high, which makes them the most available group for recruitment and abduction. For instance, in each of the countries affected by the Boko Haram crisis, children constitute over 50%, and in certain cases 60%, of the total population[22].

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[18] UNODC, Prevention of Child Recruitment and Exploitation by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2019), pp. 23-24.

[19] Ibid., pp. 19-20.

[20] UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2017), p. 10-11.

[21] Ibid., p. 10, citing Quilliam Foundation, The Children of the Islamic State (2016), p. 18.

[22] Ibid., p.10, citing United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision—Key Findings and Advance Tables, (ESA/P/WP/248).

- **Community expectations.** Depending on a situation within a particular State, in some cases families and communities may push children to join a particular extremist group if it is seen as a defence against the threat of violence from a different group or from the State. At the same time, if a terrorist group is unpopular among the population, or it does not have a wide geographical support, it may resort to recruiting children, as they are easier to engage than adults.
- **Economic considerations and effectiveness.** Regardless of their role in the group, children are usually paid less, if at all, and require less food to survive. In addition, the evolution of warfare and arms has brought about serious changes: with the current prevalence of small arms, their ease of use, and a poorly regulated trade, children can efficiently participate in military activities. Accordingly, children remain less expensive than adult combatants, but do not lag behind in terms of usefulness.
- **Control.** Compared to adults, children are considerably easier to intimidate and control – both physically and psychologically. They also tend to develop loyalty to authority figures more rapidly and are particularly receptive to adopting the beliefs and behaviours of those they love and respect, which becomes especially significant when family members are involved in the recruitment process. Finally, terrorists exploit children's immaturity and work specifically on indoctrination and radicalization of young persons.
- **Tactical advantages.** Children, particularly girls, are actively used as spies, couriers, equipment carriers, soldiers and even suicide bombers due to a limited understanding of the risk and, therefore, lower levels of anxiety. Moreover, children tend to be compliant with orders, and they arouse little suspicion.
- **Investment in the future.** As terrorist organizations seek to continue their activities, there is a need to ensure their continuity and longevity. Systematic and institutionalized recruitment of children organized in some groups suggests it is one of their priorities for survival: Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)*[23], for example, appears to combine intense physical and military training of children with deep psychological indoctrination[24].

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[23] ***Considered as a terrorist organisation on the territory of the Russian Federation.**

[24] UNODC, Prevention of Child Recruitment and Exploitation by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2019), p. 20.

Recruitment of children often combines both elements of coercion and voluntariness. With that, UNODC documents related to countering terrorism repeatedly stipulate that no child recruitment should be seen as truly voluntary due to the forms of coercion and influence used by terrorists and their authority[25]. The International Criminal Court has recognized that the distinction between voluntary and forced recruitment is not only legally irrelevant but also practically superficial in the context of children in armed conflict[26].

1.2. Consequences of recruitment

Once recruited, children may perform a variety of active and supportive roles. Regardless of their occupation, children in this situation are subjected to multiple forms of violence, including sexual exploitation and enslavement, and psychological pressure. They are also exploited to commit criminal offences as well as terrorist acts, war crimes or crimes against humanity[27].

Child exploitation causes a wide range of problems from many perspectives:

- **Personal level.** Since children are still developing, violence and trauma can have a profound impact on their future. Destructive experience can affect their physical, sexual and mental health, as well as their behaviour and ability to learn, or even lead to death. In many cases, children who have been involved subsequently find themselves victims of trafficking in persons and forced labour, as well as of other offences under criminal law[28]. Guaranteed justice is yet another weak point: despite UNODC insisting on considering and treating recruited children primarily as *victims* of crime, due to their association with terrorism-related activities, counter-terrorism legal framework is applied, which can expose children to further violations of their rights.
- **Family and community level.** Following demobilization or release from extremist groups, children may face stigma and rejection by their families and communities. Another problem is so-called *secondary victimization*, which occurs when victims suffer further harm due to the manner in which institutions and other individuals deal with them.

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[25] Ibid., pp. 22-23.

[26] UNODC, Justice for Children in the Context of Counter-Terrorism: A Training Manual (Vienna, 2019), p. 14, citing International Criminal Court case of The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, judgment of 14 March 2012, para. 612.

[27] Ibid., p. 2.

[28] UNODC, Prevention of Child Recruitment and Exploitation by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2019), p. 13.

- **State level.** The key dilemma is the relationship between national security and the rights of the child as children become dangerous instruments in the hands of radical groups. Member States have a primary duty to preserve public safety and effectively counter terrorist and violent extremist activities alongside another utmost duty – to protect children from violence and to respect and fulfil their specific rights[29]. States are challenged by the necessity to embrace both aims, to collect reliable data and evidence to further elaborate effective complex policies, and finally, to ensure their successful implementation. Moreover, risks of secondary victimization become particularly higher when children are in contact with public authorities and when large numbers of children are arrested or detained[30]; that is, a State is likely to further contribute to stigma, therefore worsening the situation.
- **Global level.** The recruitment of children is prohibited by international law, and the promotion of child safety is recognized in the Sustainable Development Agenda as a precondition of global development. The engagement of children in terrorism-related activities hinders achieving Sustainable Development Goals № 4 (Quality Education), № 5 (Gender Equality), № 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), № 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and № 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong institutions), particularly Target 16.2, aimed at ending violence against children[31]. As terrorism represents a transborder threat, combating child recruitment contributes to combating terrorism as such, which reflects one of the main objectives of the international community at present.

1.3. Broader context of child rights protection

The protection of children's rights in cases of exploitation by terrorist organizations falls within the broader framework of child rights protection. As mentioned earlier, there are certain factors that determine children's specific vulnerability – and that is the reason why children's rights are singled out in a separate *Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989*. On the one hand, children start their life as individuals already endowed with rights, and on the other – as dependent beings with few means to protect themselves when these rights are infringed. Moreover, governmental policies and global changes (globalization, climate change, etc.) tend to impact children more strongly than any other group in society[32].

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[29] Ibid., pp. 3, 13-16.

[30] Ibid., p. 2

[31] Ibid., pp. 44-45.

[32] UNICEF, Child rights and why they matter. URL: https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/child-rights-why-they-matter [Accessed: 10.09.2026].

At the same time, healthy development of children is essential for the future well-being of every society and of the world as a whole – that is why it is necessary to treat children as a distinctive part of the population, differing from adults, whose rights are often neglected and who need careful attention from the international community.

CHAPTER 2. LEGAL STATUS AND INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION OF CHILDREN INVOLVED IN TERRORISM AND TERRORISM-RELATED CRIMES

2.1. Legal status and categorization of recruited children

The international legal framework clearly establishes that **child recruitment is prohibited and that States are obliged to criminalize and prevent it.** Moreover, no recruitment can be seen as truly voluntary but rather as a combination of voluntarism and coercion owing to the forms of coercion and influence used. Nonetheless, during their association with these groups, children may have committed criminal offences as defined in national legislation; this raises the question of how the justice system should be adapted to consider their victim status. It should not be understood as seeking a way to completely absolve them of responsibility, but rather as a way to ensure their proper treatment and fair justice. This dual status is the central feature of the agenda: the need to ensure public safety does not negate the primary status of the child as a victim of exploitation and the right to individual, age-appropriate treatment[33].

The role of children within groups is assessed differently. Recruitment and use statistics may include fighters, couriers, scouts and security guards, but far less visible are children preparing food, doing housework, being subject to forced marriage or sexual exploitation, spreading propaganda and recruiting peers. It is even more difficult to qualify a child who was taken by

[33] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System. Vienna: United Nations, 2017. Pp. 43-50.

his or her parents to a conflict zone, was born in group-controlled territory,or only maintained contact online. Categories such as “group associated,” “recruited,” “exploited,” “organizational member,” and “suspect” are not interchangeable[34]. Mixing them up increases the numbers without improving understanding and at the same time creates the risk of automatic criminalization of children for family status.

That is why the shortage of statistics has not only technical, but also legal significance. The UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, established by resolution № 1612 (2005), collects verified data on six serious violations in situations of armed conflict, including the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups[35]. It is not a global base for terrorist recruitment: peaceful states, digital involvement and organizations whose qualifications differ under national law may remain outside its coverage. Verification is complicated by the lack of age documents, inaccessible territories, threats to families, stigma and the confidentiality of information from security services. Therefore, official numbers should be understood as a confirmed minimum and should always be accompanied by an indication of the period, territory, type of violation and subject, and consider finding a solution to this problem as one of the key tasks of the international community.

2.2. Fragmentation of international law regarding children's rights and the need for a universal approach

Currently, there is no universal international treaty that specifically regulates all forms of child recruitment by terrorist groups, both in and outside of armed conflict. Protection consists of several modes. *The Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989* enshrines general rights, and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict of 25 May 2000 prohibits groups other than State armed forces in any circumstances from recruiting or using in hostilities persons under eighteen years of age and requires States to take measures, including criminalization[36]. However, its terminology is focused on armed groups and hostilities, which does not fully cover online propaganda, non-conflict terrorist plotting and ancillary exploitation.

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[34] The terms are defined in the Glossary.

[35] United Nations Security Council. Resolution 1612 (2005). S/RES/1612 (2005). New York: United Nations, 2005.

[36] Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, 2000, Article 4 // ICRC International Humanitarian Law Databases. URL: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/crc-opac-2000/article-4 [Accessed: 05.09.2026]

International humanitarian law prohibits the recruitment and participation of children in hostilities, but the basic treaty and customary bar for criminal conduct has historically been tied to the age of fifteen. *The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court of July 17, 1998* classifies the conscription, enlistment of children under fifteen years of age and their use for active participation in hostilities as a war crime[37]. In contrast, *ILO Convention No. 182 (1999)* classifies the forced or compulsory recruitment of any person under eighteen years of age for use in armed conflict as the worst form of child labor[38]. *The Protocol to Prevent and Suppress Trafficking in Persons of 15 November 2000* is applicable when the recruitment, transfer or harboring of a child is for the purpose of exploitation; for child trafficking, it is not necessary to prove a threat, deception or other method of influence[39]. Each regime addresses part of the problem, but their age thresholds, connections to conflict, and concepts of exploitation do not coincide.

Counterterrorism law adds another layer. *Security Council Resolution №2396 (2017)* requires comprehensive and tailored strategies for the prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters and their accompanying family members; children should be considered taking into account age, gender, dignity and special needs for social support[40]. *Resolution № 2427 (2018)* enshrines the approach that children associated with armed groups must be treated as victims first and foremost, and emphasizes education, health and psychosocial care and sustainable reintegration[41]. But the resolutions do not resolve the discrepancies between national definitions of a terrorist organization, and the legal status of Council decisions, treaties and advisory standards varies.

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[37] Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. A/CONF.183/9. Rome: United Nations, 1998.

[38] C182 — Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) // NORMLEX — International Labour Standards. URL: https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312327 [Accessed: 08.09.2026]

[39] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto. New York: United Nations, 2004. Pp. 41–53.

[40] C182 — Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) // NORMLEX — International Labour Standards. URL: https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312327 [Accessed: 08.09.2026]

[41] United Nations Security Council. Resolution 2427 (2018). S/RES/2427 (2018). New York: United Nations, 2018.

The transnational nature of the threat reinforces the need for a universal framework. The recruiter, the digital platform, the child, the training site and the state of nationality may be located in different jurisdictions; evidence is stored abroad, and repatriation affects citizenship, family unity and the prevention of statelessness. A minimum universal model should cover children under eighteen years of age, all intra-group functions, online and offline recruitment, human trafficking, cross-border sharing of evidence, and mandatory juvenile justice guarantees. ECOSOC Resolution 2024/12 was a significant step: it called for the prevention and criminalization of all forms of recruitment and exploitation of children by terrorist groups, the provision of special safeguards and reintegration, and tasked UNODC to organize intergovernmental expert work on principles and guidelines[42].

2.3. Key international documents on the protection of children from recruitment

First of all, the normative core of international law regarding the protection of children is formed by the above-mentioned *Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol,* international humanitarian law, *the Rome Statute, ILO Convention No. 182* and *the Trafficking in Persons Protocol. The 1993 Paris Principles* complement them with an operational definition of a child associated with an armed force or group that extends beyond participation in combat and requires unconditional release and long-term reintegration[43]. These acts must be applied jointly: neither the group's designation as a terrorist organization nor the commission of an unlawful act by a child terminates the validity of children's and humanitarian guarantees.

In the Security Council system, *resolution No. 1261 (1999)* formed the thematic agenda for the first time; *resolutions No. 1379 (2001) and No. 1539 (2004)* developed the list of violators and action plans; *Resolution No. 1612 (2005)* established a monitoring mechanism and a Working Group. *Resolutions No. 1882 (2009), No. 1998 (2011) and No. 2225 (2015)* expanded the grounds for including parties in the annexes of the report, and *resolution No. 2427 (2018)* strengthened the preventive and reintegration approach. The Secretary-General's annual report and country reports turn norms into a verifiable picture of violations but remain tools for monitoring and political influence rather than judicial decisions.

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[42] United Nations, Economic and Social Council. Treatment of children associated with terrorist groups, including children who are recruited and exploited by those groups: resolution adopted by the Economic and Social Council. E/RES/2024/12. New York: United Nations, 2024.

[43] UNICEF. The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups. New York: UNICEF, 2007. Pp. 9-12.

A new body of standards is formed by *ECOSOC resolution 2024/12* on the treatment of children associated with terrorist groups, and *General Assembly resolution 79/188* on the prevention of violence by organized criminal and terrorist groups. They demand the criminalization of recruitment, tailored measures for the online environment, recognition of victim status without automatic exclusion of individual responsibility, alternatives to imprisonment, rehabilitation and inter-agency cooperation. Their advisory nature does not replace treaty obligations, but they directly connect the previously disconnected areas of child protection, criminal justice and counterterrorism.

2.4. International institutions, opportunities and limitations regarding child protection

UNODC bridges the criminal justice and child-centred approaches. It prepares analytical materials, trains judges, prosecutors, police and social workers, helps states revise legislation, establish child referral mechanisms and programs for return, rehabilitation and reintegration. The limitation is inherent in the mandate itself: UNODC does not investigate specific crimes, does not overturn national decisions and provides assistance at the request of states and subject to the availability of extrabudgetary resources. This is directly reflected in ECOSOC resolutions 2024/12 and General Assembly 79/188.

The central operational role is played by UNICEF, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the country monitoring mechanism task forces. They verify information, prepare annual and country reports, engage in dialogue with parties to conflict, agree on action plans, secure the release of children and support reintegration. However, the mechanism is related to situations of armed conflict and lists of parties, and the Office of the Special Representative does not have its own field network. Access, security of sources, and consent of the parties determine which cases can be verified; as a result, the mechanism does not cover all terrorist recruitment and is not an enforcement agency.

The International Criminal Court can prosecute individuals for the recruitment and use of children under fifteen years of age as a war crime. The Lubanga case showed the reality of such responsibility and the possibility of subsequent reparations[44]. However, the limits of the ICC are

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[44] International Criminal Court. The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo: Decision on Sentence pursuant to Article 76 of the Statute. ICC-01/04-01/06-2901. The Hague: International Criminal Court, 2012.

also significant: the Court does not prosecute organizations or persons under eighteen years of age, acts only when it has subject-matter, territorial or personal jurisdiction, and is complementary to national courts. It does not have its own police force and depends on the cooperation of states. Moreover, the Rome Statute threshold does not cover all recruitment of persons between fifteen and seventeen years of age prohibited by the Optional Protocol.

The ILO monitors the implementation of Convention No. 182, promotes labor and social policy reform and supports the elimination of forced recruitment as the worst form of child labor. Its oversight bodies evaluate state laws and practices but do not conduct criminal investigations against terrorist group commanders. The International Committee of the Red Cross conducts a neutral, confidential dialogue with state and non-state armed actors, reminds parties of the requirements of international humanitarian law, visits places of detention, restores family ties and supports the return of children to communities[45]. Confidentiality helps gain access but limits public attribution of liability; the ICRC's work depends on the security and the parties' practical consent.

The Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee and its Executive Directorate assess national systems, identify trends and help coordinate technical assistance; the UN Office of Counterterrorism is developing prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Their strength is the connection with security agencies and cross-border cooperation, and the risk is the dominance of the logic of threat over the logic of children's rights. Therefore, the key UN principles require an individual assessment rather than presuming that a child belongs to a group solely on the basis of kinship or location, and they prioritize protection and return.

2.5. Pursuing justice: operational principles and judicial system

Victimization, children's developmental characteristics and specific vulnerabilities are recognized as factors justifying *the limitation of their prosecution*, but not its absence. In this regard, one key example is the principle of *non-punishment for child victims of trafficking in persons* for offences directly connected or related to the trafficking situation that they have experienced. It is accepted as international good practice, and is reflected in some regional legal instruments[46]. Nevertheless, this principle

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[45] Protected persons: Children // ICRC. 28.07.2014. URL: https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/protected-persons-children [Accessed: 09.09.2026]

[46] UNODC, Justice for Children in the Context of Counter-Terrorism: A Training Manual (Vienna, 2019), pp. 29-30.

might be disregarded in national judicial practice since there is no binding rule on the non-application of punishment for acts that are a direct consequence of such exploitation.

Above mentioned the *Paris Principles* stem from the experience of dealing with children associated with armed groups[47]. By analogy, they can be applied to the children engaged in terrorism or violent extremism groups:

- prosecution of such children as a measure of last resort;
- no prosecution or punishment solely for their association with armed groups;
- treatment of children primarily as victims, with rehabilitation in mind;
- seeking alternatives to judicial proceedings before resorting to justice measures.

With regard to the last point, the approach promoted by the UNODC manuals suggests the following: before prosecution, there should be a qualified overall assessment of circumstances (*the means by which the child was recruited; the role the child played; the child's level of physical, psychological and social development; the impact of trauma or violence; the risks the child represents and faces; and whether diversion is appropriate*), respect for the minimum age of criminal responsibility, and efforts to seek diversion or alternative judicial proceedings[48]. If nothing prevents a child from facing trial, the legal proceeding should be conducted only with full respect for international standards on justice for children.

Efforts should be aimed at creating a *specialized justice system* for children or improving the already existing one by identifying gaps. The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires States "to promote the establishment of laws, procedures, authorities and institutions specifically applicable to children alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the penal law". A specialized justice system performs a dual role of protecting, respecting, and fulfilling children's rights and preserving public safety. It is considered to be the appropriate forum to deal with child alleged offenders, and not the counter-terrorism or military systems[49].

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[47] Ibid., p. 30

[48] UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2017), pp. 76-77, 88-90, 95.

[49] UNODC, Roadmap on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups (Vienna, 2019), p. 5; see also UNODC, Justice for Children in the Context of Counter-Terrorism: A Training Manual (Vienna, 2019), pp. 48-68.

The justice system must ensure that any action taken against a child alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having committed terrorism-related offences aims *to promote his or her rehabilitation and social reintegration*[50]. To effectively achieve this, the justice system should work in close coordination and cooperation with other systems (i.e. child protection, education and health), following a multidimensional approach. In addition, particular importance should be attached to ensuring that the child can receive ***reparations***, wherever possible, as a means of aiding redress, reintegration and recovery[51].

In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, throughout any justice proceedings concerning a child alleged offender, the following key principles must always apply: **1)** the right to non-discrimination; **2)** the best interests of the child; **3)** the right to life, survival and development; **4)** and the right to participate and to be heard. Other minimum standards of operation include: the application of internationally recognized minimum guarantees to a fair trial, due legal process guarantees and a child-sensitive manner; the involvement of specially trained juvenile justice professionals; the prohibition of the use of torture; respect for privacy and confidentiality of children; appropriate treatment while arrested, detained or imprisoned[52].

2.6. Particular issues and obstacles

A specific issue is justice for foreign national children. Considering their vulnerable status as foreign nationals, dealing with them should involve providing special protection and assistance to any child "temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment…", free assistance of an interpreter at all stages of the justice process, the right to consular assistance, detention as a measure of last resort and not because family members are unwilling or unable to care for them (alternatives include placing a child with suitable family members, in non-punitive and voluntary shelters, or independent living arrangements), equal access to services in detention[53].

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[50] UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2017), p. 80.

[51] Ibid., p. 58-67.

[52] UNODC, Roadmap on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups (Vienna, 2019), p. 5.

[53] UNODC, Justice for Children in the Context of Counter-Terrorism: A Training Manual (Vienna, 2019), p. 59.

Justice for children is frequently endangered for several reasons. In many national legal systems, terrorist recruitment is defined in general terms and prohibits the recruitment of a “person” regardless of age. Enhanced child protection is distributed among the criminal code, anti-terrorism law, legislation on child protection, human trafficking, labor, military service and juvenile justice. This model can ensure the accountability of the recruiter, but does not always guarantee that the police, prosecutors and courts will recognize the recruited minor as a victim and immediately refer him or her to the civilian protection system. As it is often complemented by legal gaps such as the absence of a separate qualifying feature and the lack of mandatory inter-agency referral, a formal ban on recruitment turns into an incomplete guarantee. Therefore, national implementation should combine a general prohibition of recruitment with child guarantees: definition of a child under eighteen years of age, extraterritorial jurisdiction within permissible limits, early legal assistance, presumption of referral to rehabilitation, responsibility of adult organizers.

The lack of a universal definition of *terrorism*, criminalization of mere association, lowering of the minimum age of responsibility exclusively for terrorism-related cases, and mandatory minimum sentences create legal uncertainty and overcriminalization. National governments often fail to consistently respect specific rights of children, and there is always a risk of them being treated as adults, for instance, when they are adjudicated in adult or military courts or presumed as adults in age disputes.

Ineffective rule of law and judicial system factors manifest in the absence of specialized justice for children, lack of access to a lawyer at early stages, lack of diversion and alternatives, lack of specialized procedures for children, lack of child-sensitive conditions in courts, lengthy pretrial detention, delays in proceedings among others. Last but not least, inadequate conditions of detention and treatment in custody, detention because of family ties, failure to separate children from adults, girls from boys, solitary confinement, lack of specialized psychological care, and use of torture and cruel treatment to extract confessions represent other examples of serious violations of children's rights that persist.

2.7. Non-judicial processes

Reconciliation in non-judicial processes is another dimension of both justice and rehabilitation[54]. It may be of use both in cases where children were

[54] UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2017), pp. 116-118.

recruited and where they are alleged to have committed terrorism-related crimes, often giving them more opportunities to be heard, leading to reconciliation within a community – which is one of the underlying factors for a successful rehabilitation.

- For the United Nations, *transitional justice* is the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation. Here, truth and reconciliation commissions can serve as an example.
- *Traditional justice mechanisms* often serve as an alternative to formal judicial procedures in many fragile States, and it is them who resolve a large proportion of disputes.

Despite positive prospects, due to the limited mandate of these two non-judicial institutions and a still common lack of their adaptation specifically to child needs and rights, they may prove ineffective.

CHAPTER 3. COMPLEXITIES OF DISENGAGEMENT FROM TERRORIST GROUPS. SOCIAL REINTEGRATION, REHABILITATION AND PREVENTION

3.1. Disengagement, reintegration and rehabilitation

In many cases it is extremely difficult or nearly impossible to leave a terrorist group. Recruiters often spread information that children's communities and families no longer want them and execute those who try to disengage as a warning to the others. In spite of it, harsh living conditions, violence, disillusionment in the ideology, a belief that they have done something wrong and many other reasons make children want to leave. Scenarios of children exiting terrorist groups may range from them leaving the group

independently to being abandoned by it or rescued by the authorities[55].

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, States shall take all appropriate measures to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of child victims of any form of neglect, exploitation, abuse, or recruitment. ***Social reintegration*** is understood as recovering the capabilities of such a child to assume a constructive role in society[56].

Rehabilitating and reintegrating these children presents serious challenges, as it requires a multidimensional approach and faces various difficulties of different nature. This process includes **three key components:** 1) health and psychosocial recovery and support; 2) educational and vocational opportunities; 3) return to family and community life. Failure to address all these dimensions, or prioritizing some over others, is likely to affect the outcome of the whole recovery process[57].

What is dealt with in the process of reintegration and rehabilitation can be divided into two large groups: *health-related* and *social-related* issues[58]. The first group comprises problems such as sustained physical injuries, acute or chronic diseases; high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and other psychological illnesses; risk of developing substance dependence or being already dependent on it; sexually transmitted infections that can endanger sexual and reproductive health. The second group is often characterised by stigmatization and rejection from children's families and communities, sometimes combined with terrorists forcing children to commit violence against their families or communities to prevent defection; perception of children as potential threats regardless of the degree of their association with terrorist groups; secondary victimization; children's vulnerability to punitive approaches when dealing with the legal system and authorities. Girls need a special attentive approach, as their experience of association with terrorist groups may have been significantly different compared to that of boys. The particular risks include sexual violence and slavery and physical injuries related to them, forced marriages, higher chances of developing post-traumatic stress disorder, higher exposure to sexually transmittable infections, severe community ostracism after pregnancy and giving birth to "dangerous" children, and perception of girls as having "lost their social value" after having relations with men.

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[55] UNODC, Targeted by Terrorists: Child Recruitment, Exploitation and Reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria (Vienna, 2024), pp. 26-27.

[56] The definition follows that of the Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2017), p. 106.

[57] UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2017), p. 106.

[58] Ibid., p. 107.

Strategies and specific measures for effective rehabilitation and reintegration programmes should be elaborated based on collected evidence, which ensures flexibility and suitability for the individual case. Once all the facts and circumstances are considered, they should be organised into a comprehensive strategy with the identification of key stakeholders and the mapping of resources. The next stage involves developing a programme, which implies identifying target groups, designing interventions and developing coordination mechanisms. Once implementation begins, monitoring and evaluation should be introduced.

The planning process includes several key elements[59]:

- Individual assessments of the child as a basis of individual reintegration plans, with a strong focus on child participation in the process;
- Public intervention to support demobilization and release from the group (where relevant);
- Interim care and immediate assistance in the post-release phase;
- Access to appropriate services, including mental health and psychosocial support, with a focus on trauma-informed care as a key component of reintegration efforts;
- A combination of interventions aimed at supporting positive life skills of the child victims while also addressing the attitudes and concerns of communities to prevent re-victimization;
- Investment in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts;
- Promotion of the safe return to families and communities (where appropriate, and on the basis of individualized assessments);
- Relying on the involvement of the family and the community, with a particular focus on constructive ways to cope with change and the identification of new roles for family members;
- Ensuring provision of services in three key domains of reintegration and rehabilitation (health, education, social life);
- Elaboration of interventions to address disengagement from violence (if and where appropriate);
- Specific support to be provided to children without parental care, including unaccompanied and separated children;
- Appropriate support to practitioners, including a focus on safety and security issues which may arise when dealing with these children.

3.2. Specific contexts and challenges in implementation

Release and demobilization processes, cross-border issues and involvement with the justice system are specific contexts that may significantly

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[59] UNODC, Roadmap on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups (Vienna, 2019), p. 4.

impact the preparation of a plan[60]. Respectively, they suggest measures related to ensuring that a child can be successfully released and accepted by bodies responsible for running disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes; to seeking possible ways of repatriation, family tracing, and reunification; to dealing with additional stigma, secondary victimization, and possible violence suffered during judicial proceedings. Another case is the rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for *children affected by the FTFs phenomenon*. ***Foreign terrorist fighters (FTF)*** are largely considered to be individuals who have travelled from their home States to other States to participate in or support terrorist acts, including in the context of armed conflict. Here, States should avoid policies rendering children stateless, preventing them from returning to the homeland; it is also recommended to enhance international cooperation and involve the media in reintegration efforts, where appropriate[61].

The list of potential risks to the realization of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes is extensive[62]. The lack of resources, especially in fragile States, may result in the elaboration of a unified reintegration programme for all; such a plan is unable to satisfy the specific needs of a child in a particular case. There are also specific issues arising from operating in conflict and terrorism-affected zones – difficult and delayed identification of children in case of detention, which violates the principle of separating children from adults; instability on the ground and lack of peace agreements; displacement; political sensitivity of the matter and governmental opposition to release children associated with terrorist groups. The concerns about indoctrination and a natural desire to counter it led to a relatively new phenomenon of *"deradicalization" programmes*, which, nonetheless, lack a definitional basis, clear criteria for the selection of target groups, and voluntary participation, and which carry a potential for discrimination. Among other risks are a lack of accurate data resulting in ineffective approaches; a possible retaliation from terrorists, rejection by families and communities or even the retribution of their own families who militate in the group; arrest, deterrence, or abuse by the authorities; gendered and stereotypical representations of children's association with terrorist groups, as studies reveal that girls are less likely to be subjected to arrest or harsh treatment compared to boys; unfavourable social and economic conditions

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[60] UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2017), pp. 109-110.

[61] UNODC, Roadmap on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups (Vienna, 2019), p. 4.

[62] UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2017), pp. 97-98, 106-109; UNODC, Targeted by Terrorists: Child Recruitment, Exploitation and Reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria (Vienna, 2024), p. 27.

in the country, poverty. Sometimes reintegration measures are disregarded, marginalized or delayed; this is conducive to future violence and crime, and heightens the risks of re-recruitment.

3.3. Prevention of recruitment

When referring to rehabilitation and reintegration, it is crucial to pay due attention to the prevention of further recruitment. First, it can be said that the elaboration of programmes related to all three interrelated spheres should be integrated into broader development and rule of law reform efforts. Second, in case of prevention policies, they should target **two axes**: public safety and the enhancement of a protective environment for children[63].

Measures include interventions aimed at *holding child recruiters accountable for their deeds* through criminalization of recruitment, enforcement of national legal and policy frameworks (e.g., counterterrorism and anti-trafficking laws), international cooperation in identifying transnational recruiters of children, building up the capacity of the justice system to deal with terrorism-related cases, and adopting child-sensitive approaches in dealing with victims of recruitment. In addition, there are practices aimed at building a better environment for children, such as the promotion of access to health and protective services, building an inclusive education system with a focus on promoting positive life skills, critical thinking, and the empowerment of children to learn and act as agents of change; the adoption of community-based approaches and the involvement of local actors, awareness raising campaigns, and the provision of services to support the protective role of families. Strong political will, the proactive role of the justice system, and the participation of children in the development of prevention strategies contribute to achieving the result. In this process, justice system actors (police, prosecution, courts, lawyers, victim services, prisons, detention facilities, correctional services, and statistical agencies) and child protection laws and agencies are believed to have a critical role[64].

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[63] UNODC, Roadmap on the Treatment of Children Associated with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups (Vienna, 2019), p. 3.

[64] UNODC, Prevention of Child Recruitment and Exploitation by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2019), pp. 45-48.

CHAPTER 4. COUNTRY CASES OF RECRUITMENT AND EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

4.1. Somalia and Al-Shabaab*[65]

Somalia provides the most fully documented contemporary case of mass recruitment of children by a terrorist organization. The Secretary-General's report verified 2,821 cases of recruitment and use of children between October 2021 and September 2024, including 2,624 boys and 197 girls; some were eight years old. Al-Shabaab accounted for 2,317 cases, or 82%[66]. The dynamics responded to military pressure: after offensives by government and communal forces, the group increased recruitment, seeking to make up for losses and maintain control over territories. The UN has documented abductions from homes and schools, pressure on communities, involvement through relatives and local leaders, indoctrination and material incentives. Al-Shabaab directed communities to send boys to supervised religious institutions, where education was combined with indoctrination and military training. Public meetings, special recruiters, and peers were also used. In the total population, 563 children, about 20%, were recruited through persuasion by peers or designated recruiters. Such a model relies on shortages of schools, security and income, population displacement, and the group's ability to substitute for government services and dispute resolution.

The government's response demonstrates both progress and the risk of revictimization. Somalia adopted action plans in 2012, a standard procedure in 2014 for the transfer of children separated from armed groups to civilian protection services, and age verification guidelines in 2023. In 2025, progress allowed the Somali National Army and Police to be delisted from the annex for recruiting and using children. However, during the same reporting period, 797 children aged 11–17 were detained for alleged association with armed groups. The execution of four young men in Puntland in 2024 for acts committed during their underage association with Al-Shabaab highlighted

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[65] ***Considered as a terrorist organisation on the territory of the Russian Federation.**

[66] United Nations, Secretary-General. Children and Armed Conflict in Somalia: Report of the Secretary-General. S/2025/735. New York: United Nations, 2025.

the gap between transfer protocol and security practices[67].

4.2. Syria and Iraq and the practice of ISIS*[68]

ISIS has turned child recruitment into an element of quasi-state building. Children underwent systematic ideological and military training, were used in combat, at checkpoints, in reconnaissance, in executions and suicide attacks, and their images became propaganda for continuity. In Syria, between November 2013 and June 2018, the UN verified 3,377 cases of recruitment and use of children by all parties; a quarter of the children were under fifteen years of age, the youngest was four years old, over 80% were used in combat roles. The array covers over 90 non-state factions and cannot be entirely attributed to ISIS[69]. Separately, the UN reported the alleged recruitment of up to 400 children by ISIS from January to March 2015 alone, and the use of some as executioners[70].

In Iraq, from July 2015 to July 2019, 296 cases of recruitment and use of children were verified, more than half of them attributed to ISIS[71]. The group created youth units and training centers, kidnapped children, destroyed previous ties, and used extreme cruelty as a means of subjugation. Girls, especially from the Yazidi community, were subjected to sexual slavery and forced marriages; boys were exploited in combat, security and logistics. These roles show why the narrow concept of “child soldiers” systematically underestimates exploitation.

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[67] Somalia: UN Officials Alarmed at Execution of Four Young People for Crimes Committed as Minor, Call for Release, Reintegration of Children in Detention // Children and Armed Conflict. 03.09.2024. URL: https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/en/somalia-un-officials-alarmed-at-execution-of-four-young-people-for-crimes-committed-as-minor-call-for-release-reintegration-of-children-in-detention [Accessed: 09.09.2026]

[68] ***Considered as a terrorist organisation on the territory of the Russian Federation.**

[69] Syria: Blatant Disregard for Life and Fundamental Rights of Children // Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. 26.11.2018. URL: https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/en/syria-blatant-disregard-for-life-and-fundamental-rights-of-children [Accessed: 09.09.2026]

[70] Syria: Blatant Disregard for Life and Fundamental Rights of Children // Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. 26.11.2018. URL: https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/en/syria-blatant-disregard-for-life-and-fundamental-rights-of-children [Accessed: 09.09.2026]

[71] Children of Iraq Dramatically Impacted by ISIL’s Extreme Violence and Counter-Military Operations // Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. 29.01.2020. URL: https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/en/children-of-iraq-dramatically-impacted-by-isils-extreme-violence-and-counter-military-operations [Accessed: 09.09.2026]

With the territorial defeat of ISIS, the problem has moved from the battle zone to detention facilities, camps and return procedures. In June 2019, at least 778 children were detained in Iraq on national security-related charges. In northeastern Syria, thousands of children ended up in camps with their families, and the mere presence or relationship does not prove membership or criminal participation. States must establish citizenship, repatriate children, separate protective from criminal assessments, collect evidence against adults, and provide long-term care. Failure to return increases the risk of statelessness, traumatization and re-engagement; automatic prosecution destroys the principle of individual responsibility.

4.3. Indonesia and the family-network model

The Indonesian case is distinguished by the absence of a nationwide armed conflict and the leading role of family and social networks. UNODC research has identified a pattern of “inherited jihadism”: a child internalizes ideas from an early age through conversations at home, sermons, audiovisual materials, education and social circles, and formal affiliation becomes an extension of family socialization. Links with Jemaah Islamiyah, Jemaah Ansharut Tawhid and the ISIS-affiliated Jamaah Ansharut Daulah are important. The bombings in Surabaya in May 2018, carried out by family groups and directly involving children, showed that a parent can simultaneously be a guardian, a recruiter and an organizer of exploitation.

The transnational dimension is associated with the departure of citizens to join ISIS and other groups in Syria and Iraq. According to data from the Indonesian National Counter-Terrorism Agency cited by UNODC, as of July 2020, there were 546 Indonesian children in Syria and Iraq, with another three each in Afghanistan and the Philippines; by 2020, 180 children associated with the foreign fighter phenomenon had been repatriated[72]. These numbers describe location or connection, not proven recruitment. For practice, this means the need for family assessment: the child cannot be considered guilty because of the parents’ decision, but returning to an unchanged ideological environment can create a risk of re-involvement.

4.4. Taliban movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan

In Afghanistan, the Taliban combined recruitment through local leaders and families with the use of children in combat and support roles. For 2021–2022,

[72] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Targeted by Terrorists: Child Recruitment, Exploitation and Reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria. Vienna: United Nations, 2024. Pp. 45-53.

the UN verified the recruitment and use of 257 children, of whom 217, or 84%, were attributed to the Taliban. Among the methods, persuasion by local leaders, relatives or parents predominated, and coercion and the use of children to make and carry improvised explosive devices, as well as in suicide units, were also recorded. In 2022, through the mediation of the country team, 494 previously recruited boys were released and sent to reintegration programs[73].

Since the Taliban came to power, the number of verifiable cases has decreased, but this cannot automatically be considered the disappearance of the practice: the report highlights the sensitivity of the topic and underreporting. During 2024, the UN verified the use of eleven boys by the Taliban—four in combat and seven in support roles—and called on de facto authorities to recognize as a child any person under eighteen years of age, adopt age determination rules, and establish protection units at recruitment centers[74]. Decrees based on signs of puberty do not provide a clear age standard and are especially dangerous if birth registration is poor.

The Pakistani aspect should be separated from the Afghan one. Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan*[75] is a distinct organization included by the Security Council on the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida*[76] Sanctions List as an entity associated with Al-Qaida[77]. The UN reported cross-border recruitment between Afghanistan and Pakistan and children receiving military training in madrassas in border areas. The use of children in improvised explosive devices and suicide attacks has been documented. However, Pakistan does not constitute a separate country under the monitoring and reporting mechanism comparable to Afghanistan, so there is no separate complete series for Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan. This gap illustrates how mandate boundaries, cross-border nature and separate sanctions regimes make it difficult to assess scale.

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[73] United Nations, Secretary-General. Children and Armed Conflict in Afghanistan: Report of the Secretary-General. S/2023/893. New York: United Nations, 2023.

[74] United Nations, Secretary-General. Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General. A/79/878–S/2025/247. New York: United Nations, 2025.

[75] ***Considered as a terrorist organisation on the territory of the Russian Federation.**

[76] ***Considered as a terrorist organisation on the territory of the Russian Federation.**

[77] TEHRIK-E TALIBAN PAKISTAN (TTP) // United Nations Security Council. 29.07.2011. URL: https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-%28ttp%29 [Accessed: 09.09.2026]

4.5. Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

Sri Lanka is an important historical example of systematic recruitment in a protracted internal conflict and subsequent transition to rehabilitation. According to UNICEF, by September 2008, the database recorded 6,287 children recruited by the LTTE since 2002 and 539 children associated with the splinter Karuna Group[78]. The database was compiled mainly from reports submitted by families in the northern and eastern regions; fear and intimidation prevented reporting, and the period of mass recruitment before 2002 was not included. Consequently, even a large figure reflects only the documented part. The LTTE recruited boys and girls, including through repeated recruitment, and used them in combat, reconnaissance, security and suicide units. In the later stages of the war, forced recruitment intensified and the ability to leave controlled territory decreased. Pressure on families, mobilization norms and disruption of education played a special role. Unlike Indonesia's network model, here recruitment was embedded in the territorial control of the armed organization, but in both cases the family could be both a protective resource and a channel of pressure.

After the end of hostilities, the state established three centers providing education, medical and psychosocial assistance, and reunification support. By 2011, 594 children aged 12–18 years, including 364 boys and 230 girls, had completed the program and returned to their families[79]. However, the UN noted that some former participants did not receive assistance, and girls especially often remained invisible. This example demonstrates that the release of children and the disbandment of an armed group do not end protection: long-term follow-up, education, support for family income, stigma reduction, tracing missing children, and investigation of adult recruiters are needed.

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[78] UN. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Sri Lanka 2009 Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP): Mid-Year Review. [ST/]OCHA/CAP/2009/14. Geneva: UN, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2009. 56 p. URL: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/660119 [Accessed: 06.09.2026]

[79] United Nations, Secretary-General. Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Sri Lanka. S/2011/793. New York: United Nations, 2011.

CHAPTER 5. KEY AREAS FOR THE COMMITTEE'S WORK

The preceding overview of the existing complexities in dealing with children associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups suggests paying special attention to several aspects that require further elaboration or development.

First, regarding **prevention as a priority**, including early detection of children prone to terrorism, addressing root causes, prioritizing preventive measures over punitive responses, and combating stigma arising from perceptions that certain population groups are more or less likely to be associated with terrorism[80]. Second, institutionalizing **specialized justice**, working on the development of specialized legislation, the creation of courts and procedures for children, the adaptation of laws to international standards and the unification of fragmented legislation; strengthening of children's rights institutions and ensuring coordination between them and other bodies. Third, ensuring **children's rights protection in challenging environments** such as conflict zones and specific regimes (e.g., military rule) and addressing gaps in protection; working on disengagement and release strategies. Fourth, **raising awareness**, promoting the perception of children primarily as victims and combating stigma related to their former engagement in terrorist groups. Fifth, **addressing conceptual gaps** and developing a more unified approach to defining such terms as terrorism and recruitment. Sixth, **strengthening institutional capacities**, promoting key principles for the proper treatment of children, reinforcing legal guarantees and institutional transparency, addressing the lack of qualified staff, institutionalizing better cooperation between institutions; preventing secondary victimization and violence. Seventh, improving **monitoring, accountability and data collection**, promoting the establishment of effective monitoring and oversight of the justice system; enhancing capacities for research, proper data collection and analysis to inform policy. Eighth, **addressing problems specific to FTF children**, working on the creation of a clear legal framework and overcoming challenges related to the vulnerability of such children in a foreign State. Ninth, creating **fair justice for all**, encouraging the promotion of the principle that children should not be held responsible for the actions of their family or for the mere fact of their

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[80] UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (Vienna, 2017), pp. 25-26, citing Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism (A/HRC/31/65), para. 37.

association with terrorist groups; considering complex approaches if parents are involved in recruitment; strengthening the role of non-judicial mechanisms, including traditional and transitional justice. Tenth, facilitating the **enhancement of international cooperation**, focusing on the elaboration of multilateral and regional programmes addressing common interests and problems. Eleventh, **paying special attention to girls**, tackling their specific needs, including gender-sensitive programmes.

Fulfilling the identified gaps would contribute to developing a better response to recruitment challenges: from countering recruitment to a more successful accommodation of victims' needs from institutional, legal, and practical points of view.

CONCLUSION

Children represent one of the most vulnerable groups which has few resources to counter terrorism recruitment. At all levels, including their own families, there are factors that can put children at risk of being involved in terrorist activities. Once they become associated with terrorist groups, they perform a variety of roles, are subjected to multiple forms of violence, and endure experience detrimental to their mental and physical health. Even if a child wants to disengage, prospects for a successful release remain uncertain due to control from an extremist group, complexities related to the organisation of a release process, reluctance of a State, or fear of retribution from the child's own family or authorities. If the disengagement is successful, the situation presents even more difficulties for the child. His or her past, present, and future become a subject of concern, and the positive outcome for the child is usually jeopardized by institutional, security, legal, family, and community issues. Success in addressing all of them essentially requires a multidimensional approach based on an in-depth analysis of individual cases.

One day, our world will be in the hands of the present-day children. The problem is that this understanding is shared not only by States, societies, or the international community in general; members of terrorist and violent extremist groups also believe that they can use children now to plant seeds of radical ideologies and reap the harvest later. That is why it is so important to ensure that children are protected and have all the conditions to live safely, be healthy, develop, study, and successfully socialize; to have a decent childhood and then – a decent adulthood.

With efforts united, it is possible to translate a marginalized issue into a set of tangible measures and make a difference.

GLOSSARY

Children — human beings under the age of 18 years, in accordance with article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Combatant — the legal status of a person entitled to directly participate in hostilities during an armed conflict, and may be intentionally targeted by a belligerent for their participation in the armed conflict under the law of war.

ECOSOC — Economic and Social Council.

Exploitation — the act of using someone or something unfairly for your own advantage.

Exploited child — a person under 18 whose labour, services, vulnerability, or participation has been used for the benefit of an armed force or armed group, including for military, logistical, criminal, intelligence, propaganda, or sexual purposes.

Foreign terrorist fighter — an individual who has travelled from their home States to other States to participate in or support terrorist acts, including in the context of armed conflict.

Fragile State — a state that is commonly characterized by such attributes as: the loss of physical control of its territory or a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; the erosion of legitimate authority to make collective decisions; the inability to provide reasonable public services; the inability to interact with other states as a full member of the international community.

Group-associated child — a person under 18 who maintains or has maintained a functional connection with an armed force or armed group, regardless of formal membership, assigned role, or direct participation in hostilities.

ICC — International Criminal Court.

ILO — International Labour Organisation.

Inherited jihadism — a sociological and counter-terrorism term that refers to the intergenerational transmission of violent extremist ideologies and radicalization pathways from parents or relatives to their children.

Organizational member — a person under 18 who is formally or functionally recognized as belonging to an armed force or armed group and occupies a role within its command, operational, administrative, or support structure.

Political indoctrination — the process of inculcating (teaching by repeated instruction) a person or people into an ideology, often avoiding critical analysis.

Recruited child — a person under 18 who has been enlisted, conscripted, induced, coerced, or otherwise incorporated into an armed force or armed group for any purpose.

Recruitment — the act of incorporating individuals into an armed group or activities on its behalf through coercion, kidnapping, deception, pressure, indoctrination, financial incentives, family and social ties, or formally expressed consent.

Rehabilitation — a coordinated process aimed at restoring a child's physical and mental health, psychosocial well-being, personal agency, and capacity to resume life outside an armed force or armed group.

Reintegration — a long-term process through which a child transitions to civilian life, develops a meaningful civilian identity and social role, and is accepted by their family and community. In this report, the term is used interchangeably with ***social reintegration***, understood as recovering the capabilities of such children to assume a constructive role in society.

Secondary victimization (or post-crime victimization or double victimization) — the process of victim-blaming that occurs not as a direct result of a criminal act but through the inadequate response of institutions and individuals to the victim.

Sectoral model — a pragmatic law-making method where legal norms, treaties, and regulatory regimes are developed to govern specific, narrow issue areas or industries rather than waiting for a single, comprehensive universal framework. Because states have historically been unable to agree on a universal definition of "terrorism," the international community adopted a sectoral approach. Instead of one comprehensive treaty, international law relies on a matrix of over a dozen specific conventions, each criminalizing a distinct method or act.

Stigmatization — the act of treating someone or something unfairly by publicly disapproving of them or it.

Organizational member — a person under 18 who is formally or functionally recognized as belonging to an armed force or armed group and occupies a role within its command, operational, administrative, or support structure.

Suspect — a person under 18 who is alleged or reasonably believed by the competent authorities to have committed an offence connected with an armed force or armed group, without this designation implying guilt, formal membership, or voluntary participation.

Terrorist triangle — a three-part conceptual model that distinguishes terrorism from ordinary criminal violence by defining its distinct dynamic: Actor A attacks Target B in order to coerce or influence Audience/Third Party C.

UNICEF — the United Nations Children's Fund.

UNODC — the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

N.B. Currently, there is no universally accepted, comprehensive definition of ***terrorism***, ***terrorist group*** or ***violent extremism***. The Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism states that the definitions of ***terrorism*** and ***violent extremism*** are the prerogative of Member States and must be consistent with their obligations under international law. In this report, the term ***terrorist group*** encompasses all entities included on the ISIL (Da'esh)*[81] and Al-Qaida* Sanctions List, the Taliban Sanctions List, as well as Al-Shabaab*. Moreover, any other group that performs activities defined as terrorism in national or regional legislation and universal counter-terrorism conventions and protocols may also be considered a terrorist group. The above-mentioned Plan of Action treats ***violent extremism*** "as and when conducive to terrorism", as does the current report.

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[81] ***Considered as a terrorist organisation on the territory of the Russian Federation.**