

**Briefing Note**

# The status of Iraqi children of ISIS-affiliated families outside of Jeddah 1 rehabilitation center

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## Purpose

International attention has been focused on reducing the population of al-Hol camp in Northeastern Syria and returning residents to their countries of origin. A great majority of those living in al-Hol are members of so-called 'ISIS-affiliated' families – the largest population of which are from Iraq. The Jeddah 1 rehabilitation center in Iraq has recently been established to help rehabilitate and reintegrate this population, where al-Hol returnees originally from Iraq transit through before returning to their community. This is important work, but it should not come at the expense of support for two other groups in Iraq affected by the conflict which share some comparable needs: ISIS-affiliated families who are outside of al-Hol camp (for example, in IDP camps in Iraq), and non-ISIS affiliated IDPs who were affected by ISIS and still have not been able to return home.

This policy brief examines the needs of these diverse war-affected populations, specifically focusing on children in the region. As Iraq was one of the countries most affected by ISIS where the majority of ISIS-affiliated families currently live, the brief argues that the successful and simultaneous support for these three distinct groups is essential for durable post-conflict solutions in the country.

## Key findings

- 1. Recent attention has tended to focus on Iraqi ISIS-affiliated families returning from al-Hol through J1, while overlooking ISIS-affiliated families who remained in Iraq.**
- 2. ISIS-affiliated families in Iraq in IDP camps have many of the same needs as those returning from al-Hol, though to differing degrees.**
- 3. Successful reintegration of ISIS-affiliated families is contingent upon also addressing the needs of conflict-affected IDPs who were not associated with the group.**

# Policy implications

Several general policy and program recommendations should be considered in efforts to support and prioritize the needs of children in ISIS-affiliated families in Iraq, as well as children who were affected by the war.

- ▶ **Recognize that ISIS-affiliated children currently reside in al-Hol, the Jeddah 1 (J1) rehabilitation center, as well as IDP camps,** and focus attention on all groups.
  - ▶ **Within Iraq, ensure sufficient programming and support for ISIS-affiliated children in both J1 and the IDP camps.** The government of Iraq and its international partners should ensure that ISIS-affiliated children returning from al-Hol camp, as well as those residing in IDP camps within the Kurdish region of Iraq (KRG), receive the necessary support, and programming tailored to their specific needs.
  - ▶ **Support regular IDPs too:** This much needed support for ISIS-affiliated children should not come at the expense of other IDPs in Iraq, a group also in need of durable solutions.
  - ▶ **Establish clear plans for return that are voluntary and prioritize safety of returnees:** While current al-Hol residents have relatively clearer pathways to reintegration when they are approved to return through the J1 rehabilitation center, the process has been more complicated for those in IDP camps. Recently announced government plans to close all IDP camps by July 2024 do not allow for voluntary, nor necessarily safe, returns for many families, particularly those with a perceived ISIS-affiliation.
  - ▶ **Ensure that support for ISIS-affiliated families is comparable with that for non-ISIS affiliated IDPs, including those who were victims of ISIS.** Avoid giving the impression of preferential treatment. For example, ensure ISIS-affiliated and non-ISIS affiliated children have equal access to education, security, housing, and support for war-time traumas they have suffered.
  - ▶ **Work with local communities to ensure they support returns.** To entice local communities to accept ISIS-affiliated children as well as other IDPs, resettlement funding should be allocated for both groups. Community engagement with local leaders and stakeholders can also facilitate this process.
- Recovery in Iraq, particularly of its war-affected children, will require a long-term and unified effort that takes into account the unique profiles and needs of these three distinct groups.

# Methodology

This policy brief is informed by extensive field visits in Iraq in 2022, primary source interviews with ISIS-affiliated family members (male youth, male adults, and members of female-headed households), professionals who work with these populations, and secondary open sources including previous Iraq projects in which the author was involved.<sup>1</sup> It is also informed by work by the author on children from families affiliated with terrorism.<sup>2</sup>

## Findings

Iraq was severely impacted by ISIS, which seized and administered a significant portion of the country between 2014 and 2017, before finally being defeated. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were displaced by the conflict, and tens of thousands of others came to have a real or perceived affiliation with the group; many of those ISIS-affiliated family members still reside in al-Hol camp.<sup>3</sup> Today, just over 25,000 Iraqis (64% of whom are children, 26% being women) remain in the camp, making al-Hol the largest camp for ISIS-affiliated families anywhere in the world, and arguably the most complex resettlement issue relating to ISIS.<sup>4</sup>

The government of Iraq is currently repatriating Iraqi citizens from al-Hol camp, transitioning them in batches through the Jeddah 1 (J1) rehabilitation center in Ninewa after they are approved for departure from al-Hol, which includes ensuring there are no outstanding criminal charges against them. The J1 rehabilitation center has been a key focus for international donors and partners, who are keen to reduce threats emanating from the dangerous camp by resettling Iraqi citizens still in al-Hol camp.

ISIS-affiliated children and their families are present not just in Syria's al-Hol, but in IDP camps around the Kurdish region of Iraq (KRG). However, these other camps are sometimes forgotten in the broader efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate ISIS-affiliated

populations. Residents of the Iraq camps require similar kinds of long-term programming assistance and support as those from al-Hol in order to successfully return to their communities, and should not be neglected. Ultimately, programming should balance and address the needs of three conflict-affected groups in which children are the majority:

1. ISIS-affiliated families in al-Hol who are returning to Iraq through the J1 rehabilitation center;
2. ISIS-affiliated families in IDP camps in Iraq; and
3. IDPs still residing in camps.

As long as ISIS-affiliated families in the camps outside of J1 remain neglected, as well as the status of other IDPs unresolved, there will be a notable risk that the funding and programming dedicated to facilities like J1 could foster grievances amongst the very populations meant to be receiving these ISIS-affiliated families. Long-term successful rehabilitation and reintegration of war-affected children must account for the unique needs and profiles of these three distinct groups to attain durable solutions.

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1 This includes over 20 interviews conducted in Iraq in late 2022 as well as participation in a series of roundtables with Iraqi stakeholders in 2022, "Roundtables on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration," ICCT and IOM, 2022, accessed 1 June 2024, available at: <https://www.icct.nl/project/prosecution-rehabilitation-and-reintegration-prr-practices-iraq>

2 The author is the lead investigator for the EU-funded project PREPARE which considers how the life of the child may be impacted when their family is affiliated with violent extremism. For more details see: <https://prepare-project.eu/>

3 Family members involved with the group, usually males, ranged from people who had limited roles and might be described as coerced civilians, to people who engaged in armed activity during the conflict. For more discussion on 'coerced civilians' see: Mara R. Revkin, "When Terrorists Govern: Protecting Civilians in Conflicts with State-Building Armed Groups," *Harvard National Security Journal*, 9 (2018): 100.

4 UNICEF, "Iraq Appeal," UNICEF, accessed March 23, 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/iraq>.

# Experiences of war-affected children

War affects children in a multitude of ways as they are exposed to violence, displacement, loss of family members, and disruption in education, among other things. Many suffer PTSD and other mental health problems that can continue into adulthood, hampering a society's post-conflict recovery.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the rehabilitation of children in post-conflict settings, as well as their reintegration in instances of displacement, is paramount. The children of Iraq have faced many of these traumas for decades.<sup>6</sup>

Children of ISIS-affiliated families—regardless of whether the affiliation was real or perceived—face many of the typical challenges of children exposed to war described above, as well as several additional challenges. Children may have become involved with ISIS unintentionally, through friends and relatives or by attending the group's schools

or youth events. The experiences of children were also influenced by their gender. For example, boys were more likely to participate in ISIS education and military-training efforts, thus facing physical injury, as well as developmental risks such as black-and-white thinking. Some may have been imprisoned or held in detention by security forces. Young girls were more likely to be forced into marriage and directed to domestic roles, facing risks to their healthy development such as domestic abuse, rape, and early pregnancy. Some young girls too were also exposed to ISIS education or involved in combat or weapons training facilitated by women.<sup>7</sup> In some cases, these took place against the will of the parents, in others with parental approval. Each scenario is associated with a particular set of risks that may negatively impact the healthy development and life of a child.<sup>8</sup>

## Rehabilitation and reintegration of war-affected children in Iraq

The conditions children faced under ISIS are well-documented, as are the contemporary barriers for rehabilitation and reintegration of ISIS-affiliated children in Iraq.<sup>9</sup> Some of the key challenges faced by such children include dead, missing, or absent male heads of household, broken or abusive

families, family rejection, long periods without education, stigmatization amongst peer groups, negative media coverage, limited housing and family income, lack of acceptance upon return to their communities, targeting in revenge attacks, and lack of legal documentation, amongst others.<sup>10</sup>

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- 5 Emmy E. Werner, "Children and War: Risk, Resilience, and Recovery," *Development and Psychopathology* 24, no. 2 (2012): 553-558; Mona S. Macksoud, Atle Dyregrov, and Magne Raundalen, "Traumatic War Experiences and Their Effects on Children," in *International Handbook of Traumatic Stress Syndromes*, ed. John P. Wilson and Beverley Raphael (Boston, MA: Springer US, 1993), 625-633; Peter Warren Singer, *Children at War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
  - 6 Joana Cook, "Distinguishing Children From ISIS-Affiliated Families in Iraq and Their Unique Barriers for Rehabilitation and Reintegration," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 3 (2023): 47.
  - 7 Office of Public Affairs, "American Woman Who Led ISIS Battalion Sentenced to 20 Years", US Department of Justice, 1 November 2022, accessed 21 June 2024, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-woman-who-led-isis-battalion-sentenced-20-years>
  - 8 Risk factors are defined as "characteristics at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that precede and are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes." E.g. exposure to violence, stigmatization, etc. Weine, Stevan, et al., "Rapid Review to Inform the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Returnees from the Islamic State," *Annals of Global Health* 86, no. 1 (2020).
  - 9 For further reading on some of the general conditions of children under ISIS see, ICCT (2022); Asaad Almohammad, "ISIS Child-Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague* 8 (2018): 1-29; Ellis, B. Heidi, et al., "Understanding the Needs of Children Returning from Formerly ISIS-Controlled Territories through an Emotional Security Theory Lens: Implications for Practice," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 109 (2020): 104754; ICCT and IOM (2022).
  - 10 Joana Cook, "Distinguishing Children From ISIS-Affiliated Families in Iraq and Their Unique Barriers for Rehabilitation and Reintegration," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 3 (2023): 42-69.

What is clear is that children from the three categories described above have some overlapping areas of need, and require ongoing support to help address war-time impacts on their lives, and this must be tailored based on their particular categorization. This policy brief extends from such findings to more broadly consider the ongoing balance and prioritization of rehabilitation and reintegration funding of these groups. It argues that adequate and targeted support must be allocated to all three groups to ensure long-term improved prospects for these war-affected children.

Regarding ISIS-affiliated families, international attention and funding have largely been focused on supporting the repatriation and reintegration of families from al-Hol camp via the J1 rehabilitation center in Ninewa province. This is in part due to the American emphasis on closing al-Hol and Iraq's willingness to facilitate their return. Al-Hol camp is currently considered one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a child, and exposure to violence from groups perceived to have ISIS or criminal links has become an everyday part of life,

and children under 16 have comprised 35% of deaths in this camp.<sup>11</sup> While al-Hol camp has some service support for children, this is still quite limited, and only a small portion of children in the camp regularly attend school. While approximately 9,400 persons were in al-Hol camp in 2018 (people generally viewed as IDPs),<sup>12</sup> those that came after the fall of Baghouz—which ended ISIS' reign—are more likely to be viewed as having an affiliation with ISIS. Of all Iraqi children affected by the recent war, those in al-Hol face the most ongoing danger.

Through multiple rounds of repatriation, the government of Iraq has returned 2,111 families via the J1 rehabilitation center with the aim of moving them onwards to non-camp communities, whether home or a secondary location within Iraq. Of these, 1,230 families have now departed J1.<sup>13</sup> This program is still in its early stages—and concerns remain over the long-term support and status of the center—but the positive efforts to date include a range of services to support the rehabilitation of children and their families before they depart the camp.

## ISIS-affiliated families outside of J1 rehabilitation center

The extent to which ISIS-affiliated families also exist in other camp settings within Iraq is often overlooked. Today, Iraq hosts approximately 1.12 million IDPs, 14% of whom live in IDP camps.<sup>14</sup> The majority of IDPs were displaced during the conflict with ISIS. ISIS-affiliated families are a notable presence amongst this population: an estimated 250,000 people from families with links to ISIS—some living in camps, some elsewhere—have been unable to return home.<sup>15</sup> Across the IDP camps, three IDP camps in particular host ISIS-affiliated families alongside regular IDP populations: Khazar M1, Hasansham U2, and Hasansham U3.

As of December 2022, Khazar M1 camp hosts 5,073 individuals (3,013 of whom are children under 18); Hasansham U2 hosts 3,146 individuals (1,965 of whom are children under 18); and Hasansham U3 hosts 5,888 individuals (3,438 of whom are children under 18).<sup>16</sup> Notably, between these three camps, 60% of residents are children. Hasansham camp also hosts a unique group of approximately 200 males, including many youth who spent time in detention as children, but who today do not face any criminal charges, yet are unable to secure proper documentation or leave the camp. Many fear arbitrary arrest or retribution if they leave, and they remain in limbo in the camp due to their perceived former affiliation with ISIS.

11 See, for example, Mediciens Sans Frontiers, "Between Two Fires: Danger and Desperation in Syria's al-Hol Camp," November 2022, accessed 1 June 2024, <https://www.msf.org/danger-and-desperation-syria%E2%80%99s-al-hol-camp-report-msf>.

12 UNHCR, "Syria Protection Sector Update: Al-Hol Camp, June 2022,"

13 Mahmoud Sinan, "Iraq repatriates hundreds from Syria's Al Hol camp linked to ISIS," *The National*, 30 April 2024. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/04/30/iraq-syria-isis-al-hol-camp/>

14 IOM Iraq Mission, "Displacement Overview," December 31, 2023, accessed 1 June 2024, <https://iraqdtm.iom.int/masterlist>.

15 Sandi Ouafe, "Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children" (UNDP, 2022), 1.

16 UNHCR, "Overview of the 25 IDP Camps in KRI (as of December 2022)," document held by author.

Jeddah 5 was another IDP camp located in federal Iraq. The camp hosted 342 families with perceived affiliation to ISIS before shutting down in 2023. Residents were given just 24 hours' notice before being locked out of the camp and forced to return to their communities. Two thirds of the individuals in Jeddah 5 were children,<sup>17</sup> and 59% resided in female-headed households.<sup>18</sup> These forced returns were reported to be dangerous for these families, with limited access to assistance, follow-up, or return

to areas where few services were available. While financial assistance was stated to be available to these families, many families never received this.<sup>19</sup> Such recent examples raise serious concerns about both ISIS-affiliated families in IDP camps, and war-affected children remaining in IDP camps (including Yazidis) in cases of involuntary or forced returns when the conditions are not yet seen as suitable.

## Key differences between J1 rehabilitation center and IDP camps

ISIS-affiliated children in these IDP camps share many of the same challenges of those in J1, such as limited education or none at all, a lack of documentation, absent, missing, or dead parents, stigmatization, and others described above. Yet multiple visits to Jeddah 1, Hasansham (U2 and U3), and Khazar M1 camps, as well as documentation of this population, and interviews of residents and staff, also indicated several important distinctions between these settings.

### Programming and provisions available to residents

First, programming in J1 rehabilitation center is the most extensive and targeted to support the reintegration of children of all centers and camps visited by the author that host ISIS-affiliated families. The J1 rehabilitation center is comparatively well-resourced and features multiple service providers, a school, and several new child-friendly spaces meant to support the rehabilitation of children returning from al-Hol camp. However, the status of future funding on J1 is unclear, which can affect long-term planning. While J1 currently has a higher level of

services and quality of accommodations with this al-Hol returnee caseload, it is likely to take many years to undertake this returns process. Long-term funding and support will be essential to maintain access to services for children. However, J1 is not anticipated to be affected by the closure of the IDP camps elsewhere in Iraq.

Hasansham U2, U3, and Khazar M1 camps, on the other hand, faced notable resource limitations. Living conditions for children were much worse and programming much more limited in part due to decreases in funding for humanitarian assistance in the country, as the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict with ISIS has subsided.

As such, conditions in the camp were considerably more challenging than in J1. One camp manager lamented that power was only available for several hours a day, and a lack of electricity at night posed a security concern for some residents. Furthermore, the IDP camps were low on both food and hygiene kits at the time of visit, which was noted to be increasingly common.<sup>20</sup> The visible poorer state of these camps was also observable.

17 "UN 'Concerned' about Hasty Closure of IDP Camp in Nineveh," RUDAW, April 19, 2023, accessed 1 June 2024, <https://www.msf.org/danger-and-desperation-syria%E2%80%99s-al-hol-camp-report-msf>, accessed 1 June 2024.

18 "Iraq IDP Camp Profiling – Iraq, Round XVI," CCCM Cluster and REACH, June–August 2022, February 2023, 88, accessed 1 June 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-idp-camp-profiling-camp-directory-round-xvi-june-august-2022>.

19 Alanna Travers and Meethak al-Khatib, "In Iraq, a rushed camp closure fuels unease over the safety of IS returns", *The New Humanitarian*, 23 August 2023, accessed 21 June 2024, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/08/24/iraq-rushed-camp-closure-fuels-unease-over-safety-returns>

20 Interview 5, Hasan, NGO\*. Iraq, 2022. Name changed for privacy.

## School attendance, documentation, and female-headed households

Second, certain challenges for ISIS-affiliated families are more pronounced in J1 than in IDP settings, including the number of people missing documentation, and the greater prevalence of female-headed households. Notably, in a recent survey of all 25 camps across Iraq that were open as of December 2022,<sup>21</sup> the camps with the most households subject to movement restrictions included Hasansham U2, U3, and Khazar M1. These three camps also recorded some of the lowest rates of children attending school, as well as the highest rates of residents who were missing documentation.<sup>22</sup>

While across all IDP camps, females headed an average of 14% of all households,<sup>23</sup> this figure was also much higher in camps that held ISIS-affiliated families (see tables below)<sup>24</sup> Notably, beyond the camps highlighted below, only two others had similar percentages of female-headed households: Arbat (34%), which was closed in December 2023, and Shariya camp (34%), which largely housed Yazidi IDPs. This suggests that children in camps hosting ISIS-affiliated families face the most challenges, but also highlights the urgent needs of other war-affected groups (e.g. Yazidis who faced genocide under ISIS).

A majority of children in J1 and these other camp settings have had disrupted, limited, or indeed no access to regular education. For youth, this includes the kinds of jobs and skills training that might help them obtain employment and develop livelihoods as they become adults. In al-Hol camp, many parents choose not to send their children to school because of security concerns. In J1 and other camps within Iraq, educational programs are typically provided by local or international NGOs and can be easily accessed by residents, who are encouraged to send their children to education.

However, as a notable portion of children are behind in education, have not attended a regular school in years, or never attended one at all, accelerated curriculums, teachers trained to work with trauma victims, and other specially tailored support programs are needed for children to ‘catch up’ with education. Yet such programs are currently exceedingly rare. Furthermore, in cases where national documentation is not available, students may be unable to take national exams, and their camp schooling may not be recognised by Iraqi education officials.<sup>25</sup> Being able to access and obtain regular education and documentation is critical to the well-being and healthy development of children.

**Table 1: Households missing some documentation**

Location <sup>26</sup>	% of households reporting missing some documentation
Hasansham U2	43 %
Hasansham U3	45 %
Khazar 1	41 %
Jeddah 1 <sup>27</sup>	95 %

21 Jeddah 5 camp was closed in December 2023 leaving 24 camps open as of publication.

22 Reasons for not attending school included a lack of documentation, inability to enroll, and lack of interest on the children. “Iraq IDP Camp Profiling – Iraq, Round XVI,” CCCM Cluster and REACH, June–August 2022, February 2023, 7, accessed [date], <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-idp-camp-profiling-camp-directory-round-xvi-june-august-2022>.

23 “Iraq IDP Camp Profiling – Iraq, Round XVI,” 7.

24 Ibid.

25 Interview 10, Nadja, NGO\*. Iraq, 2022. Name changed for privacy.

26 “Iraq IDP Camp Profiling – Iraq, Round XVI,” CCCM Cluster and REACH, June–August 2022, February 2023, 88, accessed 1 June 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-idp-camp-profiling-camp-directory-round-xvi-june-august-2022>.

27 Parry, Jacqueline Parry, Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O’Neil, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, and Melisande-Genat, “The Road Home from Al Hol Camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience” MEAC Findings Report 24, United Nations University, UNIDIR, December 2022, 4. Available at: [https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:9040/RoadFromAlHol\\_FINAL.pdf](https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:9040/RoadFromAlHol_FINAL.pdf)

**Table 2: Female-headed households**

Location <sup>28</sup>	% of female headed households
Hasansham U2	42 %
Hasansham U3	33 %
Khazar 1	34 %
Jeddah 1 <sup>29</sup>	60 %

**Table 3: Child enrolment in school**

Location <sup>30</sup>	% of children aged 6-11 enrolled in formal school	% of children aged 12-17 enrolled in formal school
Hasansham U2	77 %	38%
Hasansham U3	83 %	53%
Khazar 1	75 %	43%
Jeddah 1 <sup>31</sup>	Not available	Not available

## Length of time in camps

Third, the length of time spent in camps is different for J1 residents than for people in other IDP camps. At J1, residents are typically anticipated to receive six months of ‘rehabilitative’ programming before they are returned to their communities, though this return can be delayed due to a variety of factors (e.g. limited housing, lack of safety, documentation, waiting for other family members from al-Hol, etc.).

In other camps in KRG, there was historically no fixed timeline to determine when ISIS-affiliated

families, or IDPs more generally, should depart the camp and return to their communities, and many families have been there many years.<sup>32</sup> In such cases, these families may not have returned due to lack of resources, employment prospects, assured security, or housing, and remained in the camp for practical reasons, which could result in frustration and hopelessness. It is notable that many of these children have spent their formative years in camps, and the transition back into regular communities is likely to take time and require some level of support.

28 “Iraq IDP Camp Profiling – Iraq, Round XVI,” CCCM Cluster and REACH, June–August 2022, February 2023, 88, accessed 1 June 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-idp-camp-profiling-camp-directory-round-xvi-june-august-2022>.

29 Parry et al, 2022: 15.24 “Iraq IDP Camp Profiling – Iraq, Round XVI,” 7.

30 “Iraq IDP Camp Profiling – Iraq, Round XVI,” CCCM Cluster and REACH, June–August 2022, February 2023, 88, accessed 1 June 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-idp-camp-profiling-camp-directory-round-xvi-june-august-2022.26> Interview 10, Nadja, NGO\*. Iraq, 2022. Name changed for privacy.

31 Current rates of enrolment for children in J1 were unavailable. However, one report in a similar period which surveyed J1 noted that “Of the children who had returned from Jeddah 1 camp, 55 per cent of boys and 40 per cent of girls had completed no education; 25 per cent of boys and 55 per cent of girls had completed less than 6 years of primary education; and 20 per cent of boys and 5 per cent of girls had completed primary education. No children had completed more than primary education.” This suggests that not only is educational access and participation imperative for this group, but also that they are likely to be the most in need of accelerated education or other educational support to reach similar educational levels as their peers. Parry, Jacqueline, Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, and Siobhan O’Neil, “Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Children from Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation: Experiences from Iraq and Al Hol,” MEAC Findings Report 20, United Nations University and UNIDIR, November 2022: 13, accessed 1 June 2024, [https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:8995/Rehabilitation\\_Reintegration\\_\\_Children\\_Iraq.pdf](https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:8995/Rehabilitation_Reintegration__Children_Iraq.pdf)

32 This specific information on average length of stay in IDP camps was unavailable for these three camps.



However, the Government of Iraq recently announced that all remaining 150,000 people in the remaining 23 IDP camps in KRG will have to leave by 30 July 2024, and the camps closed.<sup>33</sup> While this news may be perceived as positive by some, the example of Jeddah 5 highlights the various challenges faced by families for involuntary or unsafe returns. Unless the hard work of ensuring families can return safely to areas where they can access housing, employment, and assistance where required, and that communities these populations are returning to are also prepared to receive them, then such drastic, large-scale returns are bound to result in a wide range of challenges for all involved.

For those who will exit these camps, ISIS-affiliated families are disproportionately affected by missing documentation, over-represented by female-headed households, and have not yet been enrolled in equal numbers in school as other Iraqi children, and the challenges that they will face upon return will be further compounded.

For victims of ISIS who remain in IDP camps, specifically Yazidis from Sinjar, they have yet to receive compensation promised to them under Law No. 20 of 2009, which provides compensation for victims of war operations, military mistakes, and terrorist operations. Furthermore, many of the areas in Sinjar remain heavily damaged and under-resourced, limiting opportunities upon return,<sup>34</sup> and as discussed above, also have high numbers of female-headed households which can face additional challenges to return. If the victims of ISIS cannot safely return to their communities, there is a risk of community frustration or rejection of ISIS-affiliated families who may be viewed as being in part responsible for their situation and for the associated grievances as they return to their communities as well.

## Stigmatization

Fourth, families in J1 face particularly acute stigmatization, which has implications for their reintegration. A UNDP survey in areas of return suggested that communities are generally more willing to receive women and children from the camps, particularly in cases where the woman was married against her will to a member of ISIS. However, there is notable fear around al-Hol returnee populations – with 23% of those surveyed expressing heightened concern regarding returnees from Northeast Syria.<sup>35</sup> As discussed previously, al-Hol camp currently has a notable radicalized population within the camp and is rife with crime and violence. The camp is widely believed to house family members of ISIS fighters who remained with the group until the end of the conflict and who are seen as some of the most committed to the group.

ISIS-affiliated children, whether their family's association is real or perceived, face intense stigmatization. This may impact many aspects of their lives, from their acceptance by classmates to their family's social status. Interviewees in both J1 and IDP camps predicted that ISIS-affiliated children may be bullied or shunned by other students – a concern raised by their families and support workers in the camp. Communities and neighbourhoods, particularly those that have been severely impacted by the conflict, may also reject families or even seek revenge against these families (particularly targeting male children).

Young male adults such as those in Hasansham may face heightened suspicion from communities and, if they were perceived to have a link with ISIS, even rejection by their families, whether or not they have been charged with crimes. This could leave many feeling rejected, also psychologically and practically affecting them (e.g. having limited

33 Sinan Mahmoud, "UNHCR voices concerns over Iraqi government decision to close IDP camps", The National, 10 June

34 "Iraq: Looming Camp Closures in Kurdistan: Displaced Sinjar Residents Imperiled as Compensation, Reconstruction Stalls", Human Rights Watch, 13 May 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/13/iraq-looming-camp-closures-kurdistan>

35 UNDP Iraq, "Reintegration Perceptions Survey Report: Four Areas - Al-Qa'im and Habaniya in Anbar, Tuz Khurmato in Salah al-Din, and Muhalabiya in Ninewa," March 26, 2023, 7, accessed 1 June 2024, <https://www.undp.org/iraq/publications/reintegration-perception-surveys-report>.

or no family network or support available to them). However, some recent studies have shown that communities may be more willing to accept returning children,<sup>36</sup> though this depended on the circumstances under which they became affiliated with ISIS.<sup>37</sup> The conditions under which acceptance of children, including older male youth, can be further fostered should be identified

and encouraged. Different approaches may be required to reduce the risk of stigmatization, depending on the returnee's association with ISIS. The short timeline to the declared imminent closure of the IDP camps that host ISIS-affiliated families raises concerns about community readiness to receive these populations back, and how that stigmatization may manifest.

## Policy and program recommendations

By highlighting the needs of diverse war-affected children in Iraq and distinguishing some of the specific needs of ISIS-affiliated children (those returning from al-Hol vs. those currently in IDP camps, for example), this policy brief has sought to help inform programming and other efforts to mitigate the long-term effects of ISIS' reign of terror in Iraq.

Supporting children from ISIS-affiliated families, who should not be held responsible for the actions of their parent(s), may have many benefits beyond improving the life of the child. Ripple effects could extend to a variety of post-conflict recovery efforts, from peacebuilding, reconciliation, and justice programs, to preventing violent extremism, and improving security and stability. For example, helping the children of ISIS-affiliated families develop their resilience, while also seeking to mitigate the stigmas they face, may help them manage grievances associated with this aspect of their life, avoid anti-social behavior, and shun violent extremism, while helping them develop into healthy adults. Supporting these children and youth as they return to community settings can help lead to reduced tension in communities receiving ISIS-affiliated families and contribute to societal cohesion generally.

At the same time, victims of ISIS (including IDPs) must also receive support to deal with the traumas and lingering effects of the conflict. If children and families of ISIS fighters are perceived to receive aid and outreach while victims of the conflict remain in a dismal situation (e.g. not being able to return to their communities, lack of housing or employment, etc.), this may reduce long-term support for initiatives targeted at ISIS-affiliated families. It may also negatively affect prospects for peaceful reintegration of ISIS-affiliated children, and post-conflict recovery more generally, including of the most affected victims of ISIS.

Finally, with the imminent closure of IDP camps announced, both Iraq-based NGOs and international humanitarian organisations should focus on community-level programming, targeting the specific needs of children identified above, in areas where those departing IDP camps will return to. Ongoing work with local communities in peacebuilding initiatives can also be ramped up. Advocacy to the government of Iraq to not force IDPs to leave camps when they feel unsafe or when it is involuntary should also be conducted.

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36 UNDP in Iraq, "Reintegration in Iraq: A Perception Survey to Assess Community Readiness for Return and Reintegration of Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Pilot Areas," August 2021, accessed 1 June 2024, [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/iq/UNDP\\_IQ\\_Perception\\_Survey.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/iq/UNDP_IQ_Perception_Survey.pdf).

37 Vera Mironova and Sam Whitt, "Retribution versus Rehabilitation for Children within Insurgency: Public Attitudes Toward ISIS-Affiliated Youth in Mosul, Iraq," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2024): 1-19.

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