

# Supporting the Reintegration and Recovery of Former Child Soldiers in Kurdistan, Iraq



## Executive Summary

Globally, children associated with an armed force or armed group, often referred to as “child soldiers,” are recruited to play a number of roles ranging from frontline fighters to cooks, porters, messengers, spies, and domestic workers; others are used for sexual purposes. These children are routinely exposed to violence, forced to commit crimes, exploited, and abused. Tragically, 2018 showed the highest numbers of children killed or maimed due to armed conflict.<sup>1</sup> In Iraq, “children remain highly vulnerable to forcible recruitment and use by multiple armed groups operating in Iraq, including— but not limited to— the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the People’s Mobilization Forces, tribal forces, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, and Iran-backed militias,” according to the U.S. government’s 2019 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report.<sup>2</sup>

***“People usually run from us when they know we used to be child soldiers.”***

- SEED Client

Former child soldiers face significant challenges in reintegration and recovery. From barriers to reconnecting with their families to stigma within the community, they are often left feeling isolated and angry. Children returning from ISIS captivity are often very different from the children they were upon capture, returning with new languages, new beliefs, new religions.

These children and their families can struggle to make sense of these experiences and to know how to live together again. Further, children can suffer complex trauma with significant symptoms from their exposure to violence and extremism, including both physical and

mental health needs. Having lost years of education and returning to impoverished, displaced families, desperately needed resources are often non-existent. In most cases, parents and caregivers of children returning from ISIS captivity are not equipped to deal with the challenges faced by these children. Addressing the needs of these children and their families is crucial for the future security, stability, and prosperity of these individuals, their families and communities, as well as all of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



***“When our kids came back from captivity they had so many issues; we didn’t know where to go for help.”***

Parents of a former child soldier,  
clients of SEED

An integrated and comprehensive approach to services for former child soldiers and their families is critical to provide for physical and mental health needs as well as offer a range of social, economic, housing, and educational support. While there continue to be challenges in meeting the needs of this unique population, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs have been used throughout the world in post-conflict settings to support ex-combatants. No such program exists in Iraq.

This paper presents a summary of promising practices and recommendations for service provision based on SEED's experience working with former child soldiers and findings from the literature regarding global programs targeting this population. The focus of these recommendations is children returning to the KRI from ISIS captivity, though many of the recommendations may be applicable to other contexts as well.



## Read the full report

[www.seedkurdistan.org/children-affected-by-violence](http://www.seedkurdistan.org/children-affected-by-violence)

## SEED recommends that the Kurdistan Regional Government, Government of Iraq, United Nations agencies, and civil society actors to join forces to:

1. **Address the urgent and long-term needs of child survivors** by meeting their medical, financial, legal, educational, and social needs. These needs must be met according to a trauma-informed, survivor-centered, child-friendly, and human rights-based approach.
2. **Provide integrated and comprehensive services** to former child soldiers that include:
  - » Holistic treatment models, including comprehensive case management, specialized mental health treatment, and psychosocial support (PSS) activities.
  - » Parent and caregiver involvement to focus on rebuilding and strengthening familial relationships and provide support and guidance to parents and caregivers.
  - » A coordinated response and clarified roles of national governments, international NGOs, UN agencies, CBOs, and the donor community. Governments must have the primary role of creating sufficiently robust medical, economic, legal, educational, and social frameworks to address all needs and ensure effective enforcement where needed. This includes ensuring that the justice system is effective in addressing the legacies of the conflict.
  - » Investment in public health to fund, recruit, and train the necessary professional workforce and make necessary medication accessible to ensure quality service provision for former child soldiers.
  - » Peacebuilding efforts to ensure the protection of children affected by armed conflict.
3. **Ensure beneficiary participation in program design** to encourage and empower children in the development of programs, increase local leadership and ownership, and ensure lasting impact.
4. **Build long-term donor support** and accountability to ensure robust, effective programs supporting reintegration and recovery.

1 United Nations. (2019). "Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict." [https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/26-07-2019\\_SG\\_CAAC\\_report\\_advance\\_copy\\_0.pdf](https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/26-07-2019_SG_CAAC_report_advance_copy_0.pdf)

2 United States Department of State. (2019). "Trafficking in persons report." <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-Trafficking-in-Persons-Report.pdf>