

THE IMPACT OF TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM ON CHILDREN: HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY AND GLOBAL SECURITY

By Cecilia Polizzi

*Founder & CEO, Next Wave, The International Center for Children and
Global Security; 2025 McCain Global Leader, Italy*

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TERMINOLOGY

Children and Youth

The term “children” refers to any individual below the age of 18, in accordance with Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Policy documents in the area of prevention of violent extremism often refer to “youth”, encompassing adolescents and young adults, in accordance with Secretary-General’s Report to the General Assembly, 1981.¹ For the purposes of this publication, the term “children” is used to denote individuals under the age of 18, consistent with Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in reference to contexts implicating legal protection and child-specific rights. The term “youth” is employed to refer to individuals in social, political, or civic contexts, including but not limited to participation, democratic engagement, and susceptibility to radicalization, without prejudice to the legal definition of “child.”

Radicalization

The notion of ‘radicalization’ is used to convey the idea of a process through which an individual adopts an increasingly extremist set of beliefs and aspirations. This may include, but is not defined by, the willingness to condone, support, facilitate or use violence to further political, ideological, religious or other goals.²

Child Recruitment and Use

Child recruitment and use refer to the process by which children are unlawfully enlisted or conscripted by armed forces or armed groups in any capacity. This includes both direct participation in hostilities and indirect roles, such as serving as cooks, porters, spies, messengers, or for the purpose of sexual exploitation.³

Terrorism

Terrorism, as referenced in international counterterrorism frameworks such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004), refers to criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose of provoking a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons, intimidating a population, or compelling a government or international organization to act or refrain from acting.⁴

¹ General Assembly on International Youth Year (A/36/215, para. 8 of the annex), Secretary-General’s Report to the General Assembly, A/36/215, 1981.

² OHCHR, *Report on best practices and lessons learned on how protecting and promoting human rights contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism*, A/HRC/33/29, para. 19. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/33/29>.

³ United Nations. 2000. *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*. Adopted May 25, 2000, by General Assembly resolution A/RES/54/263.; International Criminal Court. *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf>. Articles 8(2)(b)(xxvi) and 8(2)(e)(vii).; UNICEF. 2007. *The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*. February 2007. <https://www.unicef.org/mali/media/1561/file/parisprinciples.pdf>.; Please refer to: UNSC S/RES/1261 (1999), UNSC S/RES/1612 (2005), and subsequent updates.

⁴ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1566 (2004): Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts*, S/RES/1566 (2004) (adopted by the Security Council at its 5053rd meeting, October 8, 2004), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/532676?ln=en&v=pdf>.

Violent Extremism

A diverse phenomenon without a clear, universally agreed legal definition, involving the advocacy, support, preparation, commission, or promotion of ideologically motivated violence (or the credible threat thereof) to advance political, religious, social, economic, cultural, or other objectives that reject core principles of tolerance, pluralism, human rights, and peaceful coexistence. Such actions or threats are often conducive to terrorism but are distinct from terrorism itself, which entails specific criminal acts.⁵

Executive Summary

Extremist actors across the ideological spectrum have long recruited and radicalized minors to strengthen their operational capabilities, ensure the continuity of their movements, and preserve their ideological paradigms. In conflict and near-conflict zones, groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates exploit systemic inequalities, poverty, structural governance gaps, and social disenfranchisement to co-opt tens of thousands of children into terror and terror-related operations, severely undermining human and children's rights.

Technological innovation, while transformative in many ways, has amplified this challenge beyond geographic hotspots, providing extremist actors with efficient means to operate anonymously and transnationally across mainstream social media platforms, fringe forums, gaming environments, encrypted messaging apps, and the dark web. Extremist ideologies now find fertile ground online, where children and young people comprise a large portion of internet and social media users. According to United Nations and ITU statistics, up to 80% of these demographic cohorts may be exposed daily to violent propaganda campaigns, placing them at heightened risk of online radicalization. Exposure does not imply that all children subjected to it will ultimately radicalize or engage in violence. However, the digital landscape has become, recognizably, a primary vector for radicalization, recruitment, incitement to violence, as well as the mobilization of youth for terror-related purposes.

Beyond immediate security concerns, youth involvement in terrorism and violent extremism exacerbates social polarization, undermines social cohesion, jeopardizes democratic resilience, and generates a transgenerational challenge. Yet, despite the increasing involvement of minors in terrorism-related contexts, a persistent deficit in integrated knowledge and strategic intervention constrains the ability to design and implement effective counter-extremism measures while adequately protecting the rights and well-being of children.

This white paper seeks to advance a deeper understanding of the impact of terrorism and extremism on children and youth across three interdependent axes: human and children's rights, democracy, and global security. It reframes the issue not solely as a counter terrorism challenge, but as a defining test of rights protection and democratic integrity in the twenty-first century. It aims to catalyze informed international dialogue and to provide a blueprint for policy innovation and coordinated, human rights-aligned action.

⁵ United Nations General Assembly, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/70/674 (New York: United Nations, December 24, 2015), para. 1, <https://undocs.org/A/70/674>.

I. INTRODUCTION

The enduring legacy of Graça Machel's 1996 report, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*,⁶ lies in its articulation of how armed conflict profoundly undermines the rights, development, and dignity of the child. Nearly three decades later, the proliferation of terrorism and violent extremism has introduced additional and evolving challenges that both extend and complicate Machel's foundational diagnosis.

In recent years, an increasing number of individuals under the age of eighteen have been recruited and radicalized by terrorist and violent extremist groups, exposed to violence at multiple levels, and, in some cases, exploited for terrorism and terrorism-related purposes. The involvement of children in terrorism and violent extremism constitutes a multidimensional challenge, affecting children's rights and fundamentally altering their life trajectories, while simultaneously reshaping broader social, political, and security environments.

First, prevention has become markedly more complex as recruitment and radicalization ecosystems have expanded beyond the need for physical proximity to include digitally mediated propaganda, online radicalization pathways, and hybrid movements that defy conventional classifications. Ideological fluidity is increasingly problematic for states whose counterterrorism architectures are largely designed around more stable and legible threat categories, rendering radicalization less visible and complicating the early identification of children at risk for both child protection and security actors. Recent analysis further suggests that a growing proportion of lethal attacks are associated with diffuse nihilistic subcultures rather than coherent ideological frameworks, thereby destabilizing established response taxonomies.⁷

Second, this domain has historically been characterized by institutional fragmentation, with child protection and security communities operating in siloes, a separation that has constrained the development of coherent cross-sectoral responses and contributed to uneven and at times inconsistent intervention approaches.

Third, children associated with terrorist or violent extremist activity consistently come into contact with national authorities through counterterrorism and criminal justice systems, raising persistent tensions between security imperatives and child protection obligations, particularly with respect to applicable legal frameworks, procedural safeguards, and the determination of legal status. Across jurisdictions, such children are frequently treated primarily through a security lens, thereby increasing their exposure to risks of secondary rights violations within justice systems.

Fourth, there remains a lack of consolidated and robust frameworks capable of guiding states across the full continuum of prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration of children in terrorism-related contexts. While important lessons can be drawn from reintegration efforts

⁶ Machel, Graça. *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. Report submitted to the United Nations General Assembly. A/51/306. New York: United Nations, August 26, 1996. https://www.unicef.org/media/files/impact_of_armed_conflict_on_children.pdf

⁷ Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). "The Online Landscape of Subcultures of Nihilistic Violence." *Digital Dispatch*. London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, February 17, 2026. <https://www.isdglobal.org/digital-dispatch/online-landscape-subcultures-nihilistic-violence/>

in conflict settings and of children affiliated with organized criminal groups, these have yet to be systematically adapted to the distinct legal, psychological, and institutional challenges posed by terrorism and violent extremism.

Child recruitment and radicalization unfold rapidly as the international system undergoes profound shifts, marked by the erosion of established rules-based mechanisms, the reemergence of power-driven logics in global governance, and declining trust in public institutions. Against this background, this white paper examines child recruitment and radicalization, its trends, patterns, and implications through three core lenses: human and children's rights, democracy, and global security. It is not intended to be exhaustive, but to signal major concerns and to suggest practical steps for improvement.

II. AXIS I: HUMAN AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

1. Child Recruitment and Use

The recruitment and use of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups is not incidental. On the contrary, it reflects a need for adaptation to the evolving demands of contemporary conflict. Children are systematically integrated into terrorist organizational structures as flexible and low-cost assets capable of sustaining both immediate battlefield requirements and longer-term processes of ideological reproduction and proliferation.⁸ Children's perceived innocence and developmental status render them particularly valuable within environments where concealment, adaptability, and rapid force regeneration are critical.

Within this context, children are deployed across a continuum of roles spanning direct participation in hostilities and auxiliary functions, including front-line soldiers, human shields, suicide bombers, and carriers of improvised explosive devices, as well as executioners, spies, messengers, porters, and propagandists.⁹

Beyond military functions, children are also used to perpetrate acts of extreme violence, including executions,¹⁰ which facilitate desensitization to violence, reinforce ideological commitment, and serve as tools of propaganda.

Recruitment pathways are similarly multifaceted. Forced recruitment remains prevalent, encompassing abduction, threats against family members, and intimidation. Large-scale kidnappings, such as those carried out by Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, illustrate the scale of these practices.¹¹ In Somalia, patterns of forced recruitment by Al-Shabaab have been documented for over a decade and have intensified in recent years.

⁸ Cecilia Polizzi, "Fourth Generation Warfare: An Analysis of Child Recruitment and Use as a Salafi-Jihadi Doctrine of War," *Small Wars Journal*, April 29, 2022, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2022/04/29/fourth-generation-warfare-analysis-child-recruitment-and-use-salafi-jihadi-doctrine-war/>.

⁹ Polizzi, Cecilia. "The Recruitment and Use of Children by Salafi-Jihadist Actors: Security and Human Rights." Lecture presented at the ITSS Verona Summer School 2022, Verona, Italy, 2022.

¹⁰ Almohammad, Asaad. *ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, PreTraining Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment*. The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), February 2018. <https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/import/publication/ICCT-Almohammad-ISIS-Child-Soldiers-In-Syria-Feb2018.pdf>.

¹¹ Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram: Recruitment, Financing, and Arms Trafficking in the Lake Chad Region," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 10 (October 2014): 4–6.

During its territorial expansion, the Islamic State recruited thousands of children, including Yazidi minors, for combat operations.

At the same time, recruitment cannot be understood solely through coercion. It is often facilitated by pre-existing structural vulnerabilities, particularly the absence of education, economic marginalization, and social fragmentation, which constrain alternative pathways and increase susceptibility to influence. In such contexts, the boundary between coercion and so-called voluntary association becomes increasingly blurred, as children's agency is shaped by conditions of severe deprivation and insecurity.

The recruitment and use of children constitute a grave violation of international law, including Articles 32, 37, and 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child,¹² and amounts to a war crime under Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.¹³ Despite these prohibitions, the scale of the phenomenon has remained persistently high. United Nations reporting¹⁴ documents thousands of verified cases annually, with no sustained decline and a marked geographical shift toward Sub-Saharan Africa, where groups affiliated to the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda, account for a significant proportion of violations.

2. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Protracted conflict, structural gender inequality, and humanitarian crises in fragile contexts have exposed women and girls to grave forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage, forced impregnation, trafficking, and other forms of exploitation.¹⁵ Sexual and gender-based violence is integral within numerous violent insurgencies, and weaponized as a means of domination, territorial control, social engineering or fragmentation,¹⁶ in contravention with established international norms,¹⁷ which recognize sexual violence as a tactic of war and a threat to international peace and security.

¹² United Nations. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Adopted November 20, 1989. United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1577, 3. Entered into force September 2, 1990. https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf.

¹³ International Criminal Court. *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*. Adopted July 17, 1998. Entered into force July 1, 2002. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf>.

¹⁴ United Nations Secretary-General. *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*. A/79/878–S/2025/247. General Assembly, Seventy-ninth session; Security Council, Eightieth year. June 17, 2025. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>.

¹⁵ Polizzi, Cecilia. "The Recruitment and Use of Children by Salafi-Jihadist Actors: Security and Human Rights." Lecture presented at the ITSS Verona Summer School 2022, Verona, Italy, 2022.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ United Nations. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Adopted November 20, 1989. United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1577, 3. Entered into force September 2, 1990. https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf. United Nations. *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography*. Adopted May 25, 2000. United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 2171, 247. Entered into force January 18, 2002. https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/2000/05/20000525%2003-16%20AM/Ch_IV_11_cp.pdf. United Nations Security Council. Resolution 1820 (2008). Adopted June 19, 2008. S/RES/1820 (2008). [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1820\(2008\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1820(2008)).; United Nations. *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*. Adopted May 25, 2000. United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 2171, 227. Entered into force February 12, 2002. https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/2000/05/20000525%2003-37%20AM/Ch_IV_11_bp.pdf.

Verified cases of sexual violence against children in conflict settings reached 1,982 in 2024, representing a 35 percent increase compared to the previous year.¹⁸ Over the past decade (2015–2024), documented cases attributed to terrorist and violent extremist groups have risen substantially, with West Africa emerging as the most intense theatre of gendered exploitation, including forced marriage and sexual slavery. In the Lake Chad basin, Boko Haram and ISWAP account for a significant proportion of forced marriages and sexual exploitation cases, while in Somalia, Al-Shabaab remains a primary perpetrator.¹⁹

Boko Haram has abducted thousands of women and girls since the mid-2010s, subjecting them to rape, forced marriage, sexual slavery, torture, and domestic servitude.²⁰ By April 2015, 534 women and girls were rescued by Nigerian military forces, 214 of whom were pregnant.²¹ Nigerian authorities labeled the conduct as “a deliberate strategy to dominate rural residents and create a new generation of Islamist militants in Nigeria.”²² In Somalia, United Nations reporting documents sustained patterns of sexual violence perpetrated by Al-Shabaab since 2012, including hundreds of verified cases in recent years, often coinciding with political transitions and electoral periods.²³ The Islamic State institutionalized sexual slavery and forced marriage beginning in 2014, particularly targeting Yazidi, Christian, Shabak, and Turkmen women and girls.²⁴ These acts were designed not only to terrorize communities but also to destroy, displace, or forcibly assimilate ethnic and religious minorities constituting an element of genocide under international law.²⁵

Importantly, sexual and gender-based violence is structurally intertwined with child recruitment and use. Girls are frequently coerced into forced marriages with fighters, thereby entrenching dependency on the group and constraining opportunities for disengagement. In the context of ISIS, western women and girls, often characterized in media discourse as

¹⁸ United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/79/878–S/2025/247 (General Assembly, Seventy-ninth session; Security Council, Eightieth year, June 17, 2025), paras. 9, 232–268, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>.

¹⁹ United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict*, paras. 9, 256.; United Nations Secretary-General, *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the Secretary-General*, S/2025/389 (June 2025), <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/report/report-of-the-secretary-general-on-conflict-related-sexual-violence/SG-Report-2024-FINAL.pdf>.

²⁰ European Union Agency for Asylum. “Country Guidance Nigeria.” Updated 2019.

²¹ Krystel von Kumberg, “PREVENT: The Lifecycle of Child Terrorism in Boko Haram,” Next Wave, The International Center for Children and Global Security, November 2021, <https://www.next-wave-center.com/post/boko-haram-prevent-pilot>; Joshi, R. (2015). “The Conflict of A Social Movement.” Bartleby.com. Accessed February 27, 2021. <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/The-Conflict-Of-A-Social-Movement-FK22AM3VGXZW>.

²² Ibid.; Nossiter, Adam. “Boko Haram Militants Raped Hundreds of Female Captives in Nigeria.” The New York Times, 2015.

²³ Human Rights Watch. *No Place for Children: Child Recruitment, Forced Marriage, and Attacks on Schools in Somalia*. New York: Human Rights Watch, February 20, 2012. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/02/20/no-place-children/child-recruitment-forced-marriage-and-attacks-schools-somalia>; Nicholas Dudek, “PREVENT: The Lifecycle of Child Terrorism in Al-Shabaab,” Next Wave, The International Center for Children and Global Security, March 2021, <https://www.next-wave-center.com/post/al-shabaab-prevent-pilot>.

²⁴ Polizzi, Cecilia. “The Recruitment and Use of Children by Salafi-Jihadist Actors: Security and Human Rights.” Lecture presented at the ITSS Verona Summer School 2022, Verona, Italy, 2022.; Human Rights Watch. *Iraq: ISIS Escapees Describe Systematic Rape*. New York: Human Rights Watch, April 14, 2015. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/14/iraq-isis-escapees-describe-systematic-rape>. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. “*They Came to Destroy*: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis.” A/HRC/32/CRP.2. Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Council, June 15, 2016. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf.

²⁵ Ibid.

“jihadi brides”,²⁶ were also targeted through sophisticated online propaganda strategies that employed romanticized and utopian imagery of a pure “Islamic State” to facilitate recruitment, aligning individual motivations with the group’s broader state-building project, including demographic expansion, ideological reproduction, and the consolidation of loyalty through familial and social structures.

Survivors of sexual and gender-based violence face heightened risks of sexually transmitted infections, obstetric complications, infertility, psychological trauma, and social exclusion. Stigma frequently impedes reporting and access to services.

3. Refugees and Internally Displaced Children

Terrorism and violent extremism constitute major drivers of forced displacement, rendering children acutely vulnerable to compounded rights violations.²⁷ International legal frameworks, including Article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1951 Refugee Convention, impose clear obligations of protection; yet, in practice, displacement settings frequently become sites of further victimization.²⁸ Forced displacement severs children from family structures, education systems, and access to basic services, while conditions in camps, shelters, and informal settlements are often characterized by inadequate housing, sanitation, and protection mechanisms.²⁹ Such environments, in addition, expose children to heightened risks of abduction, grooming, and other forms of exploitation.³⁰

Since the mid-2010s, and particularly in the aftermath of the 2014–2019 territorial campaigns of Da’esh, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab, patterns of forced displacement linked to terrorism and violent extremism have intensified significantly.³¹ Data from UNHCR Global Trends reports indicate that the global forcibly displaced population nearly doubled from approximately 65 million in 2015 to 123.2 million by the end of 2024, with children consistently representing around 40 per cent of the total, approximately 49 million children

²⁶ Bjørgum, Maren Hald. “Jihadi Brides: Why Do Western Muslim Girls Join ISIS?” *Global Politics Review* 2, no. 2 (2016): 91–102. https://www.globalpoliticsreview.com/publications/2464-9929_v02_i02_p091.pdf; Polizzi, Cecilia. *MAFIA-JIHAD: An Intersectional Study on Youth Trajectories and Innovative Models for Security Policies Aimed at Preventing Radicalization and Terrorism*. Rome: Next Wave – The International Center for Children and Global Security, in partnership with the Siracusa International Institute for Criminal Justice and Human Rights, June 2025. Funded by the Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale.

²⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024* (Copenhagen: UNHCR, June 2025), 2–10, <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Global-Trends-2024.pdf>.

²⁸ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted November 20, 1989, art. 22, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1577, 3 (entered into force September 2, 1990), https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf; United Nations, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, adopted July 28, 1951, arts. 22–24, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 189, 137 (entered into force April 22, 1954).

²⁹ United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/79/878–S/2025/247* (General Assembly, Seventy-ninth session; Security Council, Eightieth year, June 17, 2025), paras. 160–170, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>.

³⁰ Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism: The Erosion of Children’s Rights in Armed Conflict*, Policy Note (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, January 2020), 6–8, https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist-policy-note_jan2020_lr.pdf.

³¹ United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/79/878–S/2025/247* (General Assembly, Seventy-ninth session; Security Council, Eightieth year, June 17, 2025), paras. 7, 160–170, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>.

in 2024 alone.³² In several contexts, including northeast Syria, the Lake Chad basin, and Somalia, children constitute more than half of displaced populations.³³ Over the past decade (2015–2024), the scale of displacement attributable to terrorist activity, alongside the structural vulnerabilities associated with camp and informal settlement environments, has expanded markedly, exposing increasing numbers of children to risks of recruitment and radicalization.³⁴ Patterns of displacement and associated risks exhibit pronounced regional variation. The Lake Chad basin and Somalia remain critical epicenters, where high concentrations of displaced children face immediate risks of abduction, forced recruitment, and exploitation within poorly governed camp and settlement environments.³⁵ In northeast Syria, approximately 25,500 children with actual or perceived familial ties to Da’esh, remained in camps such as Al-Hol and Roj for years, in contexts characterized by insecurity, limited service provision, and heightened exposure to extremist influence.³⁶ Subsequent shifts in control dynamics, including changes in the posture of Syrian Democratic Forces, contributed to breaches in camp security and the escape of several thousand individuals, with a significant number, including women and children, remaining unaccounted for as of April 2026.³⁷

4. Deprivation of Liberty

Despite the existence of established international norms stipulating that deprivation of liberty must be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time, children alleged to have committed terrorism and terrorism-related offences are frequently subjected to detention as the default rather than the exception, reinforced by assumptions that such children have internalized violent extremist ideologies and therefore constitute elevated security risks, alongside the presumption that alternatives to detention are not viable in terrorism-related contexts.³⁸

The arbitrary or extrajudicial deprivation of liberty of children for actual or alleged association with terrorist groups constitutes a violation of Article 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits arbitrary detention and requires that deprivation of liberty be used only as a measure of last resort.³⁹ It further contravenes established juvenile justice standards, including the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (Beijing Rules) and the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles

³² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024* (Copenhagen: UNHCR, June 2025), 2–10, <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Global-Trends-2024.pdf>.

³³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024*, 12–15; see also United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict*, paras. 240–268.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/79/878–S/2025/247* (General Assembly, Seventy-ninth session; Security Council, Eightieth year, June 17, 2025), paras. 240–268, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>

³⁶ Polizzi, Cecilia. *Children Affected by the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: Guidelines on Managing the Humanitarian and Security Dimensions in Northeast Syria*. Vol. 2, CAFF Series. Washington, DC: Next Wave – The International Center for Children and Global Security, December 20, 2023.

³⁷ War on the Rocks, “Islamic State Containment Is Collapsing in Syria,” March 19, 2026.

³⁸ Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 24 (2019) on Children’s Rights in the Child Justice System*, CRC/C/GC/24 (Geneva: United Nations, September 18, 2019), paras. 85–88; International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law, *Toolkit on Juvenile Justice in a Counter-Terrorism Context* (Valletta: IIJ, October 2017), 36–45, <https://theiij.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/IIJ-TOOLKIT-JUVENILE-JUSTICE.pdf>.

³⁹ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted November 20, 1989, art. 37(b), United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1577, 3.

Deprived of their Liberty.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding these standards, thousands of children continue to be detained on the basis of alleged association with terrorist organizations, including large numbers held in camps and detention facilities in Iraq and in northeast Syria in connection with Da'esh.⁴¹ Conditions of confinement frequently fall short of international standards. Procedural safeguards are often limited or absent, including access to legal representation and meaningful judicial review, particularly where counter-terrorism frameworks override child-rights-based protections.⁴²

Children allegedly involved in terrorism and related offenses are detained at all stages of the criminal justice process and are frequently processed under counter-terrorism provisions designed for adults.⁴³ Where apprehensions occur in the context of large-scale counter-terrorism operations or armed conflict, individuals are often detained *en masse*, with delayed or inconsistent age verification mechanism.⁴⁴ Administrative detention is also applied both to children alleged to have participated in hostilities and to those deemed security threats due to suspected association with terrorist or violent extremist groups.⁴⁵ Such detention may be imposed by military, security, or law enforcement authorities and carried out in military facilities, prisons, or juvenile institutions that lack robust judicial oversight, raising concerns regarding due process and compliance with juvenile justice frameworks.⁴⁶

Within custodial settings, children are exposed to multiple forms of violence as well as heightened risks of self-harm. Gendered patterns of harm are particularly pronounced, with girls exposed to rape and other forms of sexual violence such as threats of rape, touching, “virginity testing”, being stripped naked, invasive body searches, insults and humiliations of a sexual nature.⁴⁷ Children accused or convicted of terrorism-related offences are also particularly vulnerable to stigma, the use of violence to extract information, as well as radicalization risks within custodial settings.

Where deprivation of liberty is strictly necessary, international standards require that conditions of detention and treatment fully respect the dignity and specific needs of the child, while minimizing exposure to violence and ensuring rehabilitation and reintegration.⁴⁸

5. Education

⁴⁰ United Nations, *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice* (Beijing Rules), adopted November 29, 1985, A/RES/40/33, Rules 17.1(c), 19; United Nations, *United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty* (Havana Rules), adopted December 14, 1990, A/RES/45/113, Rules 1–2.

⁴¹ United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/79/878–S/2025/247 (General Assembly, Seventy-ninth session; Security Council, Eightieth year, June 17, 2025), paras. 160–170 and annexes.

⁴² International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law, *Toolkit on Juvenile Justice in a Counter-Terrorism Context*, 39–45.

⁴³ Polizzi, “The Crime of Terrorism,” 25–30.

⁴⁴ Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism: The Erosion of Children’s Rights in Armed Conflict*, Policy Note (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, January 2020), 6–9, https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist-policy-note_jan2020_lr.pdf.

⁴⁵ Polizzi, “The Crime of Terrorism,” 25–30.; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups*, 50–55.

⁴⁶ Polizzi, “The Crime of Terrorism,” 25–30.; Almomhammad, *ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria*, 25–30.

⁴⁷ United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict*, paras. 160–170; see also Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, “The Gendered Harms of Detention in Northeast Syria”.; A/HRC/7/3, para. 34.

⁴⁸ Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 24*, paras. 85–95; International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law, *Toolkit on Juvenile Justice*, 50–60.

Children's right to education is anchored in Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁴⁹ and reaffirmed through additional mechanisms such as the Safe Schools Declaration.⁵⁰ Yet in numerous conflict and near-conflict settings, educational systems have become deliberate targets of terrorist and violent extremist groups, which have attacked schools, destroyed infrastructure, or repurposed curricula to embed ideological precepts within formal learning environments.⁵¹ In 2024 alone, 1,265 schools were affected globally, reflecting a 44 per cent increase compared to the previous year, alongside continued military use of educational facilities across multiple theatres of conflict.⁵²

Boko Haram – which literally translates to “Western Education is Forbidden” – has enacted one of the most violent campaigns against education in history.⁵³ Since 2009, Boko Haram claimed the lives of 2,295 teachers and displaced 19,000 more across Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States. An estimated 1,400 schools have been destroyed, damaged or looted and more than 600,000 children lost access to education.⁵⁴ In addition to secular education, Boko Haram extensively targets female students. The infamous abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok in April 2014 which spurred international outrage and the “Bring Back our Girls” social media campaign, led international notoriety to Boko Haram violence.⁵⁵

The lack of access to education also contributes to the recruitment and use of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups. In Nigeria, the education system is overburdened by strong demographic growth.⁵⁶ In 2015, 44% of the population was under fifteen years of age and according to UNESCO, 8.73 million children had no access to education at all in previous years. Illiteracy affects 72.8% of the youth population and was reported as one of the primary factors driving⁵⁷ youth involvement with Boko Haram in Kano, Gombe and Borno states.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), *Non-State Armed Groups and Attacks on Education: A Scoping Paper* (New York: GCPEA, 2022), 10–20, https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/GCPEA_NSAG_ScopingPaper.pdf.

⁵⁰ Safe Schools Declaration, endorsed May 28–29, 2015, Oslo, Norway, guideline 3, <https://ssd.protectingeducation.org/>.

⁵¹ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted November 20, 1989, art. 28, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1577, 3 (entered into force September 2, 1990), https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf; United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/79/878–S/2025/247 (General Assembly, Seventy-ninth session; Security Council, Eightieth year, June 17, 2025), paras. 218–222, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>.

⁵² United Nations Secretary-General. *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*. A/79/878–S/2025/247. General Assembly, Seventy-ninth session; Security Council, Eightieth year. June 17, 2025. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>. UNESCO. "UNESCO Warns on Dramatic Increase in Attacks Against Schools in 2024." Press release, September 10, 2025. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-warns-dramatic-increase-attacks-against-schools-2024>.

⁵³ Krystel von Kumberg, “PREVENT: The Lifecycle of Child Terrorism in Boko Haram,” Next Wave, The International Center for Children and Global Security, November 2021, <https://www.next-wave-center.com/post/boko-haram-prevent-pilot>.

⁵⁴ Adedigba, Azeezat. "Nigeria: Boko Haram Kills 2,295 Teachers in North-East – Minister." Premium Times / All Africa, May 3, 2018.; O'Neil, Siobhan, and Kato Van Broeckhoven. *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*. New York: United Nations University, 2018.

⁵⁵ Zenn, Jacob. "Boko Haram and the Kidnapping of the Chibok Schoolgirls." *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 5 (May 2014): 1–8.

⁵⁶ Staff, Wes. "Education in Nigeria." WENR, Word Education News + Reviews, 2017.

⁵⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) <http://data.uis.unesco.org>.

⁵⁸ Mefor, Law. "Nyanya Tragedy and Surviving Asymmetry Terrorist War." *Punch*, April 16, 2013.

Similarly, in Somalia, millions of children are out of school due to poverty, violence and instability.⁵⁹ With over 70 percent illiteracy, in 2010, Oxfam defined the country as “the worst place in the world to go to school”.⁶⁰ Terrorist groups in the region capitalized on the educational vacuum by systemizing the education sector across all levels. In areas under its control, Al-Shabaab established Quranic⁶¹ schools (*duksis*) and education programs. In Al-Shabaab’s strongholds of Bay and Bakool, as many as 85 percent of children join the group after graduating from its schools and being indoctrinated to its ideological curriculum.⁶² During its period of territorial control in Syria and Iraq, ISIS imposed an extreme interpretation of Islamic law that was then embedded within all facets of its governance structures. Education and the formal education system were instrumentalized to cultivate, *en masse*, a new generation of adherents and militants, frequently referred to within the group’s own discourse as the “Cubs of the Caliphate.” ISIS established the *Diwan al-Taalim*,⁶³ overseen in part through the *hisba*, to implement an ideologically driven scholastic curriculum, and subordinating teachers to doctrinal conformity.⁶⁴ Compliance was enforced through coercive measures, and individuals who resisted or failed to adhere to imposed standards faced severe punishment.

The consequences for children extend beyond immediate exposure during attacks, as the disruption of educational access weakens processes of socialization, identity formation, and civic development, reinforcing patterns of illiteracy, economic marginalization, and social exclusion.

6. Health

Terrorist activity frequently affects health infrastructure, either through direct attacks on hospitals and medical personnel or through deliberate embedding within medical facilities and surrounding environments. Such tactics impede or altogether deny children access to essential health services, constituting grave violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.⁶⁵

Recent data underscore the scale of this phenomenon. In 2024, verified reports documented over 3,600 incidents of violence against or obstruction of healthcare globally, the highest recorded, including more than 1,100 cases of damage or destruction to health facilities and the killing of over 900 health workers.⁶⁶ These attacks contribute to a broader pattern of violations against civilian infrastructure in conflict and near conflict zones, particularly where

⁵⁹ UNICEF “Education”; out of 4.7 million school-age children (USAID “Somalia Education” March 19, 2021).

⁶⁰ “Somalia: The worst place in the world to be a school child” Oxfam, September 20, 2010.

⁶¹ Skjelderup; Michael Weddegjerde. 2020. “Jihadi governance and traditional authority structures: al-Shabaab and Clan Elders in Southern Somalia, 2008-2012”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 31(6): 1174-1195 (p.1181); Marchal. 2018b. “The Motivators and Drivers of Al-Shabaab”.

⁶² Maruf, Harun, and Dan Joseph. *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018.

⁶³ Education Department

⁶⁴ al-Jablawi, Hosam. “A Closer Look at the Educational System of ISIS.” *SyriaSource* (blog), Atlantic Council, April 26, 2016. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/a-closer-look-at-isis-s-educational-system/>.

⁶⁵ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2286 (2016), adopted May 3, 2016, S/RES/2286 (2016); United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted November 20, 1989, art. 24, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1577, 3.

⁶⁶ Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition, *Epidemic of Violence: Violence Against Health Care in Conflict 2024* (Geneva: Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition, 2025), 2–4, <https://safeguarding-health.com/>.

terrorist organizations operate in proximity to civilian populations or rely on territorial control and the provision of substitute services.⁶⁷

Prolonged exposure to violence, forced recruitment, sexual abuse, displacement, and the collapse of health systems has generated elevated rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, developmental delays, and other long-term psychosocial impairments in children. Recruitment processes themselves exacerbate health risks, including forced substance use, untreated injuries, exposure to transmittable diseases, often creating significant barriers to psychosocial recovery and successful rehabilitation and social reintegration.⁶⁸

Mental health impacts are particularly profound. Trauma frequently manifests in behavioral dysregulation, aggression, withdrawal, or substance dependence—outcomes that, absent sustained psychosocial intervention, can impede reintegration and increase vulnerability to re-recruitment or recidivism. In displacement settings and protracted crises, including parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, children face compounded stressors linked to instability, stigma, and limited access to mental health services.

7. Pre-Existing Vulnerabilities and Child Protection Gaps

Claims of voluntariness in children’s participation in terrorism and related offenses have at times been instrumentalized, across both conflict and non-conflict settings, to justify a lower degree of regard for children’s rights and legal standards in criminal proceedings, including the erosion of juvenile justice principles. With the expansion of digital technologies and online recruitment and radicalization infrastructures, voluntary association has become, in some contexts, the predominant mechanism through which children engage with terrorist and extremist actors.

Notwithstanding these evolving modalities, it must be noted that no child recruitment or radicalization process can be regarded as truly voluntary. The ‘voluntary’ character of association is typically shaped by complex and intersecting structural and psychosocial drivers. Often conceptualized as “push and pull factors”,⁶⁹ these factors should not be examined in isolation. Recruitment and radicalization pathways are rarely linear; rather, they reflect the interaction of individual experiences with broader structural conditions. Within this framework, two analytically distinct but empirically interrelated categories of drivers may be identified. Push factors refer to structural conditions conducive to violent extremism

⁶⁷ Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition, *Epidemic of Violence*, 5–10; United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/79/878–S/2025/247 (General Assembly, Seventy-ninth session; Security Council, Eightieth year, June 17, 2025), paras. 218–222, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>.

⁶⁸ 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 Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017), 30–35, 45–50, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups the Role of the Justice System.E.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook%20on%20Children%20Recruited%20and%20Exploited%20by%20Terrorist%20and%20Violent%20Extremist%20Groups%20the%20Role%20of%20the%20Justice%20System.pdf).

⁶⁹ European Commission, Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). *The Root Causes of Violent Extremism*. RAN Expert Pool Paper. Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, July 2024. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/63770ad9-8c0b-44c4-a568-254bb22a8009_en; Hedayah Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism. *Factors Contributing to Radicalization: A Conceptual Framework*. Abu Dhabi: Hedayah, [n.d.]. <https://hedayah.com/app/uploads/2021/10/Factors-Contributing-to-Radicalization.pdf>.

and the broader environments from which it emerges. These include socio-economic exclusion and limited opportunities; marginalization and discrimination; weak governance and violations of the rule of law; prolonged or unresolved armed conflicts; and environments in which radicalization may occur, including detention settings. Pull factors, by contrast, operate at the individual level and encompass personal motivations, identity, and psychosocial processes that may transform grievances into violent action. These include individual background experiences; perceived collective victimization; distorted political and religious interpretations; and the influence of leadership structures and social networks. In this sense, push factors shape the structural environment of vulnerability, while pull factors influence susceptibility, meaning making, and the consolidation of identity within extremist milieus.⁷⁰

The relative weight and interplay of these factors is nonetheless context dependent. In conflict and near-conflict environments, child recruitment and radicalization processes are often shaped by direct exposure to violence, coercion, community-level pressures, family or peer affiliations, survival imperatives—including access to food, shelter, protection, or basic economic sustenance—and the physical proximity of insurgent or terrorist actors. In such contexts, children’s engagement should not be presumed to stem from ideological commitment or pre-existing attachment to extremist beliefs, but rather from the need to secure immediate and critical necessities, with ideological internalization emerging progressively as a consequence of sustained exposure, dependency, and socialization within extremist environments. In non-conflict settings, by contrast, pathways into violent extremism are more individualized and digitally mediated, reflecting a different interplay of push and pull factors, including but not limited to identity-seeking dynamics, social isolation, and needs for belonging. While the modalities of youth engagement with extremist ecosystems differ across offline and online contexts, both nonetheless converge in producing comparable trajectories and outcomes.

Children’s evolving capacity, combined with their heightened susceptibility to influence, coercion, and manipulation, and the range of social and psychological pressures embedded in recruitment and radicalization processes, preclude not only the existence of valid, informed consent as a matter of law, but reflect several protection gaps that precede recruitment and radicalization. Children’s conditions are not merely humanitarian, children’s rights or child protection concerns.⁷¹ Reports⁷² consistently document the exploitation of

⁷⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Counter-Terrorism Module 2: Drivers of Violent Extremism*. Education for Justice (E4J) University Module Series. Vienna: UNODC, [n.d.]. <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/drivers-of-violent-extremism.html>.

⁷¹ The total number of verified grave violations against children in armed conflict reached 41,370 in 2024, representing a 25 percent increase compared to 2023, with non-state armed groups, including terrorist organizations, responsible for a substantial proportion of these violations.; United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/79/878–S/2025/247* (General Assembly, Seventy-ninth session; Security Council, Eightieth year, June 17, 2025), paras. 5–7, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>

⁷² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups*, 10–15, 30–35; see also United Nations Secretary-General, *Children and Armed Conflict*, paras. 1–10.; Cecilia Polizzi, "Youth Radicalization: A New Frontier in Terrorism and Security," in *Global Terrorism Index 2025* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.; Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism: The Erosion of Children’s Rights in Armed Conflict*, Policy Note (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, January 2020), https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist-policy-note_jan2020_lr.pdf; see also Polizzi, "Youth Radicalization."

child vulnerabilities by terrorist and violent extremist groups to facilitate recruitment, radicalization, and intergenerational transmission of violent ideologies. The cumulative effect is the emergence of self-reinforcing cycles in which structural exclusion, pervasive insecurity, lack of access to basic resources and human rights, social marginalization, trauma, and search for identity and belonging intersect with recruitment and radicalization risks and are actively leveraged by terrorist and extremist actors for such purposes.

8. Relevance and adequacy of existing standards for the protection of children affected by terrorism and violent extremism

Children constitute a protected category under international law, and a robust normative architecture governs their rights across peacetime and armed conflict contexts. Provisions relating to the protection of children's rights exist within various legal systems at the international, regional, and national levels, reflecting a broad commitment to safeguarding children's welfare.

The central instrument in this regard is the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. The Convention codifies civil, political, economic, social, health, and cultural rights of children, and establishes prohibition of direct participation of children under the age of eighteen in hostilities. Its Optional Protocols further strengthen protections concerning children in armed conflict and the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography.

Complementing the Convention, the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007) offer authoritative guidance on the prevention of child recruitment, the release and social reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups, and the establishment of the most protective environment for children, in addition to providing definitions and overarching principles for engagement with children associated with armed groups or armed forces.

Children associated with non-state armed groups (OAGs), including designated terrorist organizations, are to be regarded primarily as victims of crimes under international law. This approach derives from the prohibition on the recruitment and use of children in hostilities and reflects the recognition of children's vulnerability, determined by limited cognitive maturity, and heightened susceptibility to coercion and manipulation.

Accordingly, international humanitarian law and international human rights law converge in establishing that children who may have committed unlawful acts must be treated in accordance with juvenile justice standards, which emphasize due process, alternatives to detention, rehabilitation and social reintegration.

Despite the clarity of this normative framework, and the mandatory character of adequate legal, institutional, and operational frameworks to respect, protect, and fulfill children's rights in the administration of justice, counterterrorism contexts have increasingly revealed what may be described as an uncompromising erosion of children's rights. Broad and sometimes ambiguous definitions of terrorism enabled the criminalization of membership to terrorist organizations and have facilitated the prosecution of children for membership-based offenses, often bypassing adequate assessment of the degree of involvement of the

children concerned to criminal activities. Consequently, regardless the role performed by a child during association with a terrorist organization, or the way a child has become involved with a terrorist organization, children may be labeled as perpetrators of crimes. In practice, children's roles within a terrorist organization, ranging from forced recruitment to survival-based association, are frequently subsumed under collective security frameworks.

The broadening of counterterrorism legislation and the expansion of acts constituting terrorism and/or related offenses have further exposed children to practices inconsistent with international children's rights and juvenile justice standards, including unlawful and/or arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and, in some contexts, allegations of torture or arbitrary deprivation of liberty on national security grounds.

Between 2001 and 2018, at least 140 governments adopted new counterterrorism legislation and administrative measures by reference to new threats, and since 2013 at least 47 countries passed laws relating to Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs), becoming the largest wave of counterterrorism legislation after 9/11. While governments possess legitimate security imperatives, expanded security policy and legislation contracted human rights, leading to approaches that have proven detrimental to children and counterproductive to security.

Two broader structural tensions merit emphasis.

First, terrorism is inherently incompatible with human rights, as it deliberately undermines fundamental freedoms and the international human rights framework. Yet the legitimacy of counterterrorism responses depends precisely on adherence to the rule of law and human rights standards. The normative superiority of rights-based frameworks must therefore remain central in counterterrorism policy, laws and regulations. Responses grounded in a lack of adherence to international standards risk replicating the very erosion of fundamental principles that terrorism seeks to provoke. The post-9/11 security paradigm further contributed to a perceived tension between liberty and security, sometimes positioning human rights as incompatible with counterterrorism objectives. Yet this framing is analytically and normatively misplaced. Human rights law does not impede security; rather, it provides the legal and ethical foundation for sustainable security policies.

Accordingly, the adequacy of existing standards is not primarily a question of normative absence, but rather of implementation, coherence, and integration within security frameworks. Strengthening alignment between child rights instruments and security policies is therefore essential to ensuring that responses to terrorism and violent extremism remain both legally compliant and strategically effective.

Second, despite sustained counterterrorism efforts over more than two decades, the security establishment continues to assess terrorism as a real and ongoing threat, with interventions challenged by the persistent resurgence of violent actors and their capacity to attract a continuous flow of recruits, supporters, and sympathizers, including a marked increase in reported youth radicalization cases globally as of 2026. Terrorist and violent extremist groups understand children as core assets. By contrast, international security policy has not consistently accorded children associated with terrorist and violent extremist actors, nor the requirement for child-sensitive approaches, equivalent centrality.

III. AXIS II: DEMOCRACY

The current global climate is shaped by shifting political scenarios, intensifying geopolitical competition, protracted conflict, proliferation of hybrid threats in the information domain and digitally amplified polarization. Together, these stressors test long-held assumptions about democratic resilience and multilateralism.⁷³ A sustained pattern of decline in democratic performance has been documented across multiple regions, with recent reports⁷⁴ noting a regression on key democratic indicators. Legitimacy deficits affect multilateral mechanisms and the rules-based order that underpinned post-World War II.

Global trends indicate that, as systems of government, democracies are now outnumbered for the first time in twenty years, with 72% of the world's population living under forms of authoritarian rule, the highest level since 1978.⁷⁵ These shifts have coincided with weakening social cohesion, rising distrust, and heightened susceptibility to conspiracy theories, accompanied by diminishing confidence in professional news media across many countries.⁷⁶ According to the 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer, covering 28 jurisdictions, nearly seven out of ten respondents say they fear government officials are deliberately misleading the public.⁷⁷

Frailty in the public sphere - the space where social and political issues are identified and debated, public opinion is formed, and collective identities are constructed, validated, or contested⁷⁸ - is increasingly exploited by both state and non-state actors leveraging public uncertainty and social anxiety to advance political or geopolitical ends, thereby polarizing societies, eroding trust in institutions, and destabilizing democratic processes.⁷⁹

The impacts of terrorism on democracy are widely acknowledged.⁸⁰ Acts of terrorism, including mass casualty events, or the fear terrorism generates,⁸¹ not only inflict physical

⁷³ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move*, Executive Summary (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2025), <https://interactive.idea.int/gsod-2025/executive-summary>.

⁷⁴ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move*, Executive Summary (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2025), <https://interactive.idea.int/gsod-2025/executive-summary>; see also Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2024), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2024/mounting-damage-flawed-elections-and-armed-conflict>; V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, 2024), https://www.v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf.

⁷⁵ Aldo Magoga, "Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index," in UNESCO, *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Global Report 2022/2025; Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace* (Paris: UNESCO, 2025), <https://www.unesco.org/en/world-media-trends/2025/data>.

⁷⁶ UNESCO, *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Global Report 2022/2025; Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace* (Paris: UNESCO, 2025), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000396638>.

⁷⁷ Edelman Trust Institute, *2026 Edelman Trust Barometer: Trust Amid Insularity* (Chicago: Edelman, 2026), <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2026/trust-barometer>.

⁷⁸ Jordan McSwiney, Selen A. Ercan, and Peter Balint, "Building Democratic Resilience: Protecting the Public Sphere from Violent Extremism," *Crime & Delinquency* 71, no. 3 (2025): [page range if known, e.g., 789–812], <https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287241271209>.

⁷⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); see also Donatella della Porta et al., *How Social Movements Can Save Democracy: Democratic Innovations from Below* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020); J. M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

⁸⁰ Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Civil Sphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁸¹ Jennifer L. Merolla and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, *Democracy at Risk: How Terrorist Threats Affect the Public* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

harm but also destabilize democratic institutions, distort public debates, discredit moderates, empower political extremes, and polarize societies.⁸² Threat exposure, whether actual or perceived, may also increase support for stringent security measures and restrictions for civil liberties.⁸³ By sowing division and distrust, ideologically oriented actors seek to redraw cultural, ethnic, and religious boundaries within the public sphere, eroding inclusive collective identities, disseminating divisive discourse, and polarizing ideally tolerant, pluralistic societies into intolerant and exclusionary ones.⁸⁴

Extremism is no longer limited to the movements that once defined it and can therefore no longer be assigned exclusively to them. The current trends indicate a fusion of populist, conspiratorial, and extremist worldviews that challenge the foundational principles of liberal democracy, including the reconciliation of competing interests, the separation of powers, and the protection of minority rights.⁸⁵ Extremist actors increasingly attempt to align themselves with non-extremist movements, including climate action groups, in order to amplify their influence, legitimize violent agendas, and gain greater acceptance within segments of mainstream society. Anti-democratic activity currently manifests in novel forms, including the so-called “anti-constitutional delegitimization of the state,”⁸⁶ which has emerged from protest movements against COVID-19 containment measures and, more recently, on energy policy, inflation, or Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Digital transformation has exacerbated these dynamics. Social media environments facilitate echo chambers and ideological segregation that reinforce polarization,⁸⁷ and undermine the inclusive deliberation essential for democratic governance.⁸⁸ Globally, 82 per cent of people aged 15 to 24 use the Internet,⁸⁹ and in the United States, 96% of teens report daily usage,

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Shana Kushner Gadarian, “The Politics of Threat: How Terrorism News Shapes Foreign Policy Attitudes,” *Journal of Politics* 72, no. 2 (2010): 469–483, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002238161000005X>.

⁸⁴ J. M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); see also Andrew Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 49–80, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2006.31.1.49>.

⁸⁵ Frank Foley, “The Effectiveness of Ethnonationalist Terrorism,” in *When Does Terrorism Work?*, ed. Diego Muro (London: Routledge, 2018), 87–107; see also Peter Krause, “When Terrorism Works: Explaining Success and Failure Across Varying Targets and Objectives,” in *When Does Terrorism Work?*, ed. Diego Muro (London: Routledge, 2018), 47–61.

⁸⁶ Stephan Blancke, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and the Delegitimization of the State: The Case of Germany,” *European Intelligence Academy Research Paper Series* 6 (January 2024), https://stephan.blancke.de/downloads/2024_0101_eia_paper_6.pdf (or available at <https://rieas.gr/researchareas/editorial/4840-russian-hybrid-warfare-and-the-delegitimization-of-the-state-the-case-of-germany>); see also Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), “Efforts to Delegitimise the State,” accessed March 2026, https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/EN/topics/efforts-to-delegitimise-the-state/efforts-to-delegitimise-the-state_node.html (official overview of anti-constitutional activities in Germany aimed at eroding trust in democratic institutions, rule of law, and state functionality, including through protests, conspiracy theories, and intimidation).

⁸⁷ Ezgi Kubin and Christian von Sikorski, “The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: A Systematic Review,” *Annals of the International Communication Association* 45, no. 3 (2021): 188–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070>; see also Praveen N. Vasist, Debayan Chatterjee, and S. Krishnan, “The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A Cross-country Configural Narrative,” *Information Processing & Management* 60, no. 5 (September 2023): article 103426, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2023.103426> (also available at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10106894/>).

⁸⁸ Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁸⁹ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), “Youth Internet Use,” in *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2025* (Geneva: ITU, 2025), <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2025/10/15/ff25-youth-internet-use/> (“Globally, 82 per cent of people aged 15 to 24 use the Internet, ten percentage points more than among the

with near-constant online presence doubling since 2014-15.⁹⁰ The Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2024⁹¹ identified a 'platform reset' among younger audiences. Rather than relying on news outlets, young people increasingly turn to social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, where most of the content lacks rigorous verification.⁹²

In a climate in which social isolation, distrust, and weakened civic bonds are reshaping young people's relationship to democracy,⁹³ concerns about exposure to harmful content, radicalization and the potential for spillover into real-world harm have become salient.⁹⁴

Psychology and neuroscience suggest that adults possess consolidated cognitive and defensive mechanisms against external manipulation.⁹⁵ Absent of these filters, younger individuals are more likely to continuously change their political or religious identity, and narrative exposure and propaganda, can exert a more profound and destabilizing influence on identity construction among youth. Evidence from the Kettering Foundation/Gallup Democracy for All Project,⁹⁶ based on a nationally representative survey of more than 20,000 individuals in the United States, suggests that while the majority of Americans reject political violence, young adults aged 18–29, especially frequent social media users, are comparatively more likely to regard it as "sometimes acceptable" in pursuit of political objectives.

Online hate speech, harassment, and group-focused enmity - including sexism, racism, antisemitism, and anti-Muslim hostility - have proliferated, with 67% of Internet users reporting exposure in the 2022-2025 period.⁹⁷ Such exposure extends beyond questions of

rest of the population (72 per cent). This generational gap, observed in every region, has been slowly shrinking over the last four years.").

⁹⁰ Pew Research Center, "Teens and Internet, Device Access Fact Sheet," July 10,

2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/teens-and-internet-device-access-fact-sheet/>

⁹¹ Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Digital News Report 2024* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2024), <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024>

⁹² Louisa Ha, *Behind the Screens: Insights from Digital Content Creators* (Paris: UNESCO, 2024), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392006>.

⁹³ Susan Benesch, *Defending the Public Sphere from Hate Speech: Global Challenges and Responses*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report 354 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, March 2014), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2014/03/defending-public-sphere-hate-speech-global-challenges-and-responses>; see also United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2686 (2023), S/RES/2686 (2023) (adopted June 14, 2023), <https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2686>

⁹⁴ Susan Benesch, *Defending the Public Sphere from Hate Speech: Global Challenges and Responses*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report 354 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, March 2014), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2014/03/defending-public-sphere-hate-speech-global-challenges-and-responses>; see also United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2686 (2023), S/RES/2686 (2023) (adopted June 14, 2023), <https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2686>.

⁹⁵ Jonas T. Kaplan, Sarah I. Gimbel, and Sam Harris, "Neural Correlates of Maintaining One's Political Beliefs in the Face of Counterevidence," *Scientific Reports* 6 (2016): article 39589, <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep39589>; see also Cecilia Polizzi, "Inside Salafi-jihadism: The Rationale Driving the Recruitment and Use of Children," guest lecture, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, College Park, August 2, 2021, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7H8dsUZ1lo>.

⁹⁶ Gallup, "Youth Loneliness, Political Violence," Gallup Poll, August 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/697745/youth-loneliness-political-violence.aspx>.

⁹⁷ UNESCO, *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Global Report 2022/2025; Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace* (Paris: UNESCO, 2025), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000396638>.

digital incivility and entails significant psychosocial and political implications.⁹⁸ Research indicates that young people exposed to online hate speech frequently experience negative emotional responses, including anger, sadness, and shame,⁹⁹ alongside diminished levels of interpersonal and institutional trust.¹⁰⁰ These sentiments may contribute to processes of radicalization,¹⁰¹ particularly where targets lack effective coping mechanisms.¹⁰² In digitally saturated environments marked by contentious public debates on migration, social rights, or gender equality, the normalization of hostility and intolerance risks reinforcing grievance-based identities and receptivity to violent group narratives.¹⁰³

Beyond developmental vulnerabilities, youth political marginalization also has structural dimensions. Young adults remain significantly underrepresented in formal political institutions relative to their share of the population.¹⁰⁴ Cross-national research further indicates declining attachment to democratic institutions among younger cohorts in established democracies,¹⁰⁵ alongside broader patterns of distrust and weakened civic engagement.¹⁰⁶ When institutional channels are perceived as unresponsive and political efficacy diminishes, younger citizens may disengage from conventional participation or seek alternative, anti-system forms of political expression. Such dynamics do not deterministically produce radicalization; however, they may create conditions in which anti-democratic narratives gain greater resonance.

Youth radicalization is increasingly observed within democratic societies and constitutes both a symptom and a stress test of democratic resilience. When young people experience social isolation, pervasive online hostility, and weakened civic bonds, their disengagement from public life and heightened receptivity to radical narratives simultaneously reflect and exacerbate structural vulnerabilities in democratic systems. The capacity of democracies to integrate youth voices, mitigate exclusion, and sustain institutional trust therefore functions as a key indicator of the resilience of democratic institutions: resilient democracies can

⁹⁸ Praveen N. Vasist, Debayan Chatterjee, and S. Krishnan, "The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A Cross-country Configurational Narrative," *Information Processing & Management* 60, no. 5 (September 2023): article 103426, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2023.103426>.

⁹⁹ UK Safer Internet Centre, *Creating a Better Internet for All: Young People's Experiences of Online Empowerment + Online Hate* (London: UK Safer Internet Centre, 2016), <http://childnetsic.s3.amazonaws.com/ufiles/SID2016//CreatingABetterInternetforAll.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ Markus Näsi, Pekka Räsänen, James Hawdon, Emma Holkeri, and Atte Oksanen, "Exposure to Online Hate Material and Social Trust among Finnish Youth," *Information Technology & People* 28, no. 3 (2015): 607–622, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-09-2014-0198>.

¹⁰¹ Michał Bilewicz and Wiktor Soral, "Hate Speech Epidemic: The Dynamic Effects of Derogatory Language on Intergroup Relations and Political Radicalization," *Political Psychology* 41, no. 1 (February 2020): 3–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12670>.

¹⁰² Nora Krause, Clara Ballaschk, Franziska Schulze-Reichelt, Julia Kansok-Dusche, Sebastian Wachs, Wilfried Schubarth, and Ludwig Bilz, „Ich lass mich da nicht klein machen!“ – Eine qualitative Studie zur Bewältigung von Hatespeech durch Schüler/innen [I don't let them get me down! – A qualitative study on students' coping with hate speech], *Zeitschrift für Bildungsforschung* 11, no. 1 (2021): 169–185, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s35834-021-00291-w>; see also Sebastian Wachs, Manuel Gámez-Guadix, Michelle F. Wright, Anke Görzig, and Wilfried Schubarth, "How do adolescents cope with cyberhate? Psychometric properties and socio-demographic differences of a coping with cyberhate scale," *Computers in Human Behavior* 104 (March 2020): 106167, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.106167>.

¹⁰³ IUVENTA – Slovak Youth Institute (National Agency), "From Online Hate Speech to the Extremism: Perspectives & Solutions," training course, European Training Calendar, SALTO-YOUTH, <http://trainings.salto-youth.net/8008> (accessed March 2026), <https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/european-training-calendar/training/from-online-hate-speech-to-the-extremism-perspectives-solutions.8008/>

¹⁰⁴ Stockemer, Daniel, and Aksel Sundström, *Youth Without Representation: The Absence of Young Adults in Parliaments, Cabinets, and Candidacies*, University of Michigan Press, 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Foa, Roberto Stefan, and Yascha Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2016, pp. 5–17.

¹⁰⁶ Norris, Pippa, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

channel dissent, uncertainty, and identity formation into deliberative participation, whereas systems that fail to do so risk intensifying polarization, legitimizing anti-democratic narratives, and fostering conditions conducive to radicalization. Addressing these dynamics is therefore not solely a matter of countering extremist activity; it is fundamentally about safeguarding the participatory, deliberative, and identity-forming mechanisms that underpin and sustain democratic governance.

IV. AXIS III: GLOBAL SECURITY

Global security threats have evolved from predominantly state-centric confrontations to increasingly networked, transnational, and ideologically driven forms of violence. Decentralized extremist movements, hybrid warfare tactics, and digitally mediated recruitment infrastructures have altered both the scale and speed of risks within the current threat environment.

The recruitment and radicalization of youth have become an increasing concern. Over the last few years, a rising prominence of minors and young people in counter-terrorism cases and manifestations of youth involvement with terrorism and terrorism-related offenses have emerged consistently as a dimension of the threat landscape.¹⁰⁷ Home Office data in 2021 indicated a record-level increase in underage arrests for terror-related offenses¹⁰⁸ prompting then-Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick to issue a cautionary statement regarding a new wave of extremism among children.¹⁰⁹ By 2023, this trend had intensified, with forty-two arrests for offences ranging from the dissemination of terrorist propaganda to the encouragement and planning of violent attacks; in 2025, children continued to represent a significant portion of referrals, with those aged 11 to 15 forming the largest group at 36% and those aged 16 to 17 accounting for a further 13%.¹¹⁰

Youth radicalization is not confined to the United Kingdom. In 2024, nearly two-thirds of ISIS-linked arrests in Europe involved teenagers.¹¹¹ In Australia, authorities elevated the

¹⁰⁷ Cecilia Polizzi, "Terrorism Trends in the OSCE Region: Youth Radicalization 2025," keynote address, Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Combating Organised Crime and Serious Crimes in the OSCE Region, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Rome, June 5–6, 2025, Aula dei Gruppi parlamentari, Camera dei deputati.

¹⁰⁸ Home Office, *Individuals Referred to and Supported Through the Prevent Programme Statistics*, last updated December 5, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-statistics>.

¹⁰⁹ Lizzie Dearden, "Children Forming 'New Generation of Extremists' in UK as Terror Threat Shifts, Cressida Dick Warns," *Independent*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/terror-threat-uk-children-cressida-dick-b1919154.html>.

¹¹⁰ Cecilia Polizzi, "Youth Radicalisation: A New Frontier in Terrorism and Security," in *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025), 86–91, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>; see also Home Office, *Individuals Referred to and Supported Through the Prevent Programme, April 2024 to March 2025* (London: Home Office, November 6, 2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-prevent-to-march-2025/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-april-2024-to-march-2025>.

¹¹¹ Cecilia Polizzi, "Youth Radicalisation: A New Frontier in Terrorism and Security," in *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025), 86–91; see also Nick Paton Walsh, Muhammad Darwish, Saskya Vandoorne, and Benjamin Brown, "ISIS-K's Online Recruitment Poses Security Threat to West Ahead of Olympic Games," *CNN*, July 25, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/25/world/isis-k-online-recruitment-security-threat-olympics-intl-cmd/index.html>; "CIA Says Foiled Plot to Attack Taylor Swift Shows in Vienna Aimed to Kill 'Tens of Thousands'," *Euronews*, August 29, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/08/29/cia-says-foiled-plot-to-attack-taylor-swift-shows-in-vienna-aimed-to-kill-tens-of-thousand>; Petter Nesser and Wassim Nasr, "The Threat Matrix Facing the Paris Olympics," *CTC Sentinel* 17, no. 6 (June 2024): 1–11, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-threat-matrix-facing-the-paris-olympics/>.

national terror threat level from “possible” to “probable,” citing a heightened vulnerability stemming from emerging youth-oriented threats.¹¹² Youth radicalization risk awareness has been mirrored internationally, with the ProtectEU: Agenda to Prevent and Counter Terrorism 2026¹¹³ highlighting the surge in minors involved with violent extremism across ideological lines, alongside a joint Five Eyes call for “whole-of-society” action¹¹⁴ and the implementation of social media restrictions for users under 16 in several countries.¹¹⁵

Extremist actors have long recruited and radicalized minors to bolster operational capabilities, secure the continuity of their movements and the preservation of ideological paradigms over time.¹¹⁶ In conflict and near-conflict zones, the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and their affiliates exploit the demographic pool, systemic inequality, poverty, governance deficits, and disenfranchisement to replenish their ranks, co-opting thousands of children every year in terror and terror-related operations.¹¹⁷ The systematic involvement of children with terrorist ecosystems emerges as a recurring feature of jihadist warfare strategy. Child recruitment and radicalization are neither incidental nor purely responsive to immediate military necessity; rather, they represent an organized and adaptive component of the conduct of irregular warfare, institutionalized as a mechanism to mitigate asymmetries in military power, sustain wars of attrition, and embed an intergenerational dimension into political violence.¹¹⁸

Technological innovation effectively collapsed the boundaries between in-theater and out-of-theater dynamics. The flow of Foreign Terrorist Fighters to the Middle East since the onset of the Syrian conflict, including thousands of foreign children from at least sixty nationalities traveling either independently or alongside family members to enter conflict zones in Syria and Iraq and affiliate with the self-proclaimed caliphate and other insurgent terrorist organizations, highlights the inherently transnational character of contemporary child radicalization risks. In many cases, mobilizations were facilitated by sustained exposure to

¹¹² Paul Sakkal, “ASIO Raises Terrorism Threat Level Due to Emerging ‘Twisted’ Ideologies,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 5, 2024, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/asio-raises-terror-threat-level-to-probable-20240805-p5jzj7.html>.

¹¹³ European Commission, “ProtectEU: Commission Presents New Counterterrorism Agenda,” Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, February 26, 2026, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/protecteu-commission-presents-new-counterterrorism-agenda-2026-02-26_en

¹¹⁴ “Young People and Violent Extremism: A Call for Collective Action,” Five Eyes Insights, October 2024.

¹¹⁵ Taylor Lorenz, “The World Wants to Ban Children from Social Media, but There Will Be Grave Consequences for Us All,” *Guardian*, March 2, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/mar/02/ban-children-social-media-biometric-data-surveilled>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid 40.

¹¹⁷ Ibid 40.; See also Cecilia Polizzi, “Beyond Borders: NATO, Human Security and Minors as a Pivot for Stability in the Sahel,” *NATO Defense Against Terrorism Review (DATR)* 19 (October 2024): [page range if known], <https://www.coedat.nato.int/publication/datr/volumes/datr19.pdf>; see also Guillaume Soto-Mayor, “The Islamic State in Central Africa and the Centrality of Children in its Expansion Strategy,” Next Wave, The International Center for Children and Global Security, July 2023, <https://www.next-wave-center.com/post/the-islamic-state-in-central-africa-and-the-centrality-of-children-in-its-expansion-strategy>; Guillaume Soto-Mayor, “Generational Warfare in the Sahel: The Khilafa Cubs and the Dynamics of Violent Insurgency within the Islamic State Province,” Next Wave, The International Center for Children and Global Security, November 2023, <https://www.next-wave-center.com/post/generational-warfare-in-the-sahel-the-khilafa-cubs-and-the-dynamics-of-violent-insurgency-within-th>; Krystel von Kumberg, “PREVENT: The Lifecycle of Child Terrorism in Boko Haram,” Next Wave, The International Center for Children and Global Security, November 2021, <https://www.next-wave-center.com/post/boko-haram-prevent-pilot>; Nicholas Dudek, “PREVENT: The Lifecycle of Child Terrorism in Al-Shabaab,” Next Wave, The International Center for Children and Global Security, March 2021, <https://www.next-wave-center.com/post/al-shabaab-prevent-pilot>.

¹¹⁸ Cecilia Polizzi, “Fourth Generation Warfare Analysis: Child Recruitment and Use in Salafi-Jihadi Doctrine of War,” *Small Wars Journal*, April 29, 2022, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2022/04/29/fourth-generation-warfare-analysis-child-recruitment-and-use-salafi-jihadi-doctrine-war/>.

and enticement through ISIS sophisticated propaganda machinery,¹¹⁹ which expanded the reach of extremist narratives well beyond the geographical boundaries of the conflict itself.

Digital communications have provided violent actors with efficient means to communicate, organize and plan operations anonymously and transnationally, leveraging a wide spectrum of platforms, including mainstream social media, fringe forums, gaming environments, encrypted messaging applications, and the dark web.¹²⁰ Children and young people are immersed in online cultures and comprise a large portion of internet and social media users. The widespread availability of extremist content online and the use of persuasive tactics by extremist actors have fundamentally altered the *modus operandi* of violent extremism and youth radicalization processes.¹²¹ Unlike in the past, when recruitment or mobilization was largely dependent on physical proximity or community networks, radicalization nowadays takes place in an unrestricted digital environment, which not only amplifies the reach of extremist content but also accelerates radicalization timelines. In 2002, the average radicalization period was estimated to span approximately sixteen months. By 2015, this timeframe had contracted by more than forty percent, and contemporary assessments indicate that mobilization may now occur within a matter of weeks.¹²²

Technology has also innovated the methods by which radicalization occurs. Algorithms and recommendation systems may inadvertently facilitate the fall of both intentional and unwitting youth into radical digital rabbit holes, where exposure to extreme or antagonistic content is perpetually escalating and self-reinforcing, embedding radical perspectives as part of the digital norm over time.¹²³ Violent ideologies and behaviors become normalized, influencing young people's interactions online and shaping their offline actions, often fostering an interest in targeted violence. Encrypted messaging applications, such as Telegram and Rocket.Chat, have given extremists secure channels where recruiters can groom potential adherents without fear of surveillance. At the same time, the dark web provides a hub for illicit activities and ideological exchanges, further amplifying ideological

¹¹⁹ Cecilia Polizzi, *Children Affected by the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: Guidelines on the Prevention of Radicalization on Social Media and the Internet in This Digital Era*, vol. 1, Next Wave, The International Center for Children and Global Security, 2023, <https://www.next-wave-center.com/post/children-affected-by-the-foreign-fighter-phenomenon-guidelines-on-the-prevention-of-radicalization>.

¹²⁰ Cecilia Polizzi, "Youth Radicalisation: A New Frontier in Terrorism and Security," in *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025), 86–91, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>; see also Isabel Jones, Jakob Guhl, Jacob Davey, and Moustafa Ayad, *Young Guns: Understanding a New Generation of Extremist Radicalization in the United States* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Young-guns_Understandings-a-new-generation-of-extremist-radicalization-in-the-United-States.pdf.

¹²¹ Ibid 52.; Cecilia Polizzi, "Youth Radicalisation: A New Frontier in Terrorism and Security," in *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025), 86–91, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>;

¹²² Christopher Wray, "FBI Director Christopher Wray: The 60 Minutes Interview," interview by Scott Pelley, *60 Minutes*, CBS News, aired September 13, 2020, YouTube video, posted by CBS News, 13:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Npiq_5_OmT4..; Cecilia Polizzi, "Youth Radicalisation: A New Frontier in Terrorism and Security," in *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025), 86–91.

¹²³ Cecilia Polizzi, "The Feed That Shapes Us: Extremism and Adolescence in the Age of Algorithms," Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), December 12, 2025, <https://gnet-research.org/2025/12/12/the-feed-that-shapes-us-extremism-and-adolescence-in-the-age-of-algorithms/>

exposure and radicalization risks.¹²⁴ The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR) and the metaverse in recruitment, radicalization and training is also a concern.¹²⁵

Radicalized youth can pose the same credible threats as adults - able to produce and disseminate violent content, organize and lead networks, recruit and radicalize others, carry out attacks.¹²⁶ Threats involving minors present, however, distinctive detection and prevention challenges when compared to those posed by adults or individuals with an established history of violent extremism. Adolescents typically lack criminal records or prior engagement with law enforcement and are afforded heightened privacy protections under domestic legal frameworks. In many jurisdictions, stringent regulations govern the collection and monitoring of minors' data, including online activity, communications, and personal information, thereby constraining institutional visibility into emerging risk trajectories. Adolescence itself may constitute a risk amplifier. Early indicators commonly associated with radicalization, such as social withdrawal, heightened secrecy, or oppositional behavior, often overlap with normative processes of identity formation. Adolescence is intrinsically characterized by experimentation, boundary-testing, and the renegotiation of authority and social belonging. Consequently, behaviors that may signal susceptibility to extremist influence can be easily subsumed within the spectrum of ordinary developmental change, rendering differentiation between typical maturation and incipient radicalization analytically and operationally complex.¹²⁷

Youth involvement in extremism unfolds within a dynamic, evolving, and increasingly diversified threat landscape. A defining feature of contemporary youth radicalization is the growing ideological fluidity of extremist environments, which defies categorization along traditional or well-established doctrinal lines. Political grievances, conspiracy narratives, and overlapping ideological currents increasingly converge to produce hybridized and bespoke belief systems capable of legitimizing violence. Organizations such as the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, once central reference points within the architecture of global extremism, no longer constitute the singular or even predominant threat vectors confronting many Western societies. Instead, the contemporary extremist milieu has fragmented into a complex and ideologically heterogeneous ecosystem composed of loosely connected networks, movements, subcultures, and grievance-driven communities. Simultaneously, internal schisms within established factions have generated emergent, often more radical entities that depart from the hierarchical organizational models traditionally associated with extremist movements.¹²⁸ Although both far-right extremism and Salafi-jihadism continue to pose significant security challenges, extremist ideologies increasingly mutate, overlap, and spread across digital spaces, shaping the attitudes and vulnerabilities of broad segments of the youth population. This ideological permeability blurs boundaries between belief systems and complicates the design and implementation of effective prevention and intervention strategies.

¹²⁴ Cecilia Polizzi, "Youth Radicalisation: A New Frontier in Terrorism and Security," in *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, March 2025), 86–91, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid 47.

¹²⁷ Ibid 64.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

The increase in radicalization among young people, along with their planning, support, and direct involvement in acts of terrorism, exposes the vulnerability of minors in this context and how attracting these demographic groups is a strategic priority for terrorist and violent extremist organizations, as evidenced by long-term strategic planning, systematicity, and the extent of the exploitation of minors in terrorism.¹²⁹ Despite escalating international concern, counterterrorism and counter-extremism frameworks have struggled to adapt to the evolving nature of youth threats. Holistic and integrated interventions specifically aimed at the prevention, deradicalization, and disengagement of minors engaging with ideologically oriented actors continue, in many contexts, to be treated as peripheral issues.

Institutional inertia in responding to youth radicalization is largely rooted in a persistent reliance on reactive rather than preventive approaches to counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. Governments have traditionally prioritized the kinetic disruption of terrorist networks, leadership decapitation, prosecutions, and the containment of manifested threats, often at the expense of sustained upstream interventions aimed at preventing radicalization and addressing underlying drivers of vulnerability.

In the United States, this pattern has been consistently observed across administrations. The 2018 National Strategy for Counterterrorism emphasized the imperative to “stay ahead of an adaptive enemy” and asserted that preventative approaches aimed at countering terrorists’ capacity to recruit and radicalize must constitute an integral component of U.S. counterterrorism strategy. Nevertheless, with the exception of initiatives undertaken during the two terms of the Obama administration,¹³⁰ efforts to establish a solid prevention architecture to thwart terrorist recruitment and radicalization have remained consistently underdeveloped.

The territorial defeat of the ISIS caliphate in 2019¹³¹ during the first Trump administration, coupled with broader U.S. strategic reorientations first signaled in the late 2010s toward great-power competition and subsequently expanded under the Biden administration to encompass climate change and other transnational challenges,¹³² contributed to a reduced U.S. military footprint overseas, relative declines in certain counterterrorism allocations, and

¹²⁹ Cecilia Polizzi, “Terrorism Trends in the OSCE Region: Youth Radicalization 2025,” keynote address, Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Combating Organised Crime and Serious Crimes in the OSCE Region, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Rome, June 5–6, 2025, Aula dei Gruppi parlamentari, Camera dei deputati.

¹³⁰ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University,” May 23, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>; Scott Wilson and Al Kamen, “‘Global War on Terror’ Is Given New Name, ‘Overseas Contingency Operations,’” Washington Post, March 25, 2009, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/24/AR2009032402818.html>; The White House, Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States, August 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/empowering_local_partners.pdf.

The White House, “Fact Sheet: The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism,” February 18, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/fact-sheet-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism>.

Jerome P. Bjelopera, Countering Violent Extremism in the United States, Congressional Research Service Report R42553, May 31, 2012, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R42553.html>.

¹³¹ Donald J. Trump, “Statement from the President on the Liberation of ISIS-Controlled Territory,” March 23, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-liberation-isis-controlled-territory/>.

¹³² The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, October 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

a shift away from large-scale direct interventions¹³³ in favor of partner-led models and domestically oriented priorities. The second Trump administration further intensified this trajectory, implementing substantial reductions in research and prevention-oriented programming, including the National Institute of Justice's studies on radicalization, Minerva-funded social science initiatives, and the University of Maryland's Terrorism and Targeted Violence (T2V) project under START.¹³⁴

By contrast, Europe has consistently emphasized preventive strategies that integrate both immediate security considerations and broader social cohesion objectives.¹³⁵ National frameworks in EU Member States, supported by the European Commission and initiatives such as the EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation¹³⁶ (formerly, EU Radicalisation Awareness Network), have advanced multi-agency, community-oriented models that combine early intervention, educational initiatives, and practitioner training to foster resilience and counter online radicalization.¹³⁷ Such frameworks represent some of the most developed prevention architectures globally, and for that reason, they also illustrate the next frontier most clearly. Children remain largely subsumed within broader categories such as "at-risk individuals" or "youth empowerment," child-specific provisions are largely absent, and intervention models are inconsistently adapted to the specific needs and developmental status of children. Adaptive strategies of terrorist and extremist actors continue to outstrip the response capacity of existing frameworks. The persistence of this asymmetry risks perpetuating instability, facilitating intergenerational ideological transmission, and generating new cycles of terrorism.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The recruitment and radicalization of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups represents one of the most complex and enduring challenges at the intersection of human rights, security, and democratic governance. As this white paper has shown, the issue cannot be reduced to isolated instances of child recruitment and use in conflict settings, but must instead be understood a phenomenon rooted in profound structural and individual conditions, shaped by evolving complex environments and persistent gaps in protection and security frameworks.

Across contexts, children are not only exposed to violence but are systematically positioned within the architectures of terrorist and violent extremist movements. At the same time,

¹³³ Costs of War Project, Brown University, "United States Counterterrorism Operations Under the Biden Administration, 2021-2023," <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2021/USCounterterrorismOperations.>; "Experts React: Biden Administration's National Security Strategy," Stimson Center, October 14, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/experts-react-biden-administrations-national-security-strategy/>.

¹³⁴ Lizzie Dearden, "Trump's Counter-Terror Cuts Will Harm Fight Against Far Right, Experts Warn," *Guardian*, March 30, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/30/trump-counter-terrorism-cuts>.

¹³⁵ Heiko Berner, "The Prevention of Extremism and the Role of Safety: Essay on a Well-Balanced Relationship Between Social Work and Law Enforcement," *European Journal for Security Research* 7 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41125-022-00082-y>.

¹³⁶ European Commission, "EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation," Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, accessed March 2026, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/eu-knowledge-hub-prevention-radicalisation_en.

¹³⁷ "Aarhus Model: Prevention of Radicalisation and Discrimination in Aarhus," Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Inspiring Practices, European Commission, accessed March 2026, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/aarhus-model-prevention-radicalisation-and-discrimination-aarhus_en.

state responses have often struggled to stay ahead, and reconcile security imperatives with child protection obligations. Counter-terrorism and counter-extremism frameworks, have at times proven ill-suited to the specific circumstances of children caught within violent ecosystems. Such misalignment has contributed to outcomes in which children are treated primarily through a security lens, increasing the risk of prolonged detention, stigmatization, and secondary victimization within the justice system.

The analysis presented here further underscored that prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration cannot be meaningfully advanced within siloed institutional architectures. The persistence of fragmented approaches between child protection and security frameworks has limited the effectiveness of interventions and constrained the development of coherent policy responses. Bridging these divides is not merely a matter of coordination, but of reconceptualizing children associated with terrorism-related activity within an integrated rights-based and security-aware framework.

More broadly, the evolving nature of child recruitment and radicalization —particularly through digital ecosystems and ideologically hybrid networks—requires a reassessment of existing prevention paradigms. Traditional analytical categories are increasingly insufficient to capture the fluidity of contemporary radicalization pathways and threat profiles, necessitating more adaptive, forward-looking, and empirically grounded approaches.

Finally, the findings of this study highlight that the involvement of children in terrorism and violent extremism is both a symptom and an accelerant of broader fragility. It reflects underlying deficits in governance, social cohesion, and institutional trust, while simultaneously contributing to their erosion over time. Addressing this challenge therefore requires not only targeted child protection measures, but also sustained investment in the resilience and integrity of democratic institutions.

Ultimately, the central question remains one of balance: how to ensure legitimate public security objectives without compromising the fundamental rights of the child. The answer does not lie in choosing between protection and security, but in constructing frameworks capable of advancing both simultaneously, grounded in legal standards, cooperation, and an unequivocal commitment to the dignity and rights of every child.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. NATIONAL OWNERSHIP

Government Leadership and Adoption of a National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism: Governmental actors are encouraged to take a leading role in addressing children affected by terrorism and violent extremism to improve opportunities for long-term sustainability. It is recommended that a National Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism be developed and adopted. The strategy should place emphasis on the prevention of radicalization, with dedicated provisions addressing the specific vulnerabilities of minors affected by terrorism and violent extremism.

2. JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN AFFECTED BY TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Best Interests of the Child: The best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration in all measures taken in relation to children, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Any intervention—whether educational, social, or

judicial—shall be aimed at safeguarding the child’s psychological and physical well-being and promoting their healthy development.

Do No Harm: The “Do No Harm” principle shall be upheld across all interventions, ensuring that policies and programming do not exacerbate trauma or cause unintended harm. All initiatives should include careful risk assessment and adopt precautionary measures wherever potential harm is identified.

Non-Discrimination: The principle of non-discrimination shall be upheld at all levels of policy and practice, ensuring equal treatment of children regardless of age, sex, race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, disability, or any other personal characteristic or association. All interventions should be inclusive, with no conditions attached to children’s access to or participation in services and support.

Legal Status and Treatment of Children within the Justice System: Children shall be regarded and treated primarily as victims of crime within the justice system, in accordance with international standards and the principles of juvenile justice.

Access to Justice and Accountability: All children should be able to access legal mechanisms and seek redress for any human rights and/or rule-of-law violation, with the assistance necessary to navigate judicial processes being provided.

Legal Instruments and Frameworks: All policies and interventions concerning minors shall be grounded in the rule of law. It is further recommended that a specialized legal framework be established that delineates the rules, procedures, protocols, and intervention measures necessary to address children affected by terrorism and violent extremism.

Specialized Child Units: Major human rights treaties and other international law instruments recognize that juvenile suspects—including children charged with, prosecuted for, or sentenced in relation to terrorism offenses—need to be treated distinctly from adults. Specialized units, formed by trained personnel and practitioners, shall be established at all stages of the justice system to handle cases involving children.

3. KEY APPROACHES

Child-Centered: A child-centered approach to all interventions concerning children shall be adopted, prioritizing the unique needs and well-being of children at all stages of the intervention process.

Age-and Gender-Sensitive: All interventions shall be age- and gender-sensitive, taking into account children’s emotional, physical, psychological needs, and developmental stages. Interventions should be tailored to be age-appropriate and responsive to gender-specific vulnerabilities, ensuring that both boys and girls are provided with the necessary support and resources.

Gender Mainstreaming: Gender mainstreaming seeks to embed gender equality in all aspects of policy and practice, providing for gender considerations to be integrated at all levels of program design, implementation, and evaluation.

Trauma-Informed Care and Responses: All intervention measures shall be grounded in trauma-informed care, which acknowledges and addresses children’s psychological needs while taking into account the potential immediate and long-term impacts of trauma.

Strengthening Child Protection Systems: To the fullest extent available, all interventions shall be aligned with—and/or operationalized through—existing child protection frameworks, with a particular emphasis on increasing the capacity of child protection systems.

Evidence-Based Responses: It is essential that all policies and interventions aimed at addressing children affected by terrorism and violent extremism are evidence-based.

Multisystemic, Multi-Agency, and Multi-Stakeholder Approach: A holistic approach to addressing children affected by terrorism and violent extremism shall be adopted, based on a participatory, inter-agency approach and information-sharing among relevant stakeholders. A holistic approach shall also leverage local resources and systems, be tailored to the specific needs of each child, and guarantee coordinated and coherent processes nationwide to prevent institutional overlaps, avoid duplication, and ensure long-term sustainability.

Preventive: All policies and interventions shall be designed to prevent recidivism, further radicalization, and re-recruitment, ensuring that children receive the necessary support to facilitate their full inclusion in society, thereby mitigating the risk of their return to extremist ideologies or behaviors.

Holistic: Child protection is a holistic and multi-dimensional process that extends beyond addressing a child's immediate needs. Access to quality education, mental health services, and opportunities for social inclusion shall be facilitated.

Participatory: The involvement of children, families, and communities is essential for the long-term effectiveness of child protection efforts. A participatory approach in planning and programming shall therefore be adopted, ensuring the meaningful engagement of these groups at every stage of planning and implementation.

Inclusive: An inclusive approach shall guide child protection processes, providing equal access to assistance and opportunities for all children. Efforts should also address the broader needs of all children, ensuring no child is excluded or stigmatized based on their perceived association with any party or armed group.

4. PREVENTION

Children's Vulnerability to Recruitment and Radicalization: The international community has acknowledged the need to prioritize the prevention of violent extremism. Given the increasing number of children involved in terrorism-related incidents and the diverse pathways underpinning their vulnerability to recruitment and radicalization to violence, it is recommended that a research agenda be established and funded to increase awareness and understanding of risk and protective factors in child radicalization, map emerging trends, and assess the effectiveness of prevention, rehabilitation, de-radicalization, and disengagement initiatives. Radicalization among children can follow diverse timelines, making early identification critical. Assessment tools designed to identify behaviors suggesting a progression toward involvement in violent extremism should be developed as part of effective prevention strategies. Assessments shall be conducted for each child with the aim of informing the design of targeted interventions and should be continuous, adapting to children's evolving circumstances. Existing risk assessment tools, such as VERA-2R and ERG 22+, are predominantly based on adult male data and may not be suitable for accurately assessing the risks and vulnerabilities of children, raising concerns regarding their viability and effectiveness in the context of child intervention. The design and implementation of

specialized assessment tools for children encompassing specific and relevant indicators is therefore recommended. Such tools should address the diverse range of backgrounds and experiences of children, ultimately improving the efficacy of programs. Any tool designed or implemented to ensure the proper and timely identification of children's needs and/or risks should account for age and gender considerations and comply with child protection frameworks and standards, including the right to privacy of the child.

Early Identification and Intervention: In addressing the involvement—potential or actual—of minors in terrorism and terrorism-related offenses, timely responses are particularly important, as they relate to and support the child's best interests as well as public safety. Early detection and early response systems have become valuable preventive tools. An early warning and early response (EWER) system may be implemented to collect and analyze open-source information and link it to formal, institutionalized response mechanisms.

Digital Literacy and Online Safety: As active users of digital and social media platforms and gaming environments, children and adolescents are at particular risk of exposure to and consumption of extremist propaganda and radicalization. The design and implementation of digital and media literacy initiatives is therefore central to prevention. By integrating digital and media literacy education into the school curriculum, educators can empower children with tools to navigate the online ecosystem responsibly, implement healthy digital habits, and develop the ability to critically assess online materials.

Strengthen Civic and Democracy Education: Governments should prioritize the development and implementation of civic and democracy education programs as a core instrument for fostering social cohesion, democratic engagement, and resilience against polarization. Civic education is essential for equipping citizens of all ages to critically engage with social and political issues, participate meaningfully in democratic processes, strengthen trust in democratic institutions, and navigate contemporary societal challenges, both offline and in digital spaces. Programs should be mainstreamed across formal and non-formal contexts, including classroom-based education for children and youth; youth work and services open to all, including socio-educational programs and sports initiatives; engagement with youth organizations and community-based initiatives; and lifelong learning opportunities for adults. Special attention should be given to populations for whom democratic participation is not yet habitual, with a focus on local-level engagement, where individuals most directly experience and contribute to civic life. Early interventions in childhood and adolescence are particularly crucial, as these formative periods are decisive for developing tolerance, democratic understanding, and civic responsibility.

Community Engagement and Community Policing: Communities have long been understood to be critical to violence prevention across the spectrum of violence types. Effective engagement with local communities and community policing that improve outreach to hard-to-reach groups and strengthen the resilience of children should therefore be promoted. While engagement with local communities and community-oriented policing are deemed critical to generating information and intelligence, such processes should be transparent and reciprocal. Mechanisms of cooperation between local communities and law enforcement should aim at developing information-driven, community-based solutions to local issues. Adequate engagement with local communities and community policing is to be understood as a synthesis of awareness-raising regarding violent extremist threats and capacity-building efforts aimed at strengthening resilience and empowering communities and community-led interventions.

5. REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION

Tailored Interventions: All reintegration interventions shall be tailored to the unique circumstances, experiences, needs, and vulnerabilities of each child.

Case Management: The development of individualized case management plans for each child is recommended. Case management refers to a coordinated service delivery approach involving the identification of vulnerable children, assessment and planning, referral to services, and follow-up, in collaboration with the extended family, community, and other service providers.

Multi-Agency Approach: Children affected by terrorism are likely to require support across different areas such as health (including mental health and psychological support), social and child welfare, legal services, and education. Governments should promote and facilitate inter-agency cooperation and coordination among all relevant stakeholders with the aim of creating an integrated support system capable of addressing each child's complex needs. The establishment of coordinated multi-agency cooperation mechanisms, designed to prevent overlap and address potential service gaps, shall be prioritized to adequately manage all dimensions of a child's reintegration and ensure the effectiveness of the reintegration process.

Specialization and Training: All professionals involved in child reintegration processes should receive specialized training and possess the requisite expertise to address the challenges associated with such reintegration processes. Governments should support the development of training modules that can be assembled into curricula tailored to the specific needs of relevant professionals and practitioners, ensuring that they address the distinct requirements of each group.

Sustainability: Solid frameworks that ensure continued support to children over time should be established, including a theory of change, adequate policy, timelines, resource allocation, and follow-up support.

- i. **Theory of Change:** Governments should ensure that reintegration programs are grounded in an evidence-based theory of change, developed in consultation with experts, and designed to achieve long-term sustainability. These programs should align with national policy frameworks to ensure that reintegration efforts contribute to broader societal goals. The sustainability of these programs shall be increased through the identification of areas requiring additional support—including but not limited to mental health services, vocational training, and exit programs—and ensure these areas are adequately resourced and equipped to sustain the programs over time.
- ii. **Long-Term:** Reintegration programs should span a minimum of 3–5 years, focusing on long-term recovery, preventing re-engagement, and ensuring the successful reintegration of children into society.
- iii. **Flexibility:** Interventions should be flexible and adaptable, allowing for adjustments during the program to respond to the changing needs of each child.
- iv. **Follow-Up:** Long-term follow-up support shall be made available for children, families, and communities requiring and accepting it. This should be integrated with existing service systems and strengthened over the long term. Follow-up programs should span a minimum of 3–5 years post-reunification, based on an individualized care plan.

Monitoring and Evaluation: A structured and independent Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) mechanism should accompany all phases of planning, implementation, and assessment of programs and interventions addressing children affected by terrorism and violent extremism. Monitoring and Evaluation exercises shall be based on clear qualitative and quantitative indicators, sustained by continuous data collection, and focus on medium-and long-term impact assessments. Participatory feedback from children and key stakeholders should be integrated to ensure adaptability and long-term effectiveness.

6. CROSS-CUTTING AREAS

Dialogue and Coordination Between Child Protection and Security Agencies: Compartmentalization, a lack of openness to new approaches, and mistrust across sectors have engendered policy and intervention-level gaps that undermine effective responses to the recruitment and radicalization of children. To respond effectively, the involvement of children in extremist threat ecosystems must be recognized as an integral component of security policy and strategy and grounded in robust institutional coordination between child protection and national security mechanisms and actors, including frameworks addressing Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC). Governments should therefore seek to promote inter-agency dialogue, joint planning processes, and information-sharing mechanisms that enable child protection considerations to be systematically integrated into counterterrorism policies, strategies, and programming. Strengthening such coordination is essential to ensuring that responses both adequately address security concerns and safeguard the rights of the children affected.

Ideologically Agnostic Approach to Child Radicalization: It is essential that all policies and interventions concerning children affected by terrorism and violent extremism are ideologically agnostic. A cross-ideological approach is therefore encouraged to objectively examine the threat landscape affecting children and young people and to inform the development of efficient policies and interventions.

Ideological Harm: Clear criteria to assess the risks and impacts of extremist ideologies held by parents, relatives, and extended family members on a child's mental, emotional, and physical health shall be established. A structured approach shall be in place to identify the specific circumstances under which family separation is necessary due to ideological concerns, with the child's best interest as the primary consideration.