



# Security Council

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## Children and armed conflict in Iraq

### Report of the Secretary-General

#### *Summary*

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the fifth report on the situation of children and armed conflict in Iraq and covers the period from 1 July 2021 to 30 September 2023.

The report documents the effects of conflict on children in Iraq, highlighting trends and patterns of the six grave violations against children, namely the recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, attacks on schools, hospitals and protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals,<sup>a</sup> the abduction of children and the denial of humanitarian access. Where available, the report contains information on perpetrators. It also outlines the progress made in addressing grave violations against children, including on the implementation of the action plan and dialogue with parties.

The report provides a series of recommendations addressed to all parties to the conflict aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children and strengthening child protection in Iraq.

<sup>a</sup> For the purposes of the present report, the phrase “protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals”, used in Security Council resolutions [1998 \(2011\)](#), [2143 \(2014\)](#) and [2427 \(2018\)](#) as well as in the statements by the President of the Security Council of 17 June 2013 ([S/PRST/2013/8](#)) and 31 October 2017 ([S/PRST/2017/21](#)), refers to teachers, doctors, other educational personnel, students and patients.



## I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [1612 \(2005\)](#) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, covers the period from 1 July 2021 to 30 September 2023. It is the fifth report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Iraq to be submitted to the Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. The report highlights trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children by parties to the conflict in Iraq and provides details on the progress made to end and prevent such violations since the previous report ([S/2022/46](#)) and the adoption by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict of its conclusions on the situation of children and armed conflict in Iraq ([S/AC.51/2022/3](#)). It also contains information on progress and challenges in the engagement with parties to the conflict and the implementation of the action plan. Where possible, parties to conflict responsible for grave violations are identified.

2. In annex I to the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict ([A/77/895-S/2023/363](#)), Da'esh<sup>1</sup> remained listed for recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals and abduction under section A, the list of parties that had not put in place measures during the reporting period to improve the protection of children. As set out in paragraph 344 of the same report, the Popular Mobilization Forces were delisted for the recruitment and use of children. The delisting was conditional upon the finalization of all pending activities contained in the action plan signed on 30 March 2023 and the continued absence of recruitment and use of children by the Popular Mobilization Forces.

3. The information contained in the present report was verified by the country task force on monitoring and reporting in Iraq, co-chaired by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The security situation, especially on the border between Iraq and Türkiye, posed challenges for the documentation and verification of grave violations against children. Therefore, the information set out in the present report does not represent the full extent of grave violations committed against children in Iraq, and the actual number of grave violations is likely to be higher. Where incidents occurred earlier but were verified only during the reporting period, that information is qualified as having been verified at a later date.

## II. Overview of political and security developments

4. In October 2021, Iraq held parliamentary elections, which were considered largely peaceful, technically well-managed and orderly. However, the subsequent formation of a new Government led to a volatile and politically charged environment. Armed clashes occurred in Baghdad and elsewhere in August 2022, in which at least 51 people, including 2 boys, were killed and 308 were injured, including an unverified number of children. In October 2022, the Council of Representatives of Iraq elected Abdullatif Jamal Rashid as President of Iraq and confirmed the new Government led by the Prime Minister, Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani.

5. During the reporting period, Da'esh continued regular small-scale, asymmetric attacks against civilians and Iraqi security forces. A total of 178 attacks were

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<sup>1</sup> Following the adoption of resolution [75/291](#) by the General Assembly, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is now referred to as Da'esh in documents originating from the United Nations Secretariat.

attributed to Da'esh during the first half of 2023, compared with 526 attacks during the first half of 2022. The 178 attacks recorded in the first half of 2023, which resulted in two child casualties, represented the lowest number of attacks recorded over a six-month period since Iraq declared victory over Da'esh in December 2017.

6. Iraqi security forces, including the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi police, continued to conduct counter-terrorism operations against Da'esh, exposing their hideouts, tunnels and weapon depots. Military operations often involved efforts to reinforce the border with the Syrian Arab Republic against possible incursions by Da'esh. Throughout the reporting period, the Iraqi security forces conducted security operations in areas where Da'esh was active. Iraqi security forces also continued to conduct explosive ordnance clearance operations in areas formerly controlled by Da'esh.

7. During the reporting period, the country task force verified attacks on populated civilian areas and intimidation of the civilian population by the People's Defence Forces of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (HPG/PKK) in northern Iraq, including grave violations against children. The country task force attributed grave violations, including recruitment and abduction of children, to HPG/PKK. Further, as noted in my previous report (S/2022/46), the Sinjar Resistance Units remained active in Sinjar district, Ninawa Governorate.

8. Further, during the period under review, the Turkish Armed Forces conducted ground and air operations against alleged HPG/PKK positions, including in Dahuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah Governorates.

9. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) launched missile and drone strikes against Iranian Kurdish opposition groups in northern Iraq. In March 2023, Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran signed a border security agreement that included steps towards the disarmament of Iranian Kurdish opposition groups.

10. Iraq remained committed to the repatriation of its citizens from Hawl camp in the north-eastern Syrian Arab Republic under the Global Framework for United Nations Support on Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq Third Country National Returnees. During the reporting period, the Government of Iraq repatriated a total of 3,523 children (1,817 boys, 1,706 girls) to Jad'ah 1 rehabilitation centre, where they received support, including in the areas of health, nutrition, education, mental health and psychosocial support. Nevertheless, children continued to face challenges, especially in relation to the lack of documentation, which continued to impede their access to education and other services and could undermine their reintegration into communities of origin and social cohesion in the future. In addition, unaccompanied and separated children, as well as children with disabilities, require further specialized support.

### III. Grave violations against children

11. The country task force verified 381 grave violations against 289 children (218 boys, 70 girls, 1 sex unknown). This is an increase of 20 per cent compared with the previous report (S/2022/46). The country task force verified 132 violations in the second half of 2021, 201 violations in 2022 and 48 violations between January and September 2023. Killing and maiming remained the most verified violation (236), followed by the denial of humanitarian access (75) and recruitment and use (32). A total of 11 children (2 boys, 9 girls) were victims of multiple violations: abduction and sexual violence (8); recruitment and use and killing (2); and abduction and recruitment and use (1).

12. Violations were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (183), including as a result of explosive ordnance (154) and during crossfire between the Turkish Armed

Forces and HPG/PKK (2), between Iraqi security forces and Da'esh (2) and between Iraqi security forces and Sinjar Resistance Units/HPG/PKK (2), to the Iraqi security forces (74), Da'esh (54), HPG/PKK (35), Turkish Armed Forces (19), the Popular Mobilization Forces (12) and IRGC (4).

13. Grave violations were verified in the Governorates of Ninawa (123), Kirkuk (51), Diyala (34), Salah al-Din (33), Baghdad (27), Dahuk (25), Basrah (22), Babil (18), Anbar (12) and Erbil (11), Nasiriyah (7), Muthanna (5), Diwaniyah (5), Sulaymaniyah (5), Najaf (2) and Maysan (1).

14. In addition, during the period under review, the country task force verified 48 grave violations against 33 children (11 boys, 22 girls) that had occurred in previous reporting periods: abduction (24), sexual violence (14), killing and maiming (9) and recruitment and use (1). Violations were attributed to Da'esh (39), the international counter-Da'esh coalition (6) and unidentified perpetrators (3).

## A. Recruitment and use

15. The recruitment and use of 32 children (18 boys, 14 girls), some as young as 7, was verified. This represents a significant increase compared with the previous reporting period (S/2022/46), during which only 1 case was verified. All cases of recruitment and use were verified in 2022. While these verified incidents highlight emblematic protection concerns, the actual number of children recruited and used is likely higher, as many cases are not reported owing to the fear of reprisals or cannot be verified owing to accessibility challenges and security concerns, especially in Ninawa, Dahuk and Sulaymaniyah Governates.

16. Incidents of recruitment and use were attributed to HPG/PKK (28) and Da'esh (4) and occurred in Ninawa (31) and Sulaymaniyah (1) Governates.

17. Financial incentives were the main factors driving recruitment, as families sought to have their children earn a “salary” from HPG/PKK in order to ease economic hardship. Four children were abducted for the purpose of recruitment and use. Children were used in combat and support roles, including to guard checkpoints, gather intelligence and act as messengers. For instance, a 16-year-old girl was recruited and used in a combat role by HPG/PKK. In October 2022, the girl was killed in an air strike by the Turkish Armed Forces against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) targets in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

18. The country task force verified an earlier incident of the recruitment and use of a Yazidi boy by Da'esh. The boy was taken to the Syrian Arab Republic and trained in the use of weapons despite being only 5 years old at the time. The boy managed to escape in 2021 and was later reunited with his family in Iraq.

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

19. At the end of the reporting period, a total of 668 children (663 boys, 5 girls) continued to be detained by Iraqi security forces on national security-related charges, including for their alleged association with armed groups, primarily Da'esh. This is a decrease compared with the 1,091 children previously detained (S/2022/46). Most of these children were boys between the ages of 15 and 17, but some of them were as young as 9. Children detained on such charges continued to face challenges in gaining access to legal, educational, social and other services. The country task force continued to advocate that the Government of Iraq treat all children formerly associated with Da'esh primarily as victims and urged the Government to take concrete steps to facilitate their release, recovery and community-based reintegration.

20. In March 2023, the Government of Iraq repatriated 203 boys through prison transfers from north-eastern Syrian Arab Republic. It was verified that at least some of the boys were prosecuted under domestic anti-terrorism legislation of Iraq. The proceedings were closed, however, and the country task force did not have full access to independently verify how many juveniles underwent a trial and were subsequently convicted or cleared of charges and released.

## **B. Killing and maiming**

21. The country task force verified the killing (107) and maiming (129) of 236 children (189 boys, 46 girls, 1 sex unknown) between the ages of 1 and 17. Of these, 71 were killed or maimed in the second half of 2021, 126 in 2022 and 39 between January and September 2023. This is a slight decrease in child casualties compared to the previous report (249) (S/2022/46), likely attributable to a stabilizing security situation.

22. Child casualties were attributed to unidentified perpetrators (176), including as a result of explosive ordnance (140), improvised explosive devices (14), and crossfire between Iraqi security forces and HPG/PKK (2), Iraqi security forces and Da'esh (2) and between the Turkish Armed Forces and HPG/PKK (2), to Da'esh (25), the Turkish Armed Forces (17), Iraqi security forces (12), IRGC (3) and HPG/PKK (3).

23. Most child casualties were verified in areas that had previously been under Da'esh control and where the group remained active, with violations verified in Diyala (34), Ninawa (32), Kirkuk (24), Salah al-Din (25), Baghdad (25), Basrah (22), Dahuk (20), Babil (18), Anbar (10), Erbil (9), Nasiriyah (6), Muthanna (6) Sulaymaniyah (3) and Najaf (2) Governorates.

24. Explosive ordnance and improvised explosive devices continued to be the leading causes of child casualties, amounting to 65 per cent of the total number of casualties. The predominantly affected areas were those that had previously been under Da'esh control. For example, in July 2021, a Da'esh suicide attack killed 8 children (6 boys, 2 girls) and maimed 7 children (4 boys, 3 girls) in Waheilat market in Baghdad. In most cases, children were harmed by accidentally triggering devices when they picked them up or stepped on them while herding livestock or playing. For example, in February 2022, 7 boys, between the ages of 1 and 17, were killed (2) and maimed (5) when they touched a device while playing in a field in Basrah Governorate, causing it to explode.

25. Ground engagements (62) and air strikes (20) were the second and third most prevalent causes of child casualties. For instance, in September 2022 IRGC launched a strike on Kuyah, Erbil Governorate, which hit military bases but also civilian homes, offices and an elementary school. The attack killed 13 people and injured 33, including 2 girls.

26. In addition, the killing (3) and maiming (6) of 9 children (7 boys, 2 girls) prior to the reporting period was verified and attributed to the international counter-Da'esh coalition (6) and unidentified perpetrators (3), including due to explosive ordnance (2).

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

27. The United Nations verified sexual violence against 8 girls between the ages of 11 and 16, attributed to Da'esh. Da'esh abducted the girls in 2014 (at the time of abduction, ranging in age from 2 to 5 years old) from Ninawa Governorate, took them to the Syrian Arab Republic and sold them to Da'esh members as sex slaves, where they remained until they were rescued by the Syrian Democratic Forces in 2022.

All the girls were reunited with their families upon their return to Iraq in 2022 (5) and 2023 (3) and received medical, mental, psychosocial and educational support.

28. The United Nations verified 14 cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence that had been perpetrated prior to the reporting period against 14 girls abducted by Da'esh; the girls became adults during their captivity. The girls were all abducted in 2014 from Sinjar, Ninawa Governorate and taken to the Syrian Arab Republic, where they continued to be sexually abused until their liberation by the Syrian Democratic Forces. All girls were reunited with their families and received case management, health, psychosocial, livelihood and reintegration support.

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

29. The country task force verified 6 attacks on schools (4) and hospitals (2). Instances were verified in 2021 (3), in 2022 (2) and in 2023 (1) and were attributed to Da'esh (2), unidentified perpetrators (2), the Turkish Armed Forces (1) and IRGC (1). For example, in August 2021, the Turkish Armed Forces shelled and destroyed a health facility, killing a 12-year-old boy, a doctor and a medical worker in Sinjar district. The facility was known to serve as the headquarters of the Sinjar Resistance Units and HPG/PKK but was also used as a field hospital, treating combatants and civilians.

##### **Military use of schools**

30. The country task force verified 42 instances of the military use of schools in 2021 (35) and 2022 (7) by the Iraqi police (28), Iraqi security forces (7), the Popular Mobilization Forces (4), Peshmerga (2) and HPG/PKK (1), in Kirkuk (34), Ninawa (7) and Salah al-Din (1) Governates. At the end of the reporting period, 22 schools continued to be used for military purposes by the Iraqi police (18) and the Popular Mobilization Forces (4), in Kirkuk (20), Salah al-Din (1) and Ninawa (1) Governates. Advocacy of the country task force to vacate the remaining schools is ongoing. The country task force continued to verify reports of additional schools having been vacated by the Iraqi police.

#### **E. Abduction**

31. The United Nations verified the abduction of 23 children (12 boys, 11 girls) between the ages of 5 and 16. Cases of abduction were verified in 2021 (1), 2022 (17) and 2023 (5). Children were abducted for periods ranging from several months to nine years. Among those abducted, 9 children (1 boy, 8 girls) were victims of multiple violations: abduction and sexual violence (8); and abduction and recruitment and use (1).

32. Abductions were attributed to Da'esh (15), HPG/Kurdistan Workers' Party (4) and unidentified perpetrators (4), in Ninawa (15), Dahuk (3), Diyala (2), Erbil (1), Kirkuk (1) and Sulaymaniyah (1) Governorates. Children were abducted for the purposes of sexual violence (8), recruitment and use (1) and for unknown reasons (13). A total of 16 children (6 boys, 10 girls) were released, while 7 children remained missing at the end of the reporting period.

33. For example, in August 2022, three boys between the ages of 10 and 13 were abducted by unidentified perpetrators from a camp for internally displaced persons, in Dahuk, and continued to be unaccounted for.

34. In addition, the country task force late verified the abduction of 24 children (4 boys, 20 girls) by Da'esh (24) in Ninawa Governorate (24), who became adults during their captivity. The children were abducted in 2014 and remained in captivity

until their rescue during the reporting period. Some 15 children were victims of multiple violations during their abduction: sexual violence (14 girls) and recruitment and use (1 boy).

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

35. The country task force verified 76 incidents of the denial of humanitarian access. Of these, 57 incidents occurred in the second half of 2021 and 19 incidents occurred in 2022. In 2023, no incidents of denial of humanitarian access were verified, indicating a positive step in enabling humanitarians to provide much-needed services to children.

36. The verified incidents were attributed to Iraqi security forces (62), the Popular Mobilization Forces (12), the Turkish Armed Forces (1) and unidentified perpetrators (1), in Kirkuk (27), Anbar (15), Ninawa (15), Diyala (8), Salah al-Din (8) and Baghdad (3).

37. Incidents of the denial of humanitarian access mostly related to administrative restrictions that limited or slowed the movement of humanitarian personnel and goods, thereby hampering humanitarian operations. Some instances also included the denial of passage at checkpoints and the prevention of access to certain areas.

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

38. The country task force continued to engage with the Government of Iraq on strengthening the protection of children, including through the adoption and implementation of the action plan with the Popular Mobilization Forces to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children. The action plan, which was signed on 30 March 2023, required the Popular Mobilization Forces to adopt administrative measures in order to enhance the protection of children from grave violations, particularly the recruitment and use of children.

39. The country task force also continued to engage with the national committee for the monitoring and reporting mechanism to support the implementation of the action plan. On 1 June 2023, the Government appointed the Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs and a representative of the Popular Mobilization Forces as focal points to facilitate coordination among Government departments for the effective implementation of the action plan.

40. In order to ensure that potential recruits meet the minimum age requirement of 18 years and that recruitment procedures align with international standards, on 5 June 2023 the Popular Mobilization Forces issued specific command orders to all units instructing them to conduct rigorous screening and age assessments.

41. On 19 September 2023, the country task force and the national committee for the monitoring and reporting mechanism visited the administration offices of the Popular Mobilization Forces to assess the recruitment procedures and the protocols in place for age assessment to prevent the recruitment of children. The assessment visit found that appropriate procedures to prevent the recruitment of children had been put in place.

42. As stipulated in the action plan, the Popular Mobilization Forces further established a dedicated Human Rights Directorate within its structure, on 26 June 2023. The Directorate's primary objective is to monitor and oversee activities relating to human rights and children's rights, assess the impact of the measures implemented

and recommend improvements for a more robust human rights framework during military operations.

43. Also in June 2023, the Popular Mobilization Forces and the country task force conducted two capacity-building training sessions with a focus on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as part of the implementation of the action plan. The training sessions were aimed at strengthening knowledge and skills on the protection of children among members of the Popular Mobilization Forces.

44. Throughout the reporting period, the country task force supported the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government in harmonizing domestic legislation with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other relevant international human rights treaties to which Iraq is a party. In July 2023, a review of the juvenile care law was completed by a Commission established by the Minister of Justice and the Juvenile Care Council. The review included a recommendation to increase the age of criminal responsibility in federal Iraq from 9 to 12 years. At the end of the reporting period, the recommendations for amendments to the juvenile care law were with the women, family and child parliamentary committee for review.

45. In September 2023, the country task force participated in a workshop on the review of the draft child protection law. The workshop was attended by members of the women, family and child parliamentary committee, Government legal advisers and the Child Welfare Commission. The objective was to raise awareness and encourage ownership of the child protection law among various stakeholders, with a focus on addressing areas such as children lacking legal documentation and accountability for child recruitment by armed groups.

46. The Government of Iraq, with support from the United Nations under the Global Framework, continued to repatriate its nationals from Hawl camp in north-eastern Syrian Arab Republic. The Government repatriated a total of 5,818 individuals, including 3,523 children, to Jad'ah 1 rehabilitation centre in Ninawa Governorate. Among those repatriated, 3,364 individuals have since departed Jad'ah 1 to their places of origin or secondary locations, in cases where a return to the place of origin was not possible. Also under the Global Framework, 203 boys were repatriated through prison transfers.

47. The technical working group on the implementation of the Global Framework in Iraq, co-chaired by the Government's Office of the National Security Adviser, the International Organization for Migration and UNICEF, continued to coordinate United Nations support through the "One United Nations" plan for supporting the return of Iraqi nationals from north-east Syrian Arab Republic, which was launched jointly by the Government and the United Nations on 24 September 2023. The plan details the full scope of work under the two pillars of the Global Framework: (a) security and accountability; and (b) development and recovery, with a focus on a rights-based approach to return, rehabilitation and reintegration processes, including for children.

48. In Jad'ah 1, the Government provided a variety of services to children, including formal education, activities to promote national identity and resocialization, religious lectures, family visits to restore family relationships, and support to families so as to prepare them for reintegration into their communities of origin. The United Nations continued engaging with the Government of Iraq on solutions for the issuance of civil documentation for returnees, including children, which remained a critical barrier in terms of reintegration and access to education and social protection services.

49. Further, the United Nations continued to support the Government of Iraq in providing services, including for individuals in Jad'ah 1 and communities of return, ranging from mental health and psychosocial support to early childhood development,



health care, nutritional support, water, sanitation and hygiene, informal education, recreational activities, vocational training, legal assistance, specialized child protection and services to prevent and address gender-based violence, as well as family tracing and alternative care for unaccompanied children.

50. The Government and United Nations partners, such as social workers and child rights organizations, also continued to support returnees in their communities of origin or relocation. The country task force continued to partner with local organizations to support the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups and children at risk of grave violations through community-based reintegration and social cohesion programmes. The programmes reached 1,800 children (1,200 boys, 600 girls) in Anbar, Basrah, Diyala, Karbala, Kirkuk, Najaf, Ninawa and Salah al-Din Governorates. Reintegration and social cohesion activities included the provision of mental health and psychological services, legal advice and facilitating access to education, vocational training, life skills and case management support.

51. In addition, the country task force provided training on child protection to strengthen awareness and build capacity in ending and preventing grave violations against children. The country task force held training sessions for 372 participants (238 men, 134 women) of the Iraqi national child protection network, which included representatives of national and international non-governmental organizations.

52. Over 1,000 persons, including 615 children (450 boys, 165 girls) received child rights education through information sessions and targeted messaging in schools around Baghdad.

## V. Observations and recommendations

53. I remain concerned that grave violations against children continue to be committed in Iraq, in particular the recruitment and use and the abduction of children, and attacks on schools and hospitals. I urge all parties to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law and to immediately end and prevent grave violations against children in Iraq.

54. I welcome the absence of verified cases of recruitment and use of children by the Popular Mobilization Forces, as well as the signature of an action plan by the Government of Iraq and the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Popular Mobilization Forces. I encourage the Government to continue prioritizing the implementation of the action plan and to continue institutionalizing the measures taken in the implementation of the action plan to sustainably prevent grave violations against children.

55. I welcome the invitation extended to my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict to visit Iraq from 7 to 11 January 2024 to discuss the progress in implementing the action plan and to engage with the Government on areas in which the United Nations may offer further support.

56. I am concerned about the increase in the recruitment and use of children by HPG/PKK. I urge HPG/PKK to end the recruitment and use of children and to unconditionally and immediately release all children from its ranks.

57. I remain particularly concerned about continuing incidents of killing and maiming of children, and about the impact on children of the contamination of Iraqi territory by explosive ordnance, which is the leading cause of child casualties. I urge all parties to immediately take all preventive and mitigating actions necessary to

avoid and minimize harm and better protect children, including in the conduct of military operations and from the risks and effects of explosive remnants of war and the use of explosive weapons, including in populated areas. I further call upon the Government to continue promoting explosive ordnance clearance, explosive ordnance risk education, victim assistance and stockpile destruction, including prior to any movement of internally displaced persons back to contaminated areas. The United Nations will continue to support the Iraqi authorities in this regard.

58. I am encouraged by the decrease in the number of children detained on national security-related charges, including for their or their families' actual or alleged association with armed groups, primarily Da'esh. I call upon the Government of Iraq to release children held on such grounds and reiterate that children formerly associated with armed forces and groups should be treated primarily as victims and that alternatives to detention should be pursued in accordance with international law and in line with international standards on juvenile justice.

59. When children are suspected of having committed criminal acts, I reiterate that due process and fair trial standards must be adhered to. Any prosecution of children should respect international standards on juvenile justice. I further call upon the Government of Iraq to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility in accordance with international standards.

60. I commend the Government of Iraq for its repatriation of 3,523 children from Hawl camp in the Syrian Arab Republic and its commitment to continue such repatriations. I also commend the Government for the provision of specialized services to repatriated children, such as formal education and activities to promote national identity and resocialization.

61. I reiterate my call upon all concerned countries to facilitate and expedite the voluntary repatriation of women and children in Hawl and Rawj camps in the Syrian Arab Republic in line with international law and grounded in respect for the principles of non-refoulement, family unity and the best interests of the child, and with the support of the United Nations, upon request, including through the Global Framework for United Nations Support on Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq Third Country National Returnees.

62. I call upon the Government of Iraq to develop and implement a national community-based reintegration programme for children affected by armed conflict, with the support of the United Nations and other actors.

63. I welcome the decrease in verified cases of the denial of humanitarian access during the reporting period, alongside the absence of any verified such incidents in 2023. I call upon all parties to allow and facilitate safe, timely and unimpeded humanitarian access to children.