



Save the Children

Protecting Tomorrow

**Assessing Germany's Foreign Policy Impact on
Children and Security in post-ISIS Iraq**

July 2024 – Sofie Lilli Stoffel

Impressum

This report is the result of a policy consultancy for Save the Children Germany. An earlier version was drafted while the author was a McCloy fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School and was awarded as the best policy analysis exercise in peace and security in 2024. The report reflects the views of the author and should not be viewed as representing the views of Harvard University or any of its faculty. Prof. Jacqueline Bhabha served as faculty advisor and Prof. Zoe Marks and Prof. Kathryn Sikkink as seminar leads for the project. It was supervised by Dr. Meike Riebau and Lea Meyer at Save the Children Germany.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the many people whose support significantly contributed to the success of this project. At Save the Children Germany, Florian Westphal and Dr. Meike Riebau helped me drive the development of this project and provided valuable insights at every turn. Lea Meyer was a constant source of support, particularly during our research trip to Jordan and Iraq. I also extend my sincere thanks to the many staff members at the MENA regional office in Amman and the country office in Iraq for their indispensable assistance in facilitating our visit, identifying interviewees, and sharing their expert knowledge. Notably, Sarra Ghazi played a key role in making this project a reality. Special gratitude is reserved for Gharib Ahmad Rauf, whose extensive guidance and support during our trip were truly appreciated.

I am deeply grateful to Prof. Jacqueline Bhabha for her consistent guidance throughout this project. Her expertise was key to help me navigate the intricacies of doing research on children in conflict. I also extend special thanks to Prof. Zoe Marks and Prof. Kathryn Sikkink for their consistent support in refining my analysis. Prof. Meghan O'Sullivan's generosity in sharing her profound knowledge of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, as well as connecting me with experts, significantly enriched my understanding of the region. This project was made possible by the generous financial support of Save the Children Germany, the Carr Center for Human Rights, and the Middle East Initiative at Harvard University.

Author

Sofie Lilli Stoffel is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin and was a McCloy fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School from 2022 to 2024. Her work focuses on foreign and security policy with a particular lens on intergenerational cycles of violence and children in conflict. She has been a panelist and moderator at events such as Germany's G7 Citizens' Dialogue, the German Forum on Security Policy, or the International Humanitarian Studies Conference. Her analysis has been featured or appeared in *The National Interest*, *Der Tagesspiegel*, *Alternatives Humanitaires*, *Policy Corner*, and the *PeaceLab blog*, among others. She holds a bachelor's degree in liberal arts and sciences with a focus on international relations, conflict studies and child protection from Maastricht University's honors program and a master's in public policy with a focus in international and global affairs from Harvard Kennedy School.

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Executive Summary

Approximately half of the population in the post-ISIS areas in Iraq are children. They are particularly vulnerable to persistent violence in the area, child labor, abuse, and other harms. Children's effects on peace and security are often underestimated in conflict management approaches, including by international donors.

Since the beginning of the fight against ISIS in 2014, Germany is the second biggest donor in Iraq and majorly contributes to Iraq's conflict management. Now, Germany stands at a crossroads: it plans to transition out of crisis measures and humanitarian assistance in Iraq.

This report seeks to integrate questions of child protection, foreign policy, and the donor spending that underpins both to offer a novel perspective on the influence that children, as a demographic, can exert on stabilization and peacebuilding. The analysis of this dynamic in Iraq may also serve as an impulse to reevaluate Germany's conflict management approaches in other contexts. To this end, children and youth should be treated as holistic agents, not potential threats.

Goals

1. Provide insights into the protection outlook for children in Northern Iraq, their risk to be radicalized and recruited by armed groups, and implications for Iraq's future.
2. Assess whether Germany's contributions to child protection in the post-ISIS areas are effective and aligned with their stated policy goals.

Methodology

Qualitative: Conducted conversations and interviews with >40 experts on Iraq, child protection in conflict settings, and German foreign policy.

Quantitative: Analyzed ~1,000 individual investments by Germany in Iraq between 2018 and 2022, using data from the OECD Creditor Reporting System of official development assistance.

Key Findings

Children in Northern Iraq face widespread child protection concerns. Many of these child rights violations, such as abuse, social exclusion, or child labor, are known to drive radicalization and recruitment. Child protection systems are ill-equipped to buffer this effect.

Several armed groups in the post-ISIS areas currently recruit minors, albeit not on a large scale. However, in case of renewed conflict, the conditions for a growing pool of child and youth recruits are present.

While Germany's integrated foreign policy approach to Iraq is acclaimed, it does not account for children's roles in conflict dynamics. **Only 8.5% of Germany's spending in Iraq since the end of ISIS' rule are targeted to the 50% of the population that are children.** Some deficiencies in its donor practice exacerbate this small focus on children.

Germany's shortcomings with regard to children in Northern Iraq are incongruent with its goal to advance stabilization and peacebuilding in the region.

Recommendations

German Federal Foreign Office

Short term (2024)

- **Leverage position as a major donor** to structurally advocate with the Iraqi and Kurdish governments to address the needs of vulnerable children.
- **Coordinate with other international actors** and donors to maximize efforts to prioritize children's needs in Iraq and enable Iraqi authorities to follow through on their protection responsibilities.
- **Continue** crisis measures and humanitarian spending according to needs in affected areas.

Long term (from 2025)

- **Mainstream children as peace and security stakeholders across foreign policy strategies**, including in the new edition of the guidelines on crisis prevention, stabilization, and peacebuilding as well as regional strategy documents.
- **Develop engagement with children in Northern Iraq and other crisis contexts.** Participatory programming supports the development of children's self-efficacy and is imperative to build needs-based child-focused interventions.

German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development

Short term (2024)

- **Prolong Transitional Development Aid in Iraq.** Considering that TDA has been described as one of Germany's most notable successes and interviewees strongly criticize seeing Iraq as anything other than in post-conflict transition, maintaining TDA could foster stability.

Long term (from 2025)

- **Increase investments on the development of children and youth according to the needs of different age groups.** To buffer against the drivers for radicalization and recruitment, technical assistance to build child protection services should be provided.

German Federal Ministry of Defense

Short term (2024)

- **Use engagement with Iraqi security counterparts and governments in Baghdad and Erbil to promote a holistic perspective on security and stabilization.** In the context of Counter Daesh/Capacity Building Iraq, NATO advisor positions as well as conversations around training and logistics are opportunities to advocate for a child-inclusive definition of security and to remind of commitments to children's rights in armed conflict.

German Parliament (Bundestag)

Short term (2024)

- **Use the parliamentary debate on the mandate renewal for Germany's contribution to the NATO and Global Coalition missions in Iraq to hold the government accountable to extending Germany's integrated approach to children.**
- **In the responsible parliamentary committees, push to include children as stakeholders in Germany's foreign policy strategies.** Parliamentarians should advocate to the Federal Government that children should be given priority in foreign and security policy decisions.
- **Advocate for additional funding specifically for child-focused humanitarian, stabilization, and peacebuilding measures as well as transitional development aid.** The goal should be to close the significant gap between children's roles and needs in conflicts and the allocation of spending.



Introduction

1. Introduction

In the fall of 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) captured its first territory in Iraq. After four years of harrowing crimes, Iraq's Prime Minister could declare military victory over ISIS in December 2017.¹ Since the beginning of the fight against ISIS, international actors including the United Nations, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and several states have publicly committed to help Iraq defeat ISIS and deal with the fallout of the conflict. After the United States, Germany is the second-largest donor in Iraq: since 2014, Germany has invested a total of approximately three billion euros in humanitarian assistance, development aid, and stabilization.² Even after ISIS' territorial defeat, Germany remains committed to help Iraq rebuild and prevent a resurgence of ISIS, making Iraq a focus region of German investments.³

Five years after ISIS' territorial defeat, the enduring repercussions of their reign of terror still affect the country – particularly in Iraq's Northern regions, where ISIS held territory from 2013 to 2017.⁴ The militias who fought ISIS under the umbrella of Popular Mobilized Forces (or al-hashd alsha'abi; PMF), other armed groups like the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), and pockets of ISIS are still active in the region.⁵ However, outbreaks of violent conflict have decreased and donors like Germany now evaluate the security situation in Iraq to be comparatively stable.⁶ As a consequence, donor attention is shifting towards other regions. Germany is currently phasing out its humanitarian assistance and crisis response measures – no new humanitarian projects are planned in Iraq as of 2024.⁷ Thus, **Germany's engagement in Iraq is at a crossroads** – this is a crucial moment to shed light on the potential risks of this transition. In doing so, this analysis focuses on one particularly vulnerable and relevant demographic: children.

Around **half of the population in the post-ISIS areas are children** under the age of 18.⁸ They are especially vulnerable to persistent violence in the area, internal displacement and obstacles for returnees, poor economic conditions conducive to child labor, and educational inaccessibility, among other harms.⁹ The ongoing suffering of children in the post-ISIS areas constitutes not only a violation of children's rights but can have far-reaching consequences for questions of social cohesion, economic development, and security. The ties between stabilization and peacebuilding and the safety of children are often overlooked or dismissed as a “soft” policy issue, including in the German foreign policy context.¹⁰ However, children have active roles in conflicts, as victims, perpetrators, and agents of change, ultimately influencing long-term developments of conflicts as they grow into adult members of society.¹¹

The **goals of this project** are twofold: Firstly, this study provides insights into the current protection outlook for children in Northern Iraq, their risk to be radicalized and recruited by armed groups, and implications for the future of the country. Secondly, it evaluates whether Germany's contributions to child protection in the post-ISIS areas are effective and aligned with their stated policy goals in the region. The unique value of this project lies in its integration of assessments concerning child protection, foreign policy, and the donor spending that underpins both. Thus, this report offers a novel perspective on the influence that children, as a demographic, can exert on stabilization and peacebuilding efforts in conflict-affected countries. The analysis of this dynamic in Iraq may also serve as an impulse to reevaluate donors' approaches to conflict management in other contexts.

The following chapter outlines this project's mixed methods approach, involving interviews with a wide range of experts and a spending mapping of Germany's investments in Iraq since the end of ISIS' rule. Chapter 3 introduces important foundations on child protection, peace and security, and intergenerational dynamics of violence that are crucial to understand the following arguments. Chapter 4 draws on expert interviews and available literature to provide an overview of the current situation in Northern Iraq, covering updates on the conflict, socio-economic issues, and key child protection concerns. Chapter 5 analyzes Germany's role as a donor in Iraq, including a mapping of its spending in the country since ISIS' military defeat in late 2017. Finally, chapter 6 synthesizes arguments on child protection concerns, security, and Germany's spending in Iraq and presents policy recommendations for German policymakers.

2

Methodology

- Geography
 - Speaking With Experts
 - Mapping Germany's Spending in Iraq
 - Limitations
-

2. Methodology

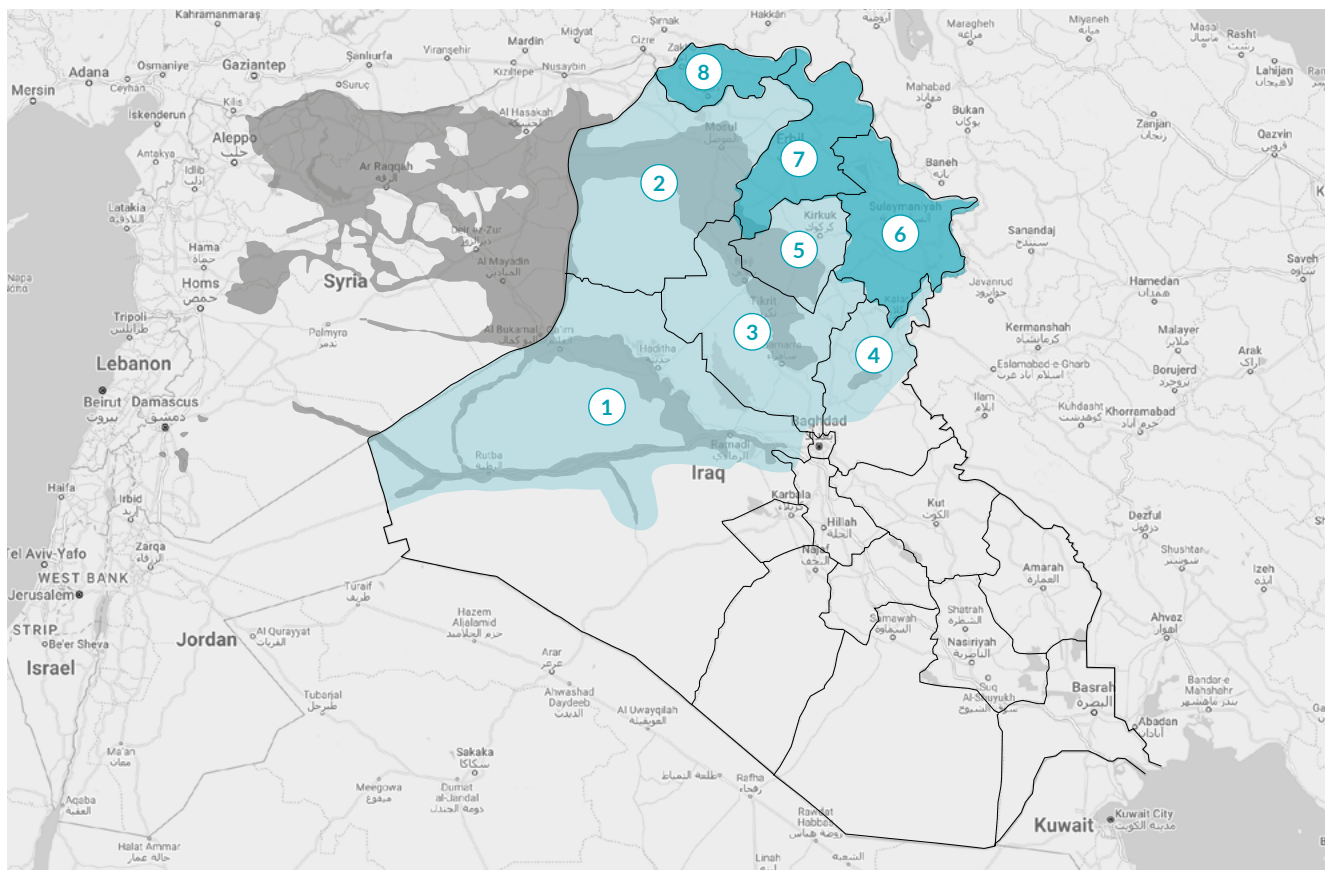
This study should not be understood as a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of child protection measures in Northern Iraq nor as a full assessment of Germany's foreign policy and investments in Iraq as a whole. It is exploratory in nature, applying a new lens of analysis to identify gaps in child protection as they relate to potential security and stabilization risks and matching these findings with weak points in Germany's donor practice as reported by partner organizations.

This section serves to outline the project's mixed methods approach, encompassing qualitative semi-structured interviews and a quantitative mapping of Germany's investments in Northern Iraq. In addition, it draws from the vast body of literature on the benefits and challenges of child protection, ISIS' recruitment tactics and strategy towards children, as well as academic work on

the political and economic development of the post-ISIS regions in Iraq.

2.1. Geography

For the purposes of this report, Northern Iraq is defined as those areas formerly under control by ISIS (see grey area in Figure 1) and majorly affected by internal displacement, reception of refugees from Syria, and the presence of armed groups. Thus, the geographic focus of this study stretches roughly from central Anbar governorate to the Syrian, Turkish, and Iranian borders, as highlighted in blue and dark blue in Figure 1. This report uses the term "the post-ISIS areas (in Iraq)" as synonymous to "Northern Iraq" as defined here.



- Maximum extent of ISIS' territorial control, January 2015
 - "Northern Iraq" as defined here, focus region of this report
 - Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), part of "Northern Iraq"
- | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| ① Anbar governorate | ④ Diyala governorate | ⑦ Erbil governorate (KRI) |
| ② Nineveh governorate | ⑤ Kirkuk governorate | ⑧ Dohuk governorate (KRI) |
| ③ Salahaddin governorate | ⑥ Sulaymaniyah governorate (KRI) | |

Figure 1: Map of the Iraqi governorates, "Northern Iraq" in blue, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) highlighted in dark blue, layered over an approximation of ISIS' maximum territorial control in January 2015 in dark grey.¹²

The governorates of Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah together form the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), which is de-facto autonomous and has its own government and administration. All other governorates together are referred to as federal Iraq. Due to its partly independent governance structures and different societal makeup, the Kurdish and federal regions of Northern Iraq experience many of the issues analyzed in this report differently. As such, this report often separates between dynamics present among different areas within Northern Iraq.

2.2. Speaking with Experts

To gain insights into the achievements and gaps of child protection as well as into Germany's role in the area, I conducted background conversations and interviews with over 40 experts on Iraq, child protection in conflict settings, and German foreign policy. Experts included current and recently departed staff members from the United Nations, INGOs, national organizations, academia, and the German administration. The majority of conversations were conducted in-person during a two-week research trip in January 2024 to Amman, Jordan, where many organizations' regional offices are located, and Erbil, KRI, where most organizations have offices to coordinate their country response. In addition, virtual interviews were convened with experts based elsewhere. The question catalogue that served as a starting point for conversations was vetted by Save the Children staff in Iraq to ensure cultural and context sensitivity. To ensure the safety of interviewees, conversations were not recorded and processes to de-identify individuals discussed and agreed on with each expert. Data collection and storage processes passed an ethics approval by the Harvard Kennedy School. The resulting qualitative dataset was coded by thematic occurrences and anecdotes were corroborated with existing literature, reports by NGOs working in the region, and news articles. Discrepancies between major patterns were minor, which meant it was not necessary to weigh different experts' views against each other.

2.3. Mapping Germany's Spending in Iraq

In addition to qualitative insights, this analysis draws on data detailing Germany's investments in Iraq. The OECD's Creditor Reporting System (CRS) database collects the self-reported official development assistance (ODA) spending data of donors.¹³ All entries are verified by the OECD data collection team to ensure compliance with reporting rules. For this study, a consolidated dataset was cre-

ated including all CRS spending data from Germany to Iraq between 2018 and 2022, the five years since the defeat of ISIS for which spending data was available. This dataset was based on the reported disbursement rather than commitment data to investigate what was actually paid when, and used constant prices tied to the 2021 US Dollar to make listings comparable over time. The OECD lists spending by projects, including titles and descriptions, and categorizes each listing into "sectors" (e.g. conflict, peace & security) and "purpose codes" (e.g. security system management and reform). Each spending entry was additionally marked for its geographic association and inclusion of children or youth. On this basis, Germany's investments in Iraq were mapped to discover patterns and potential gaps in spending.

2.4. Limitations

While these approaches are useful in approximating a picture of the situation of children in Iraq and Germany's donor activities, it is essential to acknowledge their limitations. Regarding the qualitative aspects of this study, no interviews were conducted with members of local communities and children under the age of 18 due to ethical concerns and safety risks, aligning with Save the Children's child safeguarding policies. Consequently, the populations directly affected by the discussed matters were unable to contribute to this analysis. Additionally, around half of all contacts were facilitated by Save the Children, which may introduce a perspective bias.

The quantitative approach heavily relies on the geographic and demographic coding of the dataset, which may not fully capture the reality of each project. Listings that lack mention of child-related activities in their description might still be related to minors to some extent. Similarly, listings lacking geographic information may have been implemented only in specific regions, such as the North or the South. This project serves as a starting point for describing a complex set of interrelated issues, with each relationship warranting further study.

3

Foundations

- The Basics: Legal Background and Definitions
 - Children's Roles, Radicalization, and Recruitment
 - Long-term Child Development Impact of Conflict
-

3. Foundations

This section aims to provide the foundational knowledge necessary to understand the often-complex concepts from the fields of civilian protection, foreign policy, psychology, and human rights used in this report.

3.1 The Basics: Legal Background and Definitions

3.1.1 Children, Rights, and Protection

The underlying framework for child protection work is the 1989 United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history.¹⁴ Iraq became a signatory in 1994.¹⁵ Based on the CRC, Save the Children defines child protection as the “measures and structures to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence affecting children.”¹⁶ This definition closely aligns with the United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) interpretation, which adds “harmful practices” to the list of issues to prevent and respond to.¹⁷ It is crucial to distinguish child protection, which primarily falls under the state's purview, from the broader protection of children's rights, an obligation applicable to all those engaging with children.¹⁸

Definitions

as used in this report

Children are **0-17 years** old.

Youth are **18-29 years** old.

Importantly, even though conceptions of childhood vary across time and cultures, the CRC defines children as all human beings under the age of eighteen. Subsequent chapters refer to both children and youth in consideration of the enduring effect that childhood circumstances may exert on life experiences and decisions in early adulthood. Contrastingly to “children”, “youth” is not defined in international law. Colloquially, “youth” often covers children in their teenage years and young adults. This report clearly distinguishes between children and youth by adopting the definition by the United Nations Security Council's youth, peace, and security agenda, which includes all human beings between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine years.¹⁹

Child protection is intricately related to several enabling rights enshrined in the CRC, such as the rights to registration and identity, education, or survival and development. These rights are essential to ensure children's freedom from abuse, neglect, exploitation, violence, and harmful practices. Thus, child protection efforts often intersect with other sectors – including foreign and security policy, as this policy analysis demonstrates.

3.1.2 Crisis Prevention, Stabilization, and Peacebuilding

To comprehensively assess the impacts of children's realities and child protection on peace and security, it is imperative to clarify the foreign policy concepts at play. Crisis prevention, stabilization, and peacebuilding are key pillars conflict management. Yet, their definitions often lack precision, leading to varying interpretations among different actors, including within the United Nations.²⁰

In contrast, Germany has established clear definitions for these terms within its strategic framework and acknowledges their interconnectedness. In its strategy documents, the German government delineates the components of its **integrated approach**: “Crisis prevention tackles violent conflicts at an early stage; stabilization creates incentives for non-violent conflict resolution; peacebuilding prevents a relapse into violence.”²¹ As Iraq moves back and forth between active conflict and post-conflict phases, stabilization and peacebuilding are the two most relevant concepts for this analysis.

Germany outlines stabilization as measures “to create a secure environment, to improve living conditions in the short-term, and to offer alternatives to economies of war and violence,” including “consolidate(ing) legitimate political authorities.”²² Peacebuilding is described as resembling crisis prevention by “addressing the causes and drivers of conflict” but simultaneously also dealing with “the affected societies' prolonged experience of violence and the realities of (destruction in) post-conflict situations.”²³ This report adopts Germany's interpretations of stabilization and peacebuilding in accordance with the specific issues discussed within the Iraqi context.

3.2. Children’s Roles, Radicalization, and Recruitment

To understand the security impact children might have, it is imperative to know the many roles they play in conflicts. Beyond violence against children as “collateral damage” in attacks that have different tactical aims, many conflict actors target children deliberately, be it to extract intelligence, as human shields, or as representatives of their communities’ future. During conflicts, many children assume adults’ responsibilities as heads of households, breadwinners, or within social structures. Moreover, they may actively participate in violent acts, as combatants in armed groups or in more informal and situational settings.²⁴ The changing nature of conflict (e.g., more active fighting in urban areas, an increasing proportion of protracted crises) also affects how children are affected by and involved in violence. This report recognizes the fluidity and simultaneity of children’s roles in conflict.

Armed groups often operate within extremist ideologies, ISIS being a notable example. Thus, radicalization is an important factor with regard to children exercising violence or facilitating attacks by armed groups or whose radicalization drives them to join armed groups. Factors driving child and youth radicalization and their recruitment into armed groups are almost identical. However, recruitment may occur for reasons unrelated or only partially related to radicalization – and radicalization does not necessarily result in recruitment.

Drivers of Child Radicalization and Recruitment

Push

- Accumulation of negative life events
- Alienation from community
- Discrimination and political grievances
- Lacking access to social services
- Challenging authority

Pull

- Sense of belonging, community, and peer networks
- Self-efficacy and agency
- Protection and security
- Radical environment

Source: synthesis of factors identified in academic research (see text).

Reasons for radicalization and recruitment can be distinguished by push and pull factors. Scholars have identified external circumstances that can push children and youth towards radicalization and armed groups as accumulation of social risks and negative life events, such as exposure to violence and conflict, separation from family, or poverty; alienation from society, closely tied to perceived discrimination, access to social services, and political grievances; a search for significance and recognition in connection to identity confusion; and protesting and breaking out of authority structures. Conversely, studies show that pull factors drawing young people into radical ideologies and the arms of armed groups encompass gaining a sense of belonging, mentorship, and peer networks, which in the form of ‘brotherhoods’ can feel particularly important for young men; experiencing self-efficacy and agency; the protection and safety a radical community or armed group is perceived to offer; and simply the desire to be part of a radical environment.²⁵

3.3. Long-term Child Development Impact of Conflict

Furthermore, children’s experiences and participation in conflict have profound implications for their long-term outlooks, which are closely linked to their future impacts on conflict development and society as a whole. In addition to physical harm, displacement, exposure to violence, or threats to survival can subject children to extreme stress and fear. Research has shown that so-called toxic stress due to “strong, frequent, or prolonged activation of the body’s stress response systems in the absence of the buffering protection of a supportive, adult relationship” can permanently alter children’s developing brains and are linked to mental and physical health issues that can last well into adulthood.²⁶ Next to chronic diseases or drug addiction, these long-term effects also include susceptibility to stress disorders, high risk-taking behavior, and a greater propensity for violence. When a significant portion of a society experiences the impacts of conflict during crucial developmental stages without adequate support structures, societal problems arise. We need to expect possible effects on the risk of conflict relapses, a society’s capacity for economic development, and the costs associated with managing widespread health and behavioral difficulties.

4

Northern Iraq

- ISIS in Iraq
 - The Current Security and Humanitarian Situation
 - Child Protection Concerns
 - Key Findings
-

Northern Iraq

The following section explores the first goal of this report: providing insights into the current protection outlook for children in Northern Iraq, their vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment by armed groups, and implications for the country's future. This chapter begins with an overview of the conflict's history, current security issues, and humanitarian needs in the post-ISIS areas. It then analyzes the connected threats to children's safety and wellbeing as well as the effectiveness of child protection systems in addressing these threats. To effectively evaluate the policy measures of donors like Germany in the next chapter, it is essential to comprehend the scope of child protection concerns and security risks in Northern Iraq.

4.1. ISIS in Iraq

ISIS did not appear out of thin air in 2013; decades of political violence and conflict leading up to ISIS' takeover majorly shaped the conditions they eventually exploited. ISIS quickly seized large parts of Iraq and Syria, shattering the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the process.²⁷ By December 2017, ISF, PMF, and the Kurdish Peshmerga armed forces, supported by the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter Daesh, had won back ISIS' strongholds and could announce a military victory.²⁸

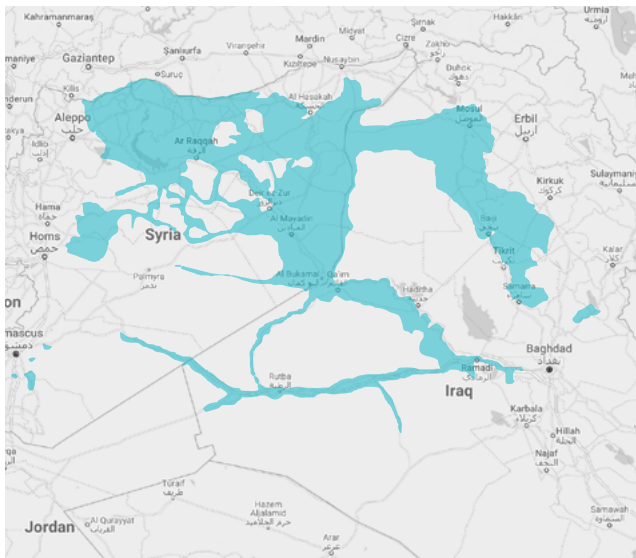


Figure 2: Map of the maximum extent of ISIS' territorial control in Northern Iraq in January 2015. See also Figure 1.

In the territories under its control, ISIS enforced harsh restrictions on basic rights and freedom and committed various atrocities, particularly against ethnic and religious minorities.²⁹ The massacres and sexual violence against the Yazidi community have been recognized as constituting genocide.³⁰ Estimations suggest the total death toll of ISIS amounts to 27,000 casualties, while another 53,000 civilians died in the wider conflict.³¹ Over six million Iraqis, equal to 15% of the population, were internally displaced and 260,000 refugees fled from Syria to Northern Iraq.³²

ISIS targeted children with vehemence. Experts estimate that at least 2,000 Yazidi children younger than fourteen were abducted by ISIS and tortured, raped, and otherwise abused. Children from other communities were also abducted in large numbers, boys primarily to fill the ranks and girls to marry ISIS fighters.³³ In addition to forced recruitment, ISIS heavily relied on radicalization and voluntary recruitment. ISIS used 1,350 schools under its control across Iraq and Syria to teach its ideology and featured child soldiers prominently in its propaganda material. ISIS strategically built a physical and ideological force of children that was aimed to last for generations, beyond its military victories.³⁴ Even though both female and male children were recruited, their ideology focusing on male superiority and extremely conservative gender roles in the context of a highly hierarchical society appealed particularly to young men.³⁵

4.2. The Current Security and Humanitarian Situation

Today, the effects of ISIS' terror, the fight against its rule, and the dynamics that enabled its radical takeover are still visible in Northern Iraq. The fragile security situation and humanitarian needs majorly impact the interplay between child protection and stabilization.

4.2.1 Security Developments

ISIS itself, although no longer controlling any territory, remains active and a threat to civilians and security personnel. In Nineveh and in the disputed areas along the border between federal Iraq and the KRI where neither ISF, PMF, nor Peshmerga exercise control, ISIS pockets and their continued attacks are a concern.³⁶ ISIS still recruits and raises money, both in federal Iraq and the KRI.³⁷

The **PMF** originally emerged in 2014 in response to the threat posed by ISIS and played an important role in ISIS' defeat. However, today, the PMF contribute more to the fragile security situation in Northern Iraq than to its resolution. They were formally integrated into ISF in 2016, but their estimated 200,000 fighters effectively remain out of centralized control. The most powerful PMF groups are backed and funded by Iran. The (former) militia leaders have since established significant political power, hold elected offices, and secured expansive federal funding.³⁸ The PMF still hold extensive power over civilians' lives, be it to access services or to move through checkpoints. Their relationships with local communities differ widely, exacerbating tensions along sectarian lines.³⁹ Civilians accuse the PMF of a range of human rights violations.⁴⁰ In addition, some PMF have allegedly started to engage in organized criminal activity including trafficking drugs. Iran-backed PMF act increasingly aggressive and have attacked U.S. military sites in Iraq multiple times over fall and winter 2023/2024.⁴¹

Northern Iraq also struggles with armed and extremist groups outside of the PMF structure. A notable group is the **PKK**, who are largely active in the very North of the country, along the Turkish border. In an extension of the conflict between the PKK and Türkiye, the PKK also recruits and operates from Northern Iraq.⁴² The Turkish air force regularly targets alleged PKK locations in Northern Iraq, including in densely inhabited city centers.⁴³

These security threats are exacerbated by the **limited capacities of the federal and KRI governments**. Federal forces struggle to contain the threat posed by the various armed groups in Northern Iraq. The KRI government exercises its responsibilities more reliably than the federal government but is in many ways dependent on Baghdad. Corruption and lacking expertise further limit governmental reach.⁴⁴ Moreover, the Kurdish and Iraqi governments operate within a fragile and tense regional environment, with regional dynamics significantly impacting domestic issues, most notable in Iran's rapidly increasing influence in Iraq.

4.2.2 Social, Economic, and Humanitarian Developments

In addition to the still fragile security situation in Northern Iraq, children's lived realities are affected by persistent socioeconomic and humanitarian issues. **Over 1 million Iraqis are still internally displaced**, of which 100,000 live in critical shelters such as tents or abandoned and damaged buildings. Another 165,000 displaced Iraqis and approximately 100,000 Syrian refugees live in camps in Northern Iraq, primarily in the KRI.⁴⁵ There are ongoing efforts to

repatriate the over 20,000 Iraqis remaining in al-Hol camp in Syria, which is infamous for its problematic human rights and security conditions.⁴⁶ The data on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees is not aggregated by age or gender; however, estimations suggest that half of camp inhabitants are children.⁴⁷ The conditions in the camps are still dire, including lacking access to basic services, food insecurity, and high rates of abuse and social exclusion.⁴⁸ All IDP camps in federal Iraq have been closed with the exception of Jeddah 1 camp in Nineveh, which serves to process returnees from al-Hol.⁴⁹ The KRI will close its remaining 23 IDP camps in July 2024 on Baghdad's wishes.⁵⁰ The camp closures have been reported to cause distress among IDPs and refugees in Northern Iraq, as most perceive conditions in their areas of origin to be too unstable to return. Instead, informal settlements emerge, who are under constant threat of eviction.⁵¹

Children in Numbers

600,000 are IDPs (2023)

65,000 live in camps (2023)

4,500,000 live in poverty (2021)

1,300,000 in need of humanitarian assistance (2023)

45,000 have no identification documents (2021)

1,000,000 are forced to child labor (2021)

5,000,000 are orphaned (2021)

Estimations for Iraq. Sources: UNICEF, Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights.

Moreover, Iraqi society struggles with **widespread distrust and social friction** following decades of conflict in which sectarian identities played big roles. Sunni Iraqis affiliated or perceived to be affiliated with ISIS remain under intense scrutiny by communities. The resulting social exclusion hinders IDPs' return and access to state services and heightens their vulnerability to violence and abuse.⁵² At the same time, the Iraqi government has not fulfilled its promises to victimized communities. Transitional justice projects to hold perpetrators accountable, provide restitution for victims, and systematically collect witness statements are deficient, feeding occurrences of vigilante justice and revenge.⁵³ Psychological distress among the population remains high while mental health support is limited, further preventing societal healing.⁵⁴

Social tensions and issues surrounding displacement are exacerbated by an improving but **weak economy** that leaves many in **poverty** – including 4.5 million children.⁵⁵ The national poverty line in Iraq is 110,881 IQD (ca. 85 USD) per person per month.⁵⁶ Iraq struggles with corruption, is heavily reliant on oil revenues, and has a significantly overblown public sector. In the aftermath of ISIS, COVID-19 and the connected drop in oil prices hit the country heavily. While Iraq’s GDP is growing again, unemployment remains high.⁵⁷ Moreover, state employees in the KRI have not received full salary payments since summer 2023.⁵⁸ Climate change is likely to further increase issues of unemployment and poverty, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas. Iraq is among the five countries worldwide most affected by climate change effects, including droughts, sandstorms, and extreme heat.⁵⁹

4.3 Child Protection Concerns

The persistent security threats and humanitarian needs in Northern Iraq affect children disproportionately due to their developmental vulnerabilities and large demographic share. Moreover, structural issues like weak governance, poor economic outlook, or corruption impact the effectiveness of protection systems and the ability of families, communities, and peers to prevent and respond to children’s experience of abuse, neglect, exploitation, harmful practices, and violence. The following section presents the most glaring protection concerns currently impacting children’s well-being in Northern Iraq. However, not all risk factors affect all children equally; different identity markers can make children particularly vulnerable:

Marginalized Demographics	Description
IDPs	Children who relocated or whose family relocated prior to their birth within Iraq.
Refugees	Children who fled or whose family fled prior to their birth from Syria.
Formerly associated with armed groups (CAAFAG)	Children who were affiliated with ISIS or other armed groups.
Perceived affiliation with ISIS	Children whose families were sympathetic with or perceived to support ISIS.
Minority groups	Children who belong to ethnic or religious minority groups like Yazidi, Christians, Shabak, or Turkmen.
Unaccompanied or orphaned	Children whose primary guardians have died or who were separated from their families.
Affected by poverty	Children whose household has 110,881 IQD (ca. 85 USD) or less for them per month.

Lacking Identification

One of the child protection concerns experts in Iraq raised most often is children’s lack of identification documents. Approximately 45,000 children in Iraq who were internally displaced, were formerly associated with ISIS, or whose birth was not recorded under ISIS’ rule lack identity documentation.⁶⁰ The continued controversy around providing children with identification violates article 8 of the CRC, which stipulates a child’s right to state support in establishing nationality and identity. What appears as a bureaucratic issue has severe implications for children’s protection. Birth certification is a prerequisite to pass through checkpoints, access basic services such as food distributions and healthcare, enroll in school, inherit property, and receive additional identification documents as an adult. Children already in vulnerable situations face additional barriers to their livelihoods, which in turn may exac-

erbate other protection concerns. Moreover, missing documentation means children who get trafficked, engage in high-risk child labor, or experience violence cannot be identified easily and may struggle to access legal protection. Gaining birth documentation remains a highly inaccessible process, with rules to prove a child’s lineage being strict (e.g., submit DNA samples from up to three male paternal relatives).⁶¹

Limited Access to Education

Going to school provides a community of peers and supervision by pedagogical staff and opens a multitude of opportunities for a child’s future in addition to physical protection and often also access to food. However, access to education remains a significant

problem in Northern Iraq. Children without birth identification originally could not enroll in school at all; since spring 2022, they may “listen in” to primary school but can only receive certificates if they submit their documentation.⁶² In addition, many families are unable to afford transport to school or required equipment and need their children to help earn the household’s living, which further drives children being pushed out of school and disproportionately affects already disadvantaged communities.⁶³ The result: roughly half of displaced and refugee children are out of school.⁶⁴ Among the host community (“regular” children), these issues exist too; in Nineveh, reports indicate 40% of children are pushed out of school after primary school and 76% never finish high school.⁶⁵ In some areas such as in Sinjar in Nineveh, the precarious security situation also affects the availability of education.⁶⁶

Child Labor

Where schooling is inaccessible and socioeconomic strains are severe, children may need to work for a living instead. Child labor occurs in comparatively “safe” jobs like cleaning in hairdresser salons or helping in repair shops. However, children in Northern Iraq are also subjected to highly unsafe labor conditions while begging or in criminal activities, including sexual exploitation.⁶⁷ Reports indicate cases of child trafficking out of high-risk labor situations, including for organ harvesting.⁶⁸ Generally, boys are more likely to engage in child labor than girls, particularly in public facing positions such as begging.⁶⁹

The extent of child labor is difficult to estimate; a 2021 report by the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights indicates 1 million children across the country work for a living. In a survey in Mosul in Nineveh from 2022, the humanitarian INGO International Rescue Committee found that 90% of guardians said at least one of their children was working and 85% of children reported unsafe working conditions.⁷⁰ The issue of child labor is expected to get worse over the next year; interviewees in the KRI and Nineveh report observing increasing numbers of children begging, and increasingly more girls among them.⁷¹

Abuse

Child abuse in all its forms is widespread in Northern Iraq. Experts report large numbers of cases of parental neglect and domestic and sexual violence. Both within IDP and refugee camps and within the host community, threatened livelihoods and financial hardships exert pressure onto family constructs that can facilitate escalations to violence. The practice of child marriage has also become increasingly popular, especially among refugee and camp populations under economic strains, leaving young girls vulnerable to sexual violence and domestic abuse by their husbands and family in law.⁷² In addition to external pressures, parents’ traumatization from their conflict experiences may play into neglect or violence against their children.⁷³

Health Struggles

The psychological distress parents experience due to their mental health interacts with their children’s psychological distress. Experiences during ISIS’ rule and the persistent prevalence of abuse, violence, and exclusion heavily impact children’s mental health, for many to the point of traumatization. Parents often lack knowledge on how to deal with their children’s trauma-induced difficulties and behaviors, resorting to abuse as a disciplining measure. Many families also start to accept more widespread symptoms such as self-isolation as normal, and don’t know how to respond to more extreme behaviors such as children killing animals.⁷⁴ Child-focused psychological interventions that could buffer the potential long-term effects of traumatization are widely lacking.⁷⁵ Interviewees report they can observe protracted effects of trauma in children over time, including communication and socialization problems, aggressive behavior, and depression.⁷⁶ One interviewee summarized the problems of development impairments in conflict-affected countries such as Iraq as a societal problem: “we lose so many human resources (for a functional society) through lacking child protection – and nobody sees it.”⁷⁷

Moreover, children with disabilities are known to be more vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation. Disabilities may be the result of genetic conditions, serious injuries (including due to conflict-related violence), or lacking access to health care and nutrition (including due to conflict-related access barriers and resource shortages). In 2020, 19% of Iraqi children between 2 and 17 years had one or more functional difficulties.⁷⁸

Social Exclusion

Several experts report a significant marginalization of children in Iraqi culture. Children are often viewed as the lowest tier within the family hierarchy. In Iraq's male-dominated social structure, this places children at the bottom of the social ladder and consequently makes them a low political priority.⁷⁹ An interviewee from the United Nations remarked that they have “never worked in a country where children are so invisible.” When children additionally belong to marginalized demographics, their social exclusion is even more pronounced, especially for those who were or are perceived to have been affiliated with ISIS, many of whom are IDPs. Children are stigmatized and bullied by peers, sometimes even barred from enrolling in school, and at high risk of revenge attacks and violence.⁸⁰ Monitoring the size of social exclusion and connected abuse is very difficult, as identifying children at risk might inadvertently expose them to harm – including prosecution by Iraqi authorities. As of December 2022, the United Nations had knowledge of 936 minors in detention on national security related charges, primarily for alleged affiliation with ISIS.⁸¹

Interviewees heavily criticized the stigmatization of children perceived to have been affiliated with ISIS, sometimes only because of their family relations. One interviewee pointed out that pushing these children out of society might have unintended consequences: “when you treat those children like ISIS, they become ISIS.”⁸² Other interviewees elaborated that the categorical exclusion of children may lead to a generation perceiving Iraqi and Kurdish society negatively, making them vulnerable to radicalization and more likely to resort to violence.⁸³ Persistent experiences of exclusion and powerlessness play into the hands of armed groups seeking to recruit children and youth.

Radicalization and Recruitment

The aforementioned child protection concerns contribute to children being radicalized, leading them to join armed groups or being recruited with the promise of a better life. Children who lack access to education face limited options in the labor market, often resorting to unskilled labor with high financial precarity or turning to illegal activities and armed groups. High rates of unemployment and poverty, exacerbated by climate change, increase the attractiveness of armed groups. Additionally, many children and youth lack trust in the state to support them in creating perspectives and livelihoods, further pushing them towards recruitment.⁸⁴ Moreover, in the context of regional conflict,

social media engagement facilitates the radicalization and recruitment of both Shia and Sunni extremist groups.⁸⁵ If children get arrested for selling or buying substances or other minor crimes, their time in incarceration may further expose them to radicalization, as prisons are known breeding grounds for extremist ideologies.⁸⁶ Some affiliations with armed groups are more informal. For example, children living in camps may teach their friends how to build explosive devices, learned during the conflict, and then receive payment from armed groups to place and detonate them.⁸⁷

The United Nations and the Iraqi government report that the **PMF** no longer recruit minors since signing an action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in spring 2023.⁸⁸ However, interviewees from different national and international organizations counter this claim, saying they still hear of PMF factions recruiting children – at the very least, the PMF groom children to join their forces later or use them in non-combatant roles. Because of the PMF's influence and the political scrutiny on child recruitment, the topic is considered so sensitive by experts that it cannot be openly discussed within communities, resulting in a lack of reliable data points. The appeal of the PMF stems from their perceived legitimacy on paper, as well as their power and wealth. They can offer livelihoods and promise physical safety.⁸⁹ The **PKK** engages in confirmed forced recruitment of minors and even kidnaps children from their families in Northern Iraq. They also find supporters and recruits among Yazidi children who live in IDP camps. Notably, the PKK recruits both girls and boys in combatant roles.⁹⁰

Since its territorial defeat, **ISIS'** recruitment of children in Northern Iraq appears limited. However, there are many children at risk of recruitment by ISIS or potential successor groups – particularly boys. ISIS still uses the same strategic recruitment tactics playing on children's self-perception and targets disenfranchised children and youth. Especially those children perceived to have been affiliated with ISIS or having fought for them “are really just waiting for next extremist group to pick them up,” as one interviewee remarked.⁹¹ The largest influx of underage recruits comes from Iraqis returning from al-Hol camp in Syria, where ISIS has a large presence and recruits on a larger scale than in Iraq. Children in al-Hol experience and witness widespread violence, including sexual assaults, and including at the hands of camp security. Experts report this ideologization based not only on religion but hatred for society to be particularly dangerous: “Everyone knows they are raising another generation of ISIS in al-Hol.”⁹²

4.3.1 Ineffectiveness of the Child Protection System

The impact of the concerns outlined above could be mediated by effective child protection systems preventing their escalation and responding to children's negative life events to buffer against long-term impacts. To assess child protection structures in Northern Iraq, interviewees were asked to elaborate on systemic issues beyond structures officially labelled as 'child protection' and include all measures that either facilitate or help prevent protection concerns.

In terms of direct actions to curb **recruitment** of minors, attempts by Iraq's federal government were described as failing. Iraq ratified the Optional Protocol to the CRC A/RES/54/263 in 2008, which requires states to take all necessary measures to prevent and criminalize the use and recruitment of minors in armed conflict. Staff at national and international organizations explained that the national action plan to prevent the recruitment of minors by the PMF remained inaccessible to civil society. Interviewees remained skeptical about its chances of implementation. Moreover, a very limited legal child protection framework means children coming forward about being recruited are frequently prosecuted, heavily limiting options to safely target children at risk to join an armed group or helping them exit armed groups.⁹³

Northern Iraq generally lacks legal provisions to effectively protect children from harm. The KRI and federal Iraq have only very limited **child protection regulations**, although the KRI's child protection framework is more extensive. Efforts are underway to pass a new child protection law through parliament in Baghdad, but the draft law remains in limbo. This proposed law aims to establish two new government bodies on child protection and to incorporate many rights of children outlined in the CRC into national law. It would provide accountability for government actions and a legal basis for enforcing a larger set of children's rights.⁹⁴ However, controversy surrounding the legislation has stalled progress, with Shia groups expressing concerns that the law was externally influenced and could undermine family structures. Activists hope for progress in 2024.⁹⁵

Even with improved legal provisions, Iraqi authorities **lack child protection expertise**. Existing mechanisms, such as the Child Welfare Commission, struggle to fulfill their mandate. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs leads Iraq's child protection efforts but lacks the necessary capacities and trained staff. UNICEF and various international and national NGOs have stepped in to fill this gap, managing child protection cases and implementing measures to promote child well-being. However, as international donors withdraw humanitarian funding, these organizations are




transitioning child protection responsibilities to local and federal authorities, despite their lack of expertise. Consequently, child protection vacuums emerge in many areas.⁹⁶ These gaps in protection weigh particularly heavily considering children's low school attendance, where children's well-being can be most easily monitored and countermeasures to potential abuse or exploitation taken.

Before donors began transitioning out of humanitarian aid, their practices were already impacting child protection in Northern Iraq. **Short project cycles**, particularly those lasting less than a year, hindered protection work beyond imminent survival needs. Projects aimed at improving parenting styles, mental health, education, and other psychosocial and cultural aspects require longer durations to achieve sustainable effects. Often, projects were abandoned prematurely, with insufficient ownership transferred to the community and authorities to ensure continuity, thereby minimizing the impact of investments.⁹⁷

As donors **decrease** their **humanitarian spending** in Iraq, child protection concerns are adversely affected. While the humanitarian situation has indeed improved, interviewees are afraid that the reduction in funding surpasses the decline in humanitarian need. For example, UNICEF Iraq faced an 80% funding shortfall in 2023.⁹⁸ International organizations have withdrawn from rural regions where their presence is most crucial, leaving behind a gap that national NGOs based in Northern Iraq lack the resources to fill. Interviewees strongly criticized donors moving from humanitarian and crisis measures to development assistance due to donors' assessments of the Iraqi government's financial capacities and the progress in stabilization. They argue that the overall improvements and country-wide indicators fail to reflect the realities in conflict-affected areas and disregard significant location-based disparities.⁹⁹

The decrease in international humanitarian assistance has a significant impact because apart from lacking capacities, there is also an absence of **political will** to address children's issues. For example, interviewees describe the Iraqi government as engaged in "a war on education", with conservative Muslim factions politicizing the already strained school system. Gender-related topics have become highly contentious, and any content referencing homosexuality has effectively been banned since summer 2023.¹⁰⁰ This has turned education from a basic right to a political bargaining chip in public discourse. The lacking political will disproportionately affects IDP children, as the federal government has pushed to close the camps many live in without providing alternative housing and has made children "a sidenote at best" in existing return and reintegration efforts.¹⁰¹

4.4 Key Findings

	<p>The security situation remains fragile. Regional dynamics pose a risk for renewed conflict.</p>
	<p>Severe child protection concerns are widespread. Including many factors known to drive radicalization and recruitment.</p>
	<p>There is significant potential for the escalation of radicalization and recruitment. Currently, children face a moderate risk of radicalization and recruitment.</p>
	<p>Child protection systems are ill-equipped to address prevalent child protection concerns effectively. Although the outlook for child protection in the KRI is comparatively better than in federal Iraq.</p>

Overall, the protection outlook for children in Northern Iraq remains alarming. While armed groups do not appear to recruit children in large numbers, interviewees report that radicalization and recruitment of minors remain prevalent concerns with considerable potential for escalation. Given the fragile security situation, children constitute a demographic that could exacerbate renewed conflict in Northern Iraq.

Particularly vulnerable are children belonging to groups already subject to discrimination and marginalization. The protection concerns present in Northern Iraq cover many factors known to drive child radicalization and recruitment: most children have been exposed to violence and conflict; IDPs, minority groups, and those with a (perceived) affiliation with ISIS experience alienation from society; many children accumulate a range of negative life experiences together with limited perspectives for their futures; hierarchical cultural norms exacerbate feelings of alienation and desire for belonging, finding agency, and bucking authority among children. At the same time, the Iraqi child protection systems lack the capacities and the political will to address these issues effectively. While child protection in the KRI fares relatively better, it still faces similar problems. Additionally, economic insecurity among vulnerable demographics is expected to worsen, further contributing to conditions conducive to radicalization and recruitment. Although interviewees largely deem the likelihood of another violent conflict originating within Iraq low, the country lacks the post-conflict processes necessary for stabilizing societal relations and addressing root causes of conflict. This includes the federal government's failure to prevent the PMF's power accumulation, curb a violence-driven political economy, and exercise the state's responsibilities in a way that could build societal trust – all factors that place Iraq more in the “stabilization” rather than “peacebuilding” category of Germany's conflict management tools. Experts are wary of the high impacts of

regional security and are concerned about Iraq's destabilization should external pressures rise: the conditions for a ‘perfect storm’ are present. Experts warn of the high potential for children and youth to become involved in renewed armed conflict. Multiple interviewees remark that the government's abandonment of children that were displaced, are returnees from al-Hol, or are accused of an affiliation with ISIS led to a situation where these children represent a “ticking time bomb.”¹⁰²

The substantial population of children in Northern Iraq facing abuse and violence could serve as a catalyst for renewed conflict.

5

Germany's Engagement

- Germany's Policy Goals in Iraq
 - Germany's Spending in Iraq
2018-2022
 - Evaluation of Germany's Donor
Practice in Iraq
 - Key Findings
-

Germany's Engagement

Beyond the situation in Northern Iraq, the second aspect of this project aims to provide insights into Germany's contributions to child protection in the post-ISIS areas and how its investments align with its stated policy goals in the region. As one of the top donors, Germany's approach is expected to significantly impact the security landscape and child protection efforts in Northern Iraq. This section delves into Germany's priorities in the region and how the German government allocates its funds in Iraq.

5.1 Germany's Policy Goals in Iraq

Germany's engagement in Iraq intensified following the emergence of ISIS in 2013. The German government has become a major partner to Iraq ever since and has formulated comprehensive policy goals addressing a broad spectrum of Iraq's current challenges. Public communication by the German government and interviews with officials from Germany's Federal Foreign Office and Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development underscored **stabilization** – encompassing economic, social, and political stability – **as Germany's key priority in Iraq**. In this context, officials also acknowledged Iraq's intricate relationships with neighboring states in the region. The goal of stabilization links to closely related priorities such as the fight against ISIS and anti-terrorism; economic development; social cohesion, particularly with regard to the situation of IDPs and refugees; the promotion of human rights; the processing of societal trauma due to ISIS' terror; and managing migration to and from Iraq.¹⁰³

Aligned with these priorities, German officials identify key issues to address in Iraq in the coming years. These include the reintegration of returnees from Syria and IDPs perceived to have affiliations with ISIS; enhancing regional stability; monitoring the eroding state monopoly on violence; and helping the Iraqi state fulfill its responsibilities towards its citizens.¹⁰⁴

In addition to humanitarian and development assistance, Germany is also militarily engaged in Iraq. As part of the military efforts in the Global Coalition Against ISIS, Operation Inherent Resolve, Germany has 277 soldiers stationed in al-Asrak in Jordan and Erbil in Iraq. Moreover, Germany supports the NATO Mission Iraq in Baghdad, advising ISF in questions of security and strategy. The parliamentary mandate for these missions was extended for one year on October 18, 2023, with main tasks revolving around technical and logistical support and training.¹⁰⁵ The mandate outlines:

"The goal of the German engagement is to contribute, through an integrated approach, to a comprehensive and sustainable stabilization of the region, particularly the former core area of ISIS in Iraq. The German military contribution aims to secure achievements, build on progress, and prevent setbacks, especially in the fight against ISIS."¹⁰⁶

5.2 Germany's Spending in Iraq 2018–2022

While monetary investments are certainly not the only foreign policy instruments states use to pursue their objectives, financial investments are an important indicator of how stated policy goals may be implemented in practice – does Germany put its money where its mouth is? Moreover, especially considering the magnitude of Germany's spending, taking a closer look at German investments gives insight into how children in Northern Iraq are affected by German donor practice. The following analysis draws on data for the five years after ISIS' territorial defeat in December 2017 that are available in the OECD database: 2018 to 2022.

Since 2014, Germany has been the second biggest donor in Iraq after the United States. When considering just the years 2018 to 2022, the U.S. still ranks first as the single biggest investor with an accumulated spending of 2.5 billion USD but is followed by Japan at 2.37 billion USD. Germany comes third with **a total spending of 2.27 billion USD**. The next biggest donors, the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK) are trailing significantly behind at 1.11 billion USD and 382.8 million USD respectively – the EU spends less than half of Germany, and the UK only roughly a third of the EU. This underpins the relevance of the three biggest spenders and the elevated role of Germany, which also contributes significant amounts to the EU's budget: Germany is a heavy weight in Iraq. Conversely, Iraq is the third biggest recipient of German assistance worldwide; between 2018 and 2022, Iraq was only topped by neighboring Syria (4 billion USD) and Afghanistan (2.38 billion USD).

Of Germany's total spending of 2.27 billion USD, at least 637 million USD were specifically spent in Northern Iraq, as defined in this report. To evaluate the **regional distribution** of individual spending listings, all roughly 1,000 listings in the database were coded by geographic markers into 'North', 'South' or 'unidentifiable'; indicators also included sub-regional and municipality names and different spellings of locations (e.g., Salah al-Din, Salahadine, Salahaddin, Salah ad-Din). Very little spending spe-

cifically targets Southern Iraq, while many lacked sufficient geographic indicators. Out of those unidentifiable listings, a large amount can be attributed to individual contributions to internationally managed funds like the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Funding Facility for Stabilization or to UN agencies. As the post-ISIS regions have been the global focus within Iraq in recent years, we can assume most unidentifiable investments were ultimately spent in Northern Iraq – the UNDP facility even specifies its focus regions as such. Overall, the data demonstrate that the regional distribution of Germany's investments follow its policy goals of stabilizing the post-ISIS areas.

Furthermore, analyzing Germany's expenditure on younger demographics provides insights into whether the significant role of **children and youth** in Northern Iraq's stabilization is adequately reflected in monetary contributions. The following analysis includes youth as a comparative category to capture children's development over time; those who participated in post-conflict programming financed by Germany in 2018 as children might be young adults by 2022. To determine the proportion of Germany's total spending targeted to children and youth, a broad range of

indicators in purpose codes, project titles, short descriptions, and long descriptions of reported listings were utilized. Children did not have to be named explicitly if e.g., the purposed code was already demographically targeted, such as "primary education." Listings where children were named together with adults (e.g., mothers and babies) were categorized as 'mixed' spending. Moreover, to establish a category of youth-related spending, direct mentions as well as indirect markers such as projects for university students were incorporated.

Out of the 2.27 billion USD Germany invested in Iraq between 2018-2022, only 181.4 million USD were directly allocated to children. When including mixed spending, this number rises to 226.7 million USD – but also encompasses adult demographics. To approximate a total number for Germany's child-focused spending in Iraq, we assume that roughly one fourth of mixed spending benefited the children in these projects. Considering the listings' project descriptions, this is likely a generous estimate. The resulting estimate of Germany's child-focused spending in Iraq amounts to 192.7 million USD. This implies **only 8.5% of Germany's spending is directed towards the approximately 50% of the Iraqi population who are children.**

Regional Distribution of Germany's Investments in Iraq

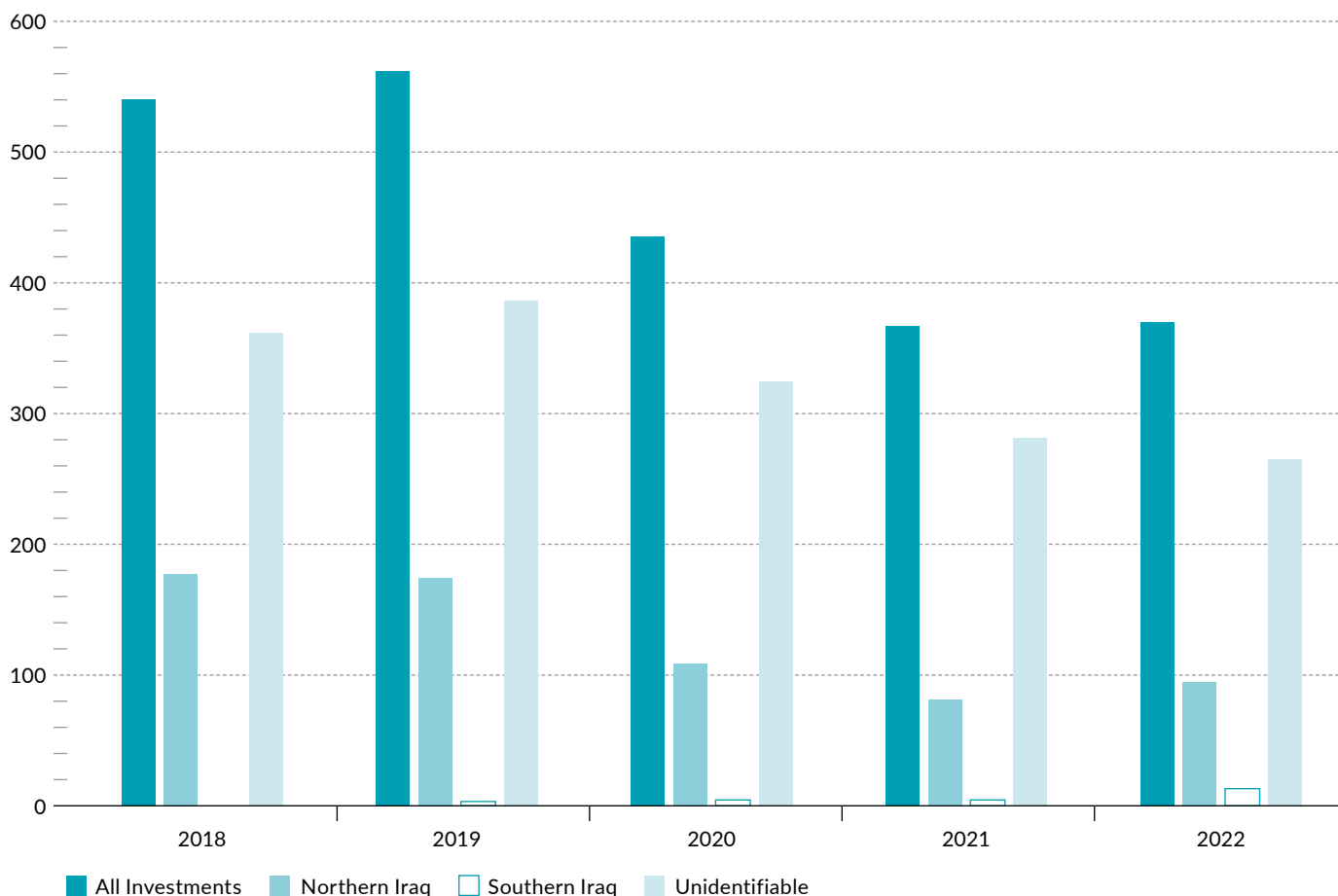


Figure 3: Chart of the regional distribution of German investments in Iraq 2018-2022, in million USD.

Spending Category	Absolute Spending in this category by Germany in Iraq 2018–2022	Proportional Spending to Germany's Total Spending in Iraq 2018–2022
Only Children	181.4 million USD	8%
Children and 'Mixed'	226.7 million USD	10%
Children, 'Mixed', and Youth	255 million USD	11.2%
Estimated Child- focused Spending	192.7 million USD	8.5%

Spending categories

Children: spending on demographic of minors, 0–17 years old (e.g., primary education)

'Mixed': spending on mixed demographic of children and adults (e.g., family interventions)

Youth: spending on demographic of young adults, 18–29 years old (e.g., college education)

Child-focused spending is similarly regionally spread as Germany's overall spending. The yearly volume of child-focused spending peaked in 2020 and has been steadily decreasing since (see Figure 4). Germany's investments targeting youth only are low, but consistent between 4.6 and 6.3 million USD per year.

Out of the purpose names provided by the OECD, "**prevention and demobilization of child soldiers**" is particularly interesting considering ISIS' extensive recruitment of children and the prevalent radicalization and conscription of minors by other armed groups. However, since 2018, only one project was labelled in this category: an intervention from 2022 at a volume of 577,638 USD. A different project, although categorized differently, targeted former ISIS child

soldiers among other groups between 2020 and 2021. No other listings mention youth or children and armed groups or recruitment together.

Within the larger sector "**conflict, peace, and security**" to which the child soldier purpose code belongs, expenditures mentioning children or youth amount to 4.19 million USD across eight listings between 2018 and 2022. One project targets youth specifically, six listings are for a 'mixed' demographic, and one is the above-mentioned child soldier project. Despite the low number of investments and their low volume, their descriptions show a great match with the issues described in Chapter 4: spending focuses on mental health support, social cohesion, and deradicalization.

Germany's Child-focused Spending in Iraq

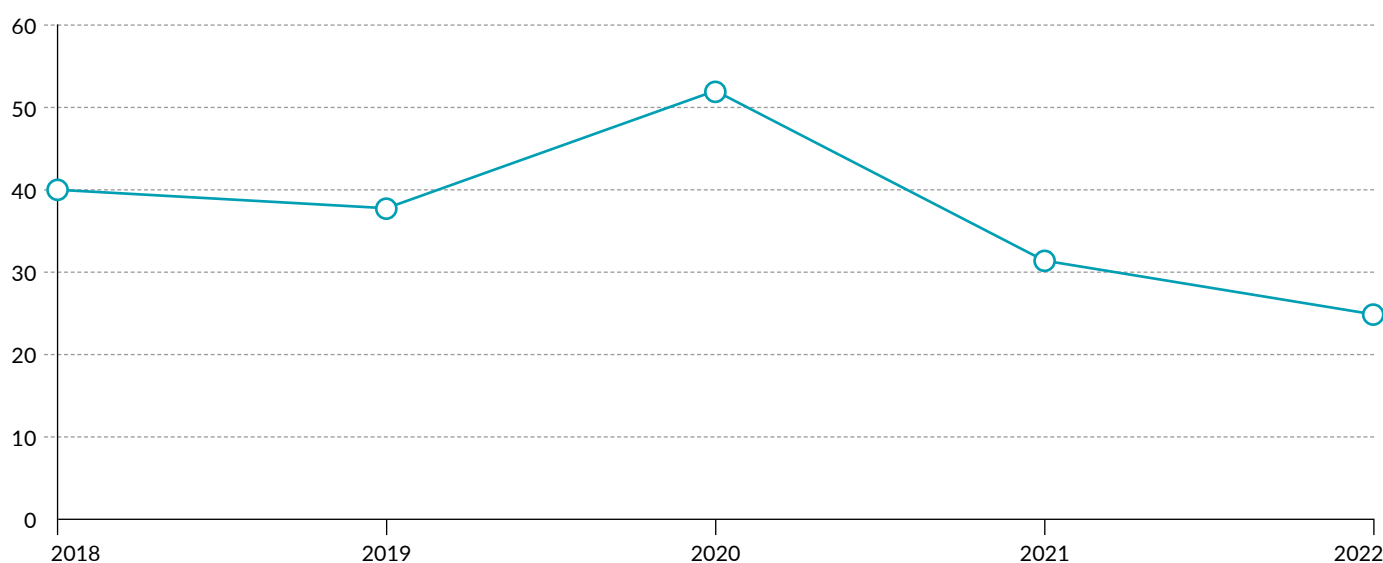


Figure 4: Chart of Germany's child-focused spending in Iraq 2018–2022, in million USD.

Germany's Child- and Youth-related Investments by Project Volume

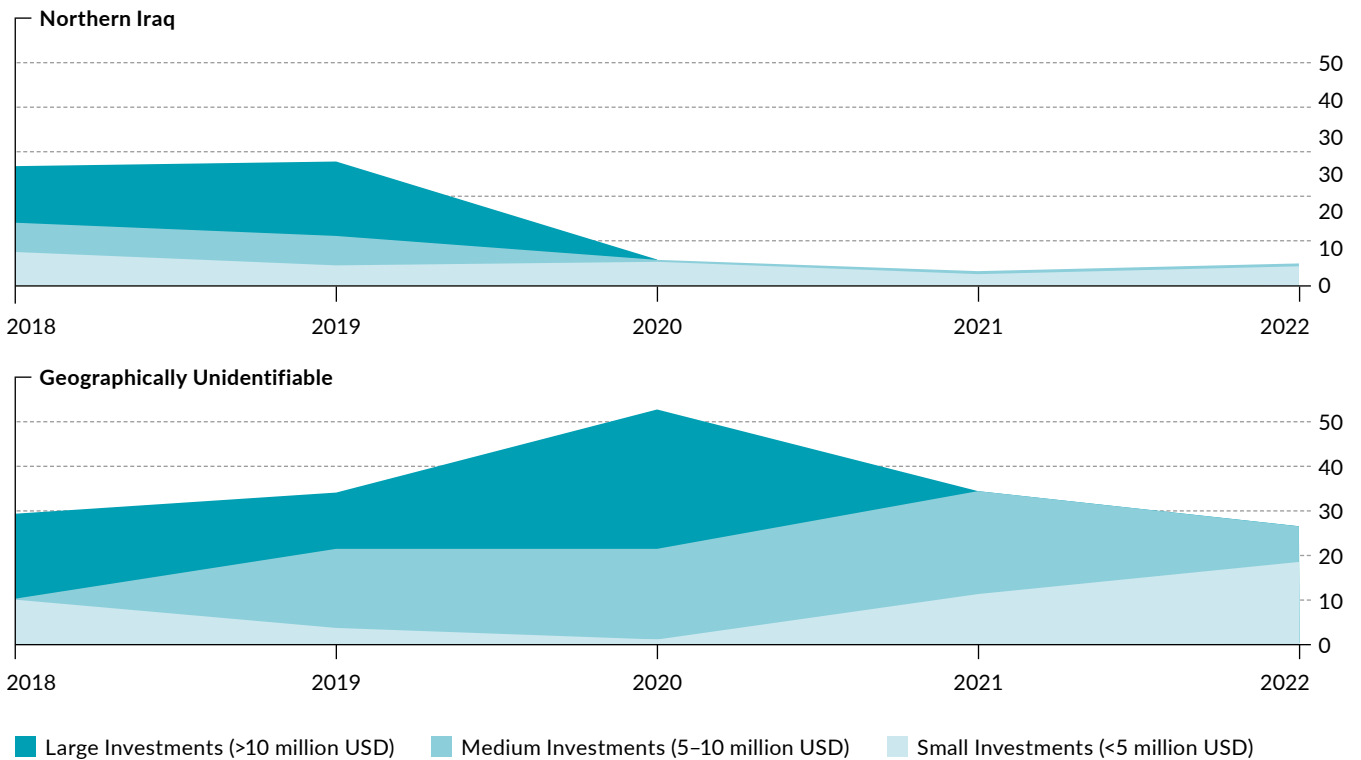


Figure 5: Side-by-side charts of Germany's child- and youth-related spending (investments targeting children, youth, and "mixed" demographics) in Iraq 2018-2022 aggregated by project volume, in million USD.

The effectiveness of spending is not solely determined by yearly amounts but also by individual project volumes. While small-scale investments are not inherently problematic, when numerous projects with small volumes accumulate, the likelihood increases that spending becomes scattershot, benefiting limited goals such as rebuilding a specific school or orphanage without allowing implementing agencies and partner organizations to work towards structural changes. Additionally, small-scale projects often entail a relatively higher share of project spending going towards administration costs and impose constraints on organizations' flexibility in adapting to changing local dynamics. In Northern Iraq, there has been no child- or youth-related listing with a volume higher than 5 million USD since 2019. Among geographically unidentifiable spending, investments higher than 10 million USD have ceased in 2021, and investments with less than 5 million USD make up 70% of total spending by 2022.

Finally, the OECD data also show which German **government agency** acted as donor for each listing. In Germany, crisis prevention, stabilization, and peacebuilding are key responsibility of the Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) leads on development assistance and related long-term measures. Notably, 97% of investments involving children and youth in Iraq between 2018 and 2022 were made by BMZ and only 2.2% by GFFO. The missing 0.8% were spent by the govern-

ments of German federal states. This distribution among German donor agencies is an indicator that the German government might not view children and youth as relevant stakeholders in questions of peace and conflict.

Germany's Child- and Youth-Related Investments by Donor Agency

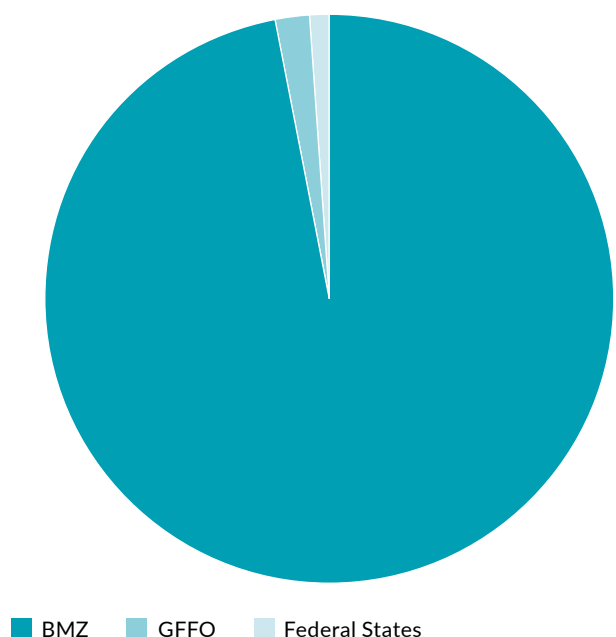


Figure 6: Chart of Germany's child- and youth-related spending (including investments targeting children, youth, and "mixed" demographics) in Iraq 2018-2022 aggregated by donor agency, in percentages.

These observations on Germany's child- and youth-related spending must be contextualized with the knowledge that project components targeted to children and youth may not be explicitly reflected in project descriptions. Nonetheless, discussions with partner organizations did not reveal any indications that these components typically constitute significant parts of those projects or reach large numbers of children and youth.

5.3. Evaluation of Germany's Donor Practice in Iraq

The effectiveness of Germany's spending to improve children's lives in the post-ISIS areas hinges not only on the amounts Germany spends, but also how it invests. The following section summarizes reports by interviewees who partnered with the German government in national and international organizations on how Germany's donor practice has affected their work in child protection and stabilization and peacebuilding.

5.3.1 Best Practices

Interviewees generally observed Germany's esteemed reputation among major donors in Iraq. One highlighted best practice is Germany's **transitional development assistance** (TDA). Introduced in 2016, TDA in Iraq spans 40 projects totaling 703 million USD.¹⁰⁷ These projects blend short-term humanitarian assistance with long-term development objectives, fostering peacebuilding efforts. Thus, they have the flexibility to address issues as they arise and change and have longer project cycles than regular post-conflict measures. The TDA framework facilitates the integration of connected needs with varying timelines (e.g., reconstruction with reintegration), enhancing the overall effectiveness of individual projects. However, TDA in Iraq is reported to be phased out in 2025.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, BMZ was commended for its **efficient reporting routines** with partner organizations, preventing administrative overload while leaving enough structured information exchange to address problems as they arise.¹⁰⁹ Interviewees also found German donor agencies to be diligent on their **project selection**. Among other donors, GFFO stands out for its willingness to fund cross-cutting and progressive approaches, while BMZ is recognized for its comprehensive portfolio, including a focus on vocational training initiatives.¹¹⁰

5.3.2 Room for Improvement


Nonetheless, interviewees still pointed out some drawbacks with the German approach that leave room for improvement and compound on the already existing marginal focus on children. Some experts criticized German staff for lacking **contextual and cultural knowledge**, which impacts partner organizations and target populations. Restricted mobility within the country means German administrators may not always be aware of dynamic shifts on the ground. Additionally, an overly rule-focused culture such as in the German development agency GIZ can strain already burdened national organizations, contradicting Germany's aid localization agenda.¹¹¹ In the realm of child protection, interviewees criticized the inefficiency of some interventions, e.g., cash assistance may reach the most senior male relative instead of the intended parent or child and parenting trainings may lack cultural context to convince guardians to change their treatment of children.¹¹²

Moreover, Germany was named as particularly ineffective when it comes to the **timing of the disbursement** of assistance. Germany often pays its committed spending in installments, with the first installment being paid early in the year, but half or more only being disbursed in December. These commitments are mostly earmarked, which means organizations can only use them for specific purposes – if the sum for child protection mostly arrives in December, no effective spending on child protection will take place that year.¹¹³

In an extension of the general critique of international donors **withdrawing their humanitarian assistance and crisis support** from Iraq, interviewees fear that as the “international community abandons Iraq,” Germany goes with them. Experts stress that reports on economic development from Baghdad and Erbil don't reflect the lived reality of children in Nineveh or Salahaddin. Interviewees emphasized that it would be a mistake for Germany to leave during this instable phase in Iraq's post-conflict journey, as Germany's investments could easily be lost if not solidified.¹¹⁴

Finally, interviewees reported **difficulties in securing funding** from the German government **for child-related activities**, especially from GFFO. Some national organizations that depend on funding by international donors for their existence have pivoted to applying for short-term projects within categories favored by donors for better chance at successful application.¹¹⁵ These statements are supported by indicators in official German government documents: Germany's 2021 stabilization strategy does not even mention “children” or “youth”.

5.4. Key Findings

	Germany prioritizes stabilization in the post-ISIS areas and regionally distributes spending accordingly.
	Germany's spending on children in Iraq is insufficient. Child-focused investments make up only 8.5% of Germany's total spending.
	Germany spends very little on interventions that target children in a context of conflict and stabilization.
	Some shortcomings in Germany's donor practice compound on the already low spending on children. Criticism includes lacking contextual knowledge, timing of disbursements, withdrawal of funding, and difficulty receiving funding for children.

Germany demonstrates a comprehensive and integrated approach to the post-conflict landscape in Iraq, as shown not only in interviews with members of the German administration but also in official government communication. Experts acclaim Germany as an outstanding donor in developing projects tailored to Northern Iraq's transitional state in the years after ISIS' terror. Moreover, Germany's regional distribution of funds aligns with its policy priority on post-ISIS stabilization and peacebuilding.

However, Germany's integrated approach does not extend to children and addressing their needs. Only an estimated 8.5% of Germany's total spending in Iraq between 2018 and 2022 targeted children, even though they constitute 50% of the population and are pivotal stakeholders in Iraq's future peace and conflict dynamics. The absence of child- and youth-related spending in the conflict and security sector is particularly concerning. Although some of the most effective measures to intervene against the radicalization and recruitment of children lie in other sectors (e.g., education), a holistic approach to children as a demographic would also incorporate their specific roles in peace and security. Furthermore, individual projects are often narrowly conceptualized and have small funding volumes. Even if there are additional child-related projects not captured in this analysis, the discrepancy between levels of funding and children's roles and needs remains significant. Addressing children's vulnerabilities, radicalization, and recruitment by armed groups, as well as stabilization and peacebuilding, cannot rely solely on children being targeted 'by accident' in larger development or humanitarian projects. With children comprising half of the population and possessing the right to be recognized as stakeholders, it is imperative to acknowledge their observable impacts on the security situation in Iraq. General development and humanitarian assistance, without a child-sensitive lens, fail to adequately address their specific needs and roles.¹¹⁶

In addition to insufficient funding, certain donor practices further diminish the effectiveness of German investments targeting children and youth. In some cases, failure to incorporate up-to-date and cultural contexts in funding decisions have rendered interventions ineffective. Delayed disbursements may hinder child protection efforts or lead to ineffective spending on short notice. Germany's planned withdrawal from certain sectors of assistance could revoke some of Germany's most positive impacts, exacerbating the gaps in the care of already underserved children. Even before Germany decided to decrease its spending, organizations struggled to secure funding for child-related programming – not a promising outlook for children in Northern Iraq.

Germany's limited investments in children in Northern Iraq are incongruent with its high prioritization of stability.

6

Next Steps

- Discussion
 - Recommendations
-

Next Steps

This chapter aims to summarize this project's key findings and explain their meaning in the greater context of children's needs, Northern Iraq's security trajectory, and Germany's role in conflict management. Based on this analysis, the following section will outline next steps Germany should take to mitigate the risks posed by inadequate child protection for Iraq's stability and address some of the shortcomings in Germany's donor practice.

6.1 Discussion

Regarding the first goal of this project, providing insights into **child protection in Northern Iraq** and the connected issues of radicalization and recruitment, this report could identify several indicators for a concerning outlook. Although violations of children's rights have reduced significantly since the end of ISIS' rule, children in post-conflict Northern Iraq are still highly vulnerable – particularly those belonging to one or multiple groups who are already struggling and marginalized, from IDPs to families living below the poverty line. The extent and extremity of child protection concerns heavily impact those children's lives, limiting their opportunities to ensure their livelihoods over time, exacerbating often severe mental health issues, and facilitating a loss of trust in the state and society. The child protection systems in federal Iraq and the KRI are not equipped to deal with these challenges, although the Kurdish government is relatively more effective.

The child protection concerns in Northern Iraq and their effects overlap greatly with the factors identified in academic research as reasons for children to become radicalized and join armed groups. The acute risk for **child recruitment** is moderate, with several groups recruiting minors but at an unknown extent as reports are mostly based on word-of-mouth information. Nonetheless, the risk for escalation is considerable, as the existing drivers for child radicalization and recruitment may worsen, e.g., due to political tensions in the region, climate change induced economic hardship, and a persistent public service funding crisis that further impacts school attendance and child labor. Without intervention, the consequences of this situation could still be felt in many years, when today's children and youth have grown older. Should conflict break out once more, armed and extremist groups may find a similarly available pool of recruits as ISIS did in 2013.

Secondly, this report assesses whether **Germany's contributions** to child protection in the post-ISIS areas are effective and aligned with their stated policy goals in the region. Germany's approach to post-conflict Iraq is progressive

and was highlighted by interviewees for its integrated approach – but does not target children as key stakeholders. Only an estimated 8.5% of Germany's spending between 2018 and 2022 targeted children. While the German government demonstrates some best practices, in other aspects they display significant weaknesses, particularly regarding child-related projects. These shortcomings exacerbate the already small focus on children. Considering children make up half of the population and have relevant impacts on both the present and future of Iraqi society and development, the absence of a focus on children could jeopardize German policy goals such as stabilization, anti-terrorism, or the reintegration of IDPs.

Finally, **what can we learn from post-ISIS Iraq for other contexts?** Within conflict-affected societies, children are a key demographic in mitigating the perpetuation of cycles of violence. Particularly in young societies and where radical groups specifically target children and youth, the risk for renewed conflict rises. These dynamics can be intercepted with comprehensive child protection approaches that holistically consider all elements in a child's life that drive radicalization and recruitment. To this end, governments and donors should prioritize children and youth and invest in the future of conflict-affected societies.

Importantly, however, neither in Iraq nor elsewhere should children and youth be construed as 'prospective threats.' This assumption already exists, particularly for young men, and could easily fuel drivers of radicalization and recruitment rather than buffer them. Instead, policymakers in conflict and post-conflict areas and in the foreign policy departments of international donors should treat children as individuals with opinions and agency, who navigate their circumstances within the constraints of available options. Armed groups should never be the sole actors recognizing and capitalizing on children's agency and needs, becoming attractive options for children and youth. There is a pressing need to globally redefine stabilization and peacebuilding to encompass children's perspectives and develop child participation formats. **Working with a very young, vulnerable population bears risks – but it also presents a substantial opportunity to disrupt cycles of conflict.**

6.2 Recommendations

Breaking Cycles of Conflict in Northern Iraq

What could an ideal future in Iraq look like that breaks through dynamics of lacking child protection and drivers of radicalization and recruitment of children and youth?



A comprehensive **legal basis** for child protection provides accountability and structures protection efforts.



Domestic and international **authorities** on all levels prioritize children's well-being and development.



Root causes of conflict are addressed through well-funded **reintegration** and **social cohesion** interventions.



Trauma- and child-sensitive **mental health** support is widely available for parents and children.



Child participation is a mainstreamed component of child-focused policymaking and community processes.



Culturally informed **parenting interventions** reduce corporal punishment and domestic abuse.



Education replaces child labor and includes socially sensitive issues to counter radicalization.



Armed groups are held accountable for grooming or recruiting minors, including the PMF.

For Germany to holistically support Iraq in implementing the structural changes and economic development necessary for transitioning sustainably out of its current state, the German government should take steps to close the significant policy gap concerning children. Considering Germany's policy priorities in the region, efforts to better

integrate children into stabilization and peacebuilding processes and to fulfill their rights and needs are also in Germany's own interest. While Germany supports Iraq in its structural changes, it should simultaneously focus on providing non-violent alternatives to children and youth who are key targets for radicalization and recruitment.

German Federal Foreign Office

2024

- **Leverage position as a large donor to advocate with the Iraqi and Kurdish governments to address the needs of vulnerable children.** This should at minimum include allocating state budget towards IDPs, delaying closure of camps until a safe relocation is organized, ensuring schools stay open, and moving the new child protection law forward.
 - **Practicalities:** Germany has close diplomatic ties to Iraq that it can use to strategically advocate for prioritizing children. However, change does not happen overnight, especially with politically charged topics.
- **Coordinate with other international actors and donors.** To maximize efforts to prioritize children's needs in Iraq and enable Iraqi authorities to follow through on their protection responsibilities, Germany should bring the EU, UN agencies like UNDP and UNICEF, and major donors like the United States and Japan on board.
 - **Practicalities:** Germany is an influential international actor and has the potential to leverage joint forces, particularly in questions of crisis prevention and conflict resolution. Nonetheless, convincing other actors to change their policy priorities regarding children in foreign policy questions will take patience.
- **Continue funding crisis measures and humanitarian assistance according to needs in affected areas.** To prevent a coverage gap, particularly those projects and investments that involve children should be extended until Iraqi authorities are prepared to take over.
 - **Practicalities:** Reversing a financial decision of this size requires significant effort within the ministry at a time where budgets are tight.

From 2025

- **Mainstream children as peace and security stakeholders across foreign policy strategies.** Children should be included as a distinct target demographic in the new edition of the guidelines on crisis prevention, stabilization, and peacebuilding as well as in regional strategies. A clear benchmark for child-focused spending in societies with large percentages of children and youth should be developed, including for Iraq.
 - **Practicalities:** A reform of the guidelines is already planned, and Germany recently adopted a feminist foreign policy with similar goals of empowerment and inclusiveness along gender lines – this should facilitate a focus on children.
- **Develop engagement with children in Northern Iraq and other crisis contexts.** Participatory programming supports the development of children's self-efficacy and is imperative to build needs-based child-focused interventions. Germany should also encourage and assist the federal and KRI governments in directly engaging with children.
 - **Practicalities:** To implement participatory programming safely and developmentally appropriate, extensive child protection expertise is required which neither government has at this point. Nonetheless, treating children as the stakeholders could be transformative in breaking intergenerational cycles of conflict.

German Federal Ministry of Defense

2024

- **Use engagement with Iraqi security counterparts and governments in Baghdad and Erbil to promote a holistic perspective on security and stabilization.** In the context of Counter Daesh/Capacity Building Iraq, NATO advisor positions as well as conversations around training and logistics are opportunities to advocate for a child-inclusive definition of security and to remind of commitments to children's rights in armed conflict.
 - **Practicalities:** This necessitates briefing/training German advisors and contact points in child rights and broader stabilization factors. Moreover, aligning the goals of child protection with broader security strategies might face resistance, requiring persistence and evidence-based arguments to demonstrate the long-term benefits of a child-inclusive approach to security.

German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development

2024

- **Prolong Transitional Development Aid in Iraq.** Considering that TDA has been described as one of Germany's most notable successes and interviewees strongly criticize seeing Iraq as anything other than in post-conflict transition, maintaining TDA could foster stability.
 - **Practicalities:** Reversing a financial decision of this size requires significant effort within the ministry at a time where budgets are tight.

From 2025

- **Increase investments on the development of children and youth according to the needs of different age groups.** To buffer against the drivers for radicalization and recruitment, technical assistance to build child protection services should be provided. Spending on early education (0–5 years), social cohesion and school attendance (5–15 years), and livelihood opportunities (>15 years) should be increased.
 - **Practicalities:** Progress could be achieved by shifting funding from other buckets in the Iraq portfolio. Structural support throughout different development stages could reduce effects of conflict and post-conflict abuse, neglect, and violence of children in the long run and provide alternative pathways to radicalization and recruitment.

German Parliament (Bundestag)

2024

- **Use the parliamentary debate surrounding the mandate renewal for Germany's contribution to the NATO and Global Coalition missions in Iraq to hold the government accountable to extending Germany's integrated approach to children.** During this time, public and government attention on the issue is high, which means effective advocacy for targeting the so far mostly disregarded half of the population in the post-ISIS areas that are minors.
 - **Practicalities:** The forum for this engagement is already given. Parliamentary inquiries can enhance pressure on the government to drive changes in policy.
- **Push to include children as stakeholders in Germany's foreign policy strategies in responsible parliamentary committees.** The parliamentary committees on foreign policy, defense, human rights and humanitarian aid, and economic cooperation and development in particular play an important role in preparing parliamentary resolutions and legislative decisions relevant to crisis prevention and conflict resolution. Parliamentarians should
 - push the government to prioritize children as a demographic and include them in their own work.
 - **Practicalities:** Setting political priorities and engaging relevant ministries falls within the responsibilities of parliamentary committees and facilitates a political strategy shift to include children.
- **Advocate for additional funding specifically for child-focused humanitarian, stabilization, and peace-building measures as well as transitional development aid.** Members of parliament should promote closing the significant gap between children's roles and needs in conflicts and the allocation of spending.
 - **Practicalities:** Budgetary expansions are highly controversial, especially in the current political climate. In the competition of needs, sustainable foreign policy might be even harder to advocate for than usually. If additional funds can be allocated, the direct impact on policy implementation would be considerable.

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