

Final Case Study / Syria — Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Former Child Affiliates of Armed Groups

Background: The Syrian civil war, ongoing since 2011, has involved numerous armed factions, including ISIS, which recruited children and adolescents from both Syria and abroad to serve in various capacities. As ISIS territory has shrunk and international forces have intervened, thousands of these children are now in refugee camps in northeastern Syria, often with no access to formal rehabilitation or education. Many are foreign nationals, awaiting repatriation to their countries of origin, while Syrian children face challenges reintegrating into communities that view them with suspicion.

These children, known as “affiliates” of armed groups, have been stigmatized due to their perceived or actual roles during the conflict. Community leaders and local authorities face complex issues in managing their reintegration, balancing public safety, community concerns, and the children’s rights to rehabilitation and a peaceful future. International aid organizations are actively working to create pathways for these children to reintegrate, but local mistrust and security concerns present significant barriers.

Problem Statement: This mediation addresses the challenges of reintegrating children who have returned or are awaiting reintegration in local Syrian communities, particularly in the Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah regions. These communities are struggling with how to accept children associated with former ISIS territories while also prioritizing safety and healing.

Key issues for mediation include:

- **Community Safety and Trust:** Local communities fear potential radicalization or violence from children formerly associated with ISIS or other groups, even if these children were forcibly recruited or acted under coercion.
- **Psychological and Social Support Needs:** Many of these children have experienced severe trauma, necessitating specialized mental health care and rehabilitation to facilitate healthy reintegration.
- **Stigma and Discrimination:** Former child affiliates face deep stigma, often treated as outcasts, which hinders their ability to attend school, participate in community life, and access job training programs.
- **International Repatriation Challenges:** Foreign children in the camps face uncertain futures, as their home countries may be reluctant to repatriate them. For those who remain, there is a need to integrate them into Syrian society with adequate support.

Roles:

- **Mediator:** Manages the dialogue and ensures all parties feel heard.

- **Local Community Leader:** Represents the safety concerns and social worries of the community, which is hesitant to accept returning children.
- **Representative for Former Child Affiliates:** Speaks on behalf of the children, emphasizing their need for education, mental health support, and a chance to rebuild their lives.
- **Mental Health Specialist:** Provides insights into trauma recovery and the necessity of psychological support as part of reintegration.
- **NGO Representative:** Represents an international organization focused on humanitarian support, advocating for the rights and rehabilitation of former child affiliates and exploring options for international assistance.

Objectives of the Mediation:

Participants should provide their input here.

Outcome: The mediation should lead to a collaborative plan that includes:

Participants should provide their input here.