



Combating Terrorism Center

AT WEST POINT



# MINOR MISERY

WHAT AN ISLAMIC STATE REGISTRY SAYS ABOUT THE  
CHALLENGE OF MINORS IN THE CONFLICT ZONE

Daniel Milton and Don Rassler | October 2019

Harmony Program



# **Minor Misery: What an Islamic State Registry Says About the Challenges of Minors in the Conflict Zone**

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.

October 2019

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## Executive Summary

The death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on October 26, 2019, in the Idlib region of Syria came more than five years after he gave his first public speech as the claimed caliph of the so-called Islamic State. During that time, his organization governed an expansive territory and directed and inspired deadly terror attacks. While al-Baghdadi's death is an important event in the fight against the group, the Islamic State's governing role gave it the ability to implement a strategy to cultivate a new generation of adherents, especially among the minors whose parents were affiliated with the group.

The issue of minors who lived in the Islamic State's caliphate is complicated and layered. Mere parental affiliation with the Islamic State does not indicate that a minor will join or sympathize with the group, or even that such an outcome is likely. Moreover, the risk that these minors will become involved in terrorism is only one of a number of future challenges they face, many of which are arguably more likely and pressing. To better understand and address these issues, more concrete data about this population of minors is needed.

This report leverages a key, internal Islamic State registry to provide an empirically based perspective of the number of minors whose parents were affiliated with the group. It does so by offering a more concrete view of: 1) the number of minors that the Islamic State was tracking and 2) other details that the group cataloged that illustrate potential challenges these minors faced or may face in the future.

## The Data

The data and statistics in this report are derived from an Islamic State registry captured by U.S. military forces in Iraq that tracked the number of men, women, and minors being supported by Islamic State-affiliated personnel, including fighters and non-fighters alike. The document is primarily focused on Iraq.

The captured spreadsheet included a tab for "Children," and each minor listed in that tab was associated with an adult male parent or guardian who was listed as playing a role for the Islamic State and who was receiving a stipend from the group.

The time period covered by the registry is impossible to say for sure, however, analysis of the document suggests that it was created in June 2015 and that it was last updated during the second half of 2016.

## Key Findings

- The registry contained data on ***101,850 minors*** who were linked to an adult male being paid a stipend by the Islamic State.

### *Age and Gender Distribution*

- The mean age of minors in the dataset is ***7.23 years of age***. There is a ***mostly even split when it comes to gender*** of minors, with 50.22 percent of the entries listed as females and 49.78 as males.
- The ***number of minors*** accounted for in the document ***declines by age over time***. This trend was different by gender. ***Beginning at 14, male minors were increasingly siphoned off***—most likely to serve in the Islamic State's army.

### *Births during the Caliphate Period*

- According to the registry, ***a total of 16,121 children (16% of total) were born after*** the Islamic State announced the creation of its caliphate in ***June 2014***.

### *Loss of an Adult Male Parent/Guardian*

- ***Nearly 33,000 minors appear to have experienced the loss or incapacitation of their adult***

***male parent/guardian.*** The data reveals that 75% were martyred, 22% were detained, 2% were wounded, and 0.1% were “lost.”

### ***Inferred Nationalities***

- By analyzing the *kunya* used by each child’s adult male parent/guardian, the authors were able to ***infer the nationalities of 76,273 minors.*** A total of ***57 countries*** were represented.
- While the media generally focuses on the Islamic State’s foreign recruits, ***92% of the minors in the dataset were children listed as being associated with a male parent or guardian from Iraq.***
- Beyond Iraq, a strong regional presence was seen, with ***Jordan (1,209), Syria (654), Turkey (380), and Saudi Arabia (375) rounding out the top five nationalities in the dataset.***
- ***The number of minors linked to a male parent from Russia was 635.*** The number of minors from the ***Central Asian area*** (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) was ***673.***
- ***France is the European country with the largest number of minors (52),*** with the next being ***Germany (17).*** There were ***no children in the registry whose male parent was from Britain or Belgium,*** which is notable given the number of recruits that joined the group from those countries.
- Small numbers of minors appear in the dataset from the ***United States (6), Canada (6), and Australia (5).***

### **Implications**

***Size and scale:*** The spreadsheet used for this analysis documents how over 100,000 minors were being supported by a male adult who was on the payroll of the Islamic State. And the spreadsheet contained information almost exclusively from Iraq—and generally not from Syria. Thus, there is a likelihood that the number of minors linked to an Islamic State payee could be considerably larger.

***Complexity and diversity:*** The experience of minors living in the caliphate was not monolithic. Instead, their lives were likely shaped by an array of factors such as age, gender, nationality, and location, as well as their family’s position within the Islamic State. It is important that approaches to assist these minors and reintegrate them into society be varied and reflect the diversity of experiences they had.

***“Stateless status”:*** It appears that at least 16,000 minors in the dataset were born into the Islamic State’s caliphate. While some may have a claim to citizenship in a country because of the citizenship of their parents, legitimate documentation regarding the births of these children likely does not exist. As a result, states face difficult legal and moral challenges that are likely going to require creative and nuanced policy solutions to ensure that these minors do not remain stateless.

***Local and global:*** Although the size of the minor population was largest in Iraq and the local region, the issue of the “Islamic State’s minors” is also a global problem that potentially impacts as many as 57 countries. States in Central Asia and North Africa, at least from the admittedly imperfect look offered by this report, appear to have a much larger challenge on their hands than do states in Europe and North America. While each minor will need to be handled on a case-by-case, bilateral or multilateral approaches could help countries that are less equipped to resource solutions or handle these issues.

***Additional research:*** While the data offers a more detailed look than has previously been available, more research is needed to further illuminate the scale and complex nature of some of the issues raised here.

## Introduction

A one-week-old girl born in a refugee camp to a mother and father who had joined the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup> A Yazidi boy kidnapped by the Islamic State at age nine and returned at age 12 to his family, with three years of his life having been filled with tragedy and violence.<sup>2</sup> A three-year-old girl sent back to France alone because her mother had been sentenced to life in prison for supporting the Islamic State in Iraq.<sup>3</sup> A father in Germany who has not seen his daughter in five years since his ex-wife took their then three-year-old to Syria to join the Islamic State's caliphate.<sup>4</sup>

This is only a small sample of the countless stories that paint a complex picture of the humanitarian and security nightmare that has unfolded in Iraq and Syria since the end of the Baghouz campaign, a key “waypoint in the process of eliminating” the Islamic State as a threat.<sup>5</sup> But each of these examples highlights an important aspect of the challenging landscape in the region: it does not only involve the men who have fought and supported the Islamic State, but it has implications for the minors and women who lived in territory controlled by the group as well. The landscape has only become more complex in the wake of the United States' decision to curtail its partnership with Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the subsequent incursion of Turkish, Syrian, and Russian forces into northeastern Syria.

Over the past eight years, the brutality of the Syrian conflict between the Assad government, opposition forces, and a variety of international actors has pushed millions of locals in both Iraq and Syria from their homes, but also attracted tens of thousands of men, women, and children from the region and around the world. Now, as the conflict enters a new phase in which the Islamic State's territorial control has been broken but the group still maintains the capability to launch guerrilla-style attacks and to potentially take advantage of opportunities related to new conflict between (or involving) Turkish security forces, the SDF, the Syrian Army, and Russian or Russian-supported elements, questions remain regarding what to do with the tens of thousands of individuals left behind in the wake of the conflict, including those impacted by life under the Islamic State. These challenges go far beyond the potential for future radicalization and violence and include a range of concerns from physical and psychological health to the legal status of those who seek to return to their countries of origin to the uncertain fate of those who remain in the conflict zone.<sup>6</sup>

For the policymakers, practitioners, and scholars attempting to both understand this complex challenge and explain it to the public, one hurdle has been the lack of specific information regarding the size and scope of the population that lived under Islamic State rule, especially those who were supported by the group in some way. Consider how both the lack of information and shifting dynamics has played out in the case of the one of the most visible examples of these questions: the Al-Hol camp. This camp, which is located in northern Syria and was set up to house internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have been impacted by the conflict, saw its population swell throughout 2017-2018 to at

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1 Natalia Sancha, “The 16 Spanish children left trapped after the fall of the ISIS caliphate,” *El Pais*, August 27, 2019.

2 Kimberly Dozier, “They Were Children When They Were Kidnapped By ISIS and Forced to Fight. What Happens Now That They're Home?” *Time*, May 23, 2019.

3 Romina McGuinness, “France open doors to ISIS orphans after jihadi parents die in Syria,” *Express*, May 8, 2019.

4 Atika Shubert, Nadine Schmidt and Claudia Otto, “‘It's not their fault': German families plead for return of stranded ISIS children,” *CNN*, May 11, 2019.

5 Carlo Munoz, “ISIS 'caliphate' ends in Baghouz, Syria,” *Washington Times*, March 24, 2019.

6 Colleen McCue, Joseph T. Massengill, Dorothy Milbrandt, John Gaughan, and Meghan Cumpston, “The Islamic State Long Game: A Tripartite Analysis of Youth Radicalization and Indoctrination,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:8 (2017): pp. 21-26; Gina Vale, *Cubs in the Lions' den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2018); Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2018); Mia Bloom with John Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

least 73,000 occupants, more than two times the number the camp was originally designed to hold.<sup>7</sup> As time progressed, an unknown number of people who fled to Al-Hol were believed to be Islamic State supporters and sympathizers. This led to a number of concerns, but prominent among them were the possibilities that those still loyal to the Islamic State could radicalize and recruit individuals or use the camp as a cover or place to hide until the local security environment became more permissive for them to reengage with the Islamic State.

The fact that the images so often shown from Al-Hol featured women and children only served to elevate the concerns that many have about the region: specifically how camps established to help those who were fleeing conflict and were in need could also—given the scale of the problem and the conditions in the camps—potentially serve as incubators that could contribute to the long-term persistence of the Islamic State-affiliated terrorism threat.<sup>8</sup> This fear has been driven in part by a mix of accurate reporting and unsubstantiated claims that risk framing the challenge in the IDP camps as one requiring a security focus.<sup>9</sup> Such a focus, however, potentially creates a self-fulfilling prophecy as resources and policy attention focus on security policies as opposed to the very real and pressing need for humanitarian aid to alleviate the increasingly destitute living conditions inside the camps and to help camp residents process and recover from the trauma that many of those living in places like Al-Hol likely experienced.<sup>10</sup> Following the advance of the Turkish military and Turkish-supported non-state forces in October 2019, such concerns took on a new level of urgency as the SDF, who had been guarding the Al-Hol camp and associated detention facilities, shifted their focus to responding to Turkish military activity.<sup>11</sup>

For many years, a considerable amount of research and policy attention has been placed on the Islamic State's membership, how the group recruits and interacts with sympathizers and supporters, its use of technology, and how it has sought to govern. The size and characteristics of the Islamic State's foreign fighter cadre and the biographies of key Islamic State leadership figures have also been key areas of research focus. Another important area of research emphasis has been on how the Islamic State has approached, utilized, and sought to leverage children in its propaganda and as potential, future group members or conflict participants. This includes the work of John Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom, Charlie Winter, and several other researchers, who have provided important insight about

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7 Erin Cunningham and Kamiran Sadoun, "The Islamic State's refugees are facing a humanitarian calamity," *Washington Post*, April 2, 2019.

8 Some worry that Al-Hol, other IDP camps, and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) detention facilities might potentially turn into the next iteration of Camp Bucca. Camp Bucca was a detention facility in Iraq that operated from 2003 to 2009. It held scores of al-Qa`ida in Iraq members, including the Islamic State's current leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and other individuals who would play key roles in the group. In the eyes of many analysts, Camp Bucca, by putting a large number of radicalized individuals in close and continuing proximity, served as a catalyst that helped to foster the development of the group that would years later begin calling itself the Islamic State. Terrence McCoy, "Camp Bucca: The US prison that became the birthplace of ISIS," *Independent*, November 4, 2014.

9 For example, see the headline used by a major newspaper to describe the children of those associated on some level with the Islamic State. Tom Kington, "45,000 children of ISIS 'are ticking time bomb,'" *Times*, May 8, 2019. Another example appears in a blog post written about the Al-Hol camp in which the authors claim (without any supporting citations or references) that the camp contains "thousands of indoctrinated women and children" and that "large numbers of women in the camp remain ideologically committed" (emphasis added). John Dunford and Jennifer Cafarella, "ISIS's Opportunity in Northern Syria's Detention Facilities and Camps," Institute for the Study of War, May 13, 2019. To be fair, reports have emerged in which women within the camp, as well as Islamic State male fighters still in prison, have voiced continued support for the caliphate and its goals. However, it is difficult to project how indicative such reports are of the number of people, especially minors, who will adhere to the Islamic State's ideology and cause. Quentin Sommerville, "Islamic State: The women and children no-one wants," BBC, April 12, 2019; Robin Wright, "The Dangerous Dregs of ISIS," *New Yorker*, April 16, 2019; Erin Cunningham, "True ISIS believers regroup inside refugee camp, terrorize the 'impious,'" *Washington Post*, April 20, 2019.

10 For a perspective on some of the experiences minors have faced while living underneath the Islamic State and some of the rehabilitation challenges that humanitarian organizations are trying to address see: Raya Jalabi, "Cubs of the Caliphate: Rehabilitating Islamic State's Child Fighters," Reuters, March 8, 2018.

11 For an excellent treatment of the issues surrounding the Al-Hol camp, see Aaron Zelin, *Wilayat al-Hawl: 'Remaining' and Incubating the Next Islamic State Generation* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2019).

the Islamic State's 'Cubs of the Caliphate' project and specifically how the group sought to indoctrinate and socialize minors in the views and ways of the group as an intentional component of its long-term, multi-generational conflict/war-of-attrition strategy.<sup>12</sup> Joana Cook and Gina Vale have also done noteworthy work that explores the composition of the population of minors who lived under the caliphate.<sup>13</sup> Despite these important contributions, little is publicly known regarding the actual size and scope of the minor population that lived in territory controlled by the group. Such information would seem to be an important prerequisite to any discussions regarding both the humanitarian *and* radicalization concerns that might emerge from this population and how the approaches and potential solutions being offered or planned by states, humanitarian organizations, and non-governmental groups could be better tailored or refined.

The issue of minors who lived in the Islamic State's caliphate, like all things related to the conflict that has taken in place in Syria and Iraq, is complicated, nuanced, and layered. Indeed, it is important to recognize that while some older minors may have chosen to join or otherwise associate with the Islamic State, the vast majority of minors likely did not have control over this decision. Many will have experienced trauma, deprivation, and other psychological challenges during their time under the control of the Islamic State. Those children who are local to the region may face challenges in reintegrating back into society. The local factor becomes even more salient of an issue and all the more challenging to deal with given that the overwhelming majority of minors associated with Islamic State personnel have been kids from Syria and Iraq. Those children from abroad may struggle to return to their home countries and, even if they are successful, face suspicion and an uncertain future. Whether local or foreign, the path forward for the minors who lived in the caliphate seems anything but certain.

The purpose of this report is to provide an empirically based perspective of the number of minors whose parents were affiliated with the Islamic State. It does so by offering a more concrete view of: 1) the number of minors that the Islamic State was tracking and 2) other details that the group cataloged that may speak to some of the challenges some of these minors faced or could face in the future.<sup>14</sup> The data and statistics provided below are derived from an Islamic State registry captured by U.S. military forces in Iraq that tracked the number of men, women, and minors being supported by Islamic State-affiliated personnel, including fighters and non-fighters alike. While this data provides a useful snapshot regarding very basic demographics of the minors who were living within the Islamic State in Iraq, it is important to recognize that it does not provide clear-cut answers to some of the questions posed above about the future terrorist threat posed by the collapse of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate and the generational challenge that the group or its different, future manifestations will almost surely pose.

## The Data

Over the past 15 years, research into the organizational tendencies of al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State has revealed that these groups engage in a wide range of record-keeping as a way to issue directives

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12 Some of the key publications in this area include Kara Anderson, "Cubs of the Caliphate": *The Systematic Recruitment, Training, and Use of Children in the Islamic State* (Herzliya, Israel: International Institute for Counterterrorism, 2016); Norman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of the Islamic State* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2016); John Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom, and Charlie Winter, "From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization Into the Islamic State," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40:7 (2017): pp. 645-664; Sara Mahmood, "'Cubs of the Caliphate': The Islamic State's Focus on Children," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 8:10 (2016): pp. 9-12; and Asaad Almohammad, *ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2018). For additional and broader context about minors and terrorism, see Bloom with Horgan. For an excellent treatment of the actual curriculum published by the Islamic State, see Jacob Olidort, *Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature, and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016).

13 Cook and Vale. A more focused example is a recent policy note by Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which provided some macro-level statistics regarding the Al-Hol camp. See Zelin.

14 Robin Wright, "The Kids of the Islamic State," *Foreign Policy*, June 3, 2019.

and rulings, communicate with their members and/or those living under the group's control, and manage the direction and perception of their group. In 2001, when a journalist in Afghanistan entered a computer repair shop to get his computer fixed, he ended up leaving with a computer that had belonged to al-Qa`ida. Among the many things he found on the al-Qa`ida laptop he acquired was evidence of detailed record-keeping, including back-and-forth messages between the group's current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and an operative over expense reports.<sup>15</sup> This find proved to be the tip of the iceberg.

As U.S. military forces began raiding terrorist safehouses, more and more documents emerged. In one raid, almost 700 al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) foreign fighter in-processing forms were discovered on one computer, shedding much light on the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq from Syria during the 2005-2007 time period.<sup>16</sup> In other locations, even more documents were found that revealed a variety of aspects of the Islamic State in Iraq's (ISI) governance and payment efforts.<sup>17</sup> More recently, several thousand records of Islamic State recruits, spreadsheets tracking personnel and weapon assignments, and detailed descriptions of the group's media efforts have all emerged and provided important insights into how terrorist organizations operate and manage their internal affairs.<sup>18</sup>

While previous rosters and data have shown that terrorist organizations keep track of their personnel, the primary document examined for this report shows the Islamic State's personnel record-keeping tendencies at a scope that goes far beyond what has previously been presented. It shows that the Islamic State kept track of the individuals who were identified as either being a part of the group or were listed as a dependent of a male adult being paid by the organization through the use of an Excel spreadsheet with multiple tabs for different categories of individuals. While there was no concise statement of the document's purpose, an examination of the spreadsheet suggests two possibilities. The first purpose might have been as an information-tracking mechanism. Given the comprehensive nature of the document and the type of detail contained within it about different segments of the Islamic State's population, one way of thinking about the Excel file is as something akin to an internal, Islamic State census (or at least a part of one) predominately focused on Iraq.

The second purpose of the spreadsheet is financial in nature, as the primary tab in the spreadsheet appears to be used to generate payment information for males who either fought or otherwise worked for the Islamic State.<sup>19</sup> For the remainder of this report, and in an effort to avoid confusion, the authors refer to the male individuals who were being paid by the Islamic State as payees. For each of the males listed in the main tab of the spreadsheet, a simple count was kept of the number of their spouses, children, and other dependents. These numbers would then be used as part of the formula that generated the stipend amounts for each of the payees. While examples of similar payment-based information have been analyzed before, two of the most interesting parts of this particular document are that it also contained data on tens of thousands of Islamic State payees and detailed information

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15 Alan Cullison, "Inside Al-Qaeda's Hard Drive," *Atlantic*, September 1, 2004.

16 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa`ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

17 Patrick B. Johnston, Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard J. Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005-2010* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016); Benjamin W. Bahney et al., *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of Al-Qaida in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010); Benjamin W. Bahney et al., "Insurgent Compensation: Evidence from Iraq," *American Economic Review* 103:3 (2013): pp 518-522.

18 Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016); Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Media Organization* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018). One of the best examples of the wide variety of internal documents available from the Islamic State is Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's archive of administrative documents, available at <http://www.aymennjawad.org>

19 This tab was labeled "Sheet 1," but will be referred to as the "Payees" tab for purposes of this article.

about some of the individuals attached to each of those payees.<sup>20</sup> The remainder of this report focuses on the information contained in two of the other tabs contained in the spreadsheet: “Children” and “Dependents.” Within each of these tabs were thousands of rows, each with information about a different individual attached to one of the payees.

The entries contained in the “Children” tab are straightforward: each row is identified as a child of a corresponding male on the main tab.<sup>21</sup> This connection is made via an Islamic State identification number assigned to each payee.<sup>22</sup> The “Dependents” tab, as best as the authors can determine, contains information for individuals for whom the male on the main tab is responsible that is neither his spouse(s) or children.<sup>23</sup> The two labels most prominently affixed to individuals in the spreadsheet are “Parents” and “Others.” Outside of these labels, however, the spreadsheet itself does not contain any direct information regarding the regulations or rules that determine who can be claimed as a dependent.<sup>24</sup>

The date of this document is impossible to know for sure. Analysis of the document suggests that it was created in June 2015, but unfortunately, there was no indication in the metadata regarding when the document was last updated or altered. However, the most recent date of birth for one of the minors listed in the roster is December 2016. Additionally, the authors were able to triangulate some of the information within the spreadsheet with information contained in other captured documents to narrow down the timeframe that is most likely the primary focus of the data: to between June 2016 to early September 2016. Overall, even though this does not give them a specific date for the document’s creation and last use, the authors are confident that the data it contains most likely pertains to the last six months of 2016. Although it is a few years old at the time of this writing, it still gives a relatively recent look at the number of minors being supported by an adult male registered as playing some type of role within the Islamic State.

Finally, there is one other caveat regarding this data. The identity and role of the compiler or team of compilers is unknown, as well as the process whereby information was entered into this spreadsheet. It is not clear if information was entered on the basis of other individual records or whether this information was populated from information transmitted to a central location by Islamic State provinces. It is important to note, however, that when the authors examine the data to see which provinces are represented in the data, the vast majority of these entries appear to come from Iraqi provinces, with a few exceptions. Thus, there is reason to suspect that this spreadsheet does not represent the entire Islamic State population in Iraq and Syria, but that it is instead more heavily weighted toward Iraq.<sup>25</sup> In sum, this uncertainty regarding the data entry and data management processes the Islamic State

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20 For background on prior work in this area, see Johnston, Shapiro, Shatz, Bahney, Jung, Ryan, Wallace; Bahney et al., *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of Al-Qaida in Iraq*; Benjamin W. Bahney et al., “Insurgent Compensation: Evidence from Iraq,” pp. 518-522.

21 There is a question of whether or not individuals listed in the “Child” column are all actual children of the male, or whether the possibility exists that they were children of a family member who was killed but are now attached to another family record. The authors cannot know for sure, but the existence of the “Dependent” column and corresponding tab in the spreadsheet, which does contain children, makes this unlikely.

22 It is interesting to note that despite the debate and discussion regarding the Islamic State’s potential use of women as fighters or in other roles in the caliphate, the “Payees” tab in the spreadsheet only appears to contain peripheral information about adult females.

23 Other than noting that a fighter had a spouse (or spouses), the main tab spreadsheet only appears to contain limited information about the spouses of Islamic State payees. For example, there are a number of instances in the main tab when it appears that the name of a spouse is listed. When this occurs, the listing appears to be tied to the death or detainment of a male payee, with a female being listed as the stipend/payment recipient.

24 Even though there is no direct statement in the spreadsheet regarding who qualifies as a dependent, there is a large amount of individual-level information in the sheet that could be analyzed to make informed estimates regarding these rules. However, such an effort is beyond the scope of this article and is an area for future research.

25 For example, there were only 34 males in the first tab of the spreadsheet from the Syrian provinces of Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, Homs, Khayr, and Raqqa. The one potential exception is the Islamic State province of Furat, which spanned the Iraq-Syria border. There were approximately 3,000 individuals in the spreadsheet from Furat.

followed has a number of implications for some of the analysis below.

Because this report focuses on minors in the Islamic State, the authors extracted all of the entries from the “Children” tab and combined these entries together with any from the “Dependent” tab in which the individual listed was 18 years old or under.<sup>26</sup> The authors then combined all of these entries into a single datasheet. In the end, this procedure left approximately 101,850 entries.<sup>27</sup> It is important to emphasize that this number appears to be only the number of the children of individuals assigned an Islamic State identification number.<sup>28</sup> In other words, if an individual lived in the territorial caliphate but was not a formal member of the group or was not assigned an Islamic State identification number, it is possible that they would not have been recorded in this document. The Combating Terrorism Center is also aware of the existence of other Islamic State personnel roster sheets, and so it is also important to note that while the number of payees, dependents, and children found within the Excel spreadsheet represent the largest, single assortment of Islamic State personnel data, it is not known how representative this spreadsheet is of the entire population of Islamic State members and residents who lived in its caliphate.<sup>29</sup> Overall, of these 101,850 minors, there is a mostly even split when it comes to gender, with 50.22 percent of the entries listed as females and 49.78 as males.<sup>30</sup> Even though the breakdown of gender is even at the aggregate level in the dataset, as the next section shows, there are interesting differences when considering age and gender together.

## Ages and Gender Dynamics

The authors begin this section by examining the number of minors in the spreadsheet by estimated age. This breakdown appears in Figure 1. As can be seen, the minors supported by individuals listed in the Islamic State’s ledger for Iraq is quite young, with the mean age for the overall distribution at 7.23 years old. Two interesting trends are immediately apparent from this simple look.

The first is a relatively large spike in the number of minors at age seven. In an effort to explore the cause of this spike, the authors broke the data down further to see if there was an anomaly that could explain what the data showed. The first step was to break down the number of births by month for those who were estimated to be seven years old. This revealed that there were a large number of minors with their birth date listed as January 2010. The number of minors born in the rest of the months of the year appeared to be relatively normally distributed. Upon further examination, a spike in the number of minors with birth dates in January was present in all other years as well.

While a conclusive explanation for this bump in January birthdays is not apparent, one possibility is

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26 To calculate an approximate age, the authors used January 1, 2017, as the reference date in comparison to the actual birth date of the minor listed in the spreadsheet. It is important to recognize that the authors’ usage of the word “minor” as any individual being 18 years of age or under likely does not reflect the way that the Islamic State categorized children as opposed to adults. In fact, in the “Child” tab, there were several thousand individuals who were over the age of 18. Whether these individuals were still considered minors or whether their inclusion was in error is uncertain. To make sure they were dealing with a uniform population, the authors elected only to focus on those 18 years of age and under. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as an individual under the age of 18, unless the country with jurisdiction over the child confers adulthood at an earlier age. Other scholars that research on children in militant organizations have fixed the age of adulthood lower. See Bloom with Horgan.

27 One challenge in working with this information is that from past experience working with captured documents, the authors know that there are often duplicate entries that exist in such spreadsheets. To try to reduce the number of duplicates, they worked to remove duplicate names from all three tabs using census numbers, dates of birth, and names. Several hundred names were removed as a result of these efforts. Nevertheless, some duplicated records likely remain because of different spellings, mis-entered dates of birth, or other forms of incomplete or inaccurate information.

28 There is evidence that the Islamic State’s use of an individual identifier for each adult male payee is a practice that the Islamic State’s predecessor organizations, or at least a local administrator in Iraq, used previously. For background, see Johnston, Shapiro, Shatz, Bahney, Jung, Ryan, and Wallace, p. 134.

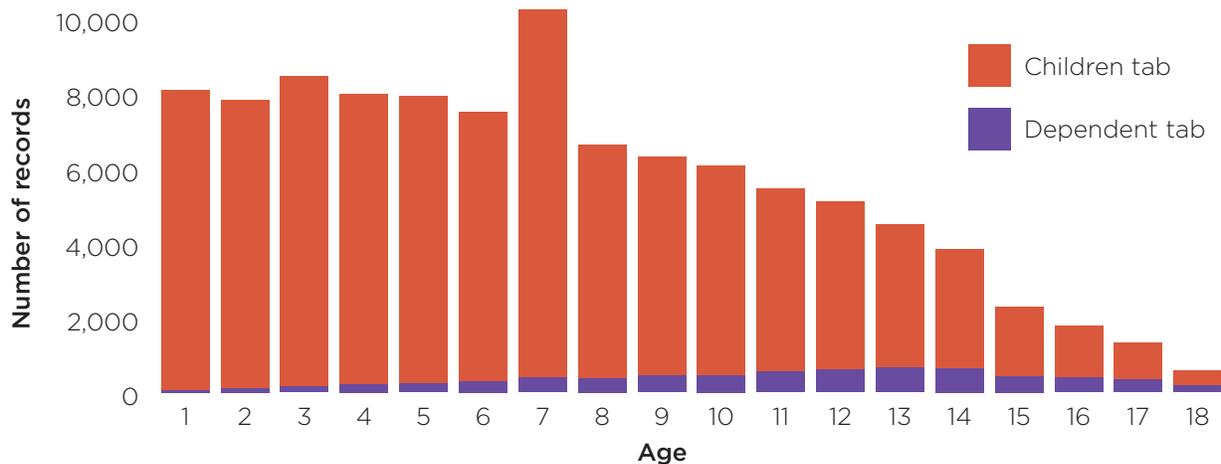
29 The CTC is also aware of the existence of similar roster sheets and payment documents created by the Islamic State’s predecessor organizations, specifically al-Qa’ida in Iraq, the Mujahidin Shura Council, and the Islamic State in Iraq.

30 The gender of the minor was not listed in 14 cases.

related to data entry. If the actual birth date of a child was unknown to the person entering the data (not an unlikely possibility), they may have elected to enter a birth year and date it with the beginning of the year. Of course, that makes sense if the data entry was being done using the Gregorian calendar. In the original Excel spreadsheet, however, some dates appear using the *hijri* calendar and others were converted into a numeric formula. This suggests the possibility of some other error (perhaps related to the user's experience level with Excel), although this is uncertain as well. In the end, although neither the surge in minors aged seven nor the January birth date anomaly can be explained, they do underscore the difficulty of analyzing this type of material and the caution required in its interpretation.<sup>31</sup>

The second trend in the data is what happens to the relative size of the population of minors as they get older. As seen in Figure 1, there is an unmistakable decline in the number of minors at each age level. More specifically, the number of minors listed begins a gradual decline after the age of three and, aside from a spike in the number of minors who are approximately seven years old, the rate of this decline in the number of minors accelerates until the data stops at age 18.

*Figure 1: Age Breakdown of Minors in Islamic State Registry*



One possible reason for this decline is that as minors aged, they were no longer listed as minors or dependents and transferred to other rosters for those who become Islamic State fighters or fulfill other roles in the Islamic State. Or, even if minors were not formally transferred off the roster at a certain age, it is possible that as they grew older, they were more likely to be out and about (either because of the nature of being an older minor or as a result of some responsibility given to them by the Islamic State), which may have carried a higher risk of being killed as a result of operational activity in a combat zone in general. Regardless of the underlying explanation, if as minors aged they were pushed into other roles, one might expect this to potentially have a more disproportionate impact on the males as opposed to the females. This is because, for the most part, the Islamic State has fulfilled most of its roles in both fighting and administration with males.

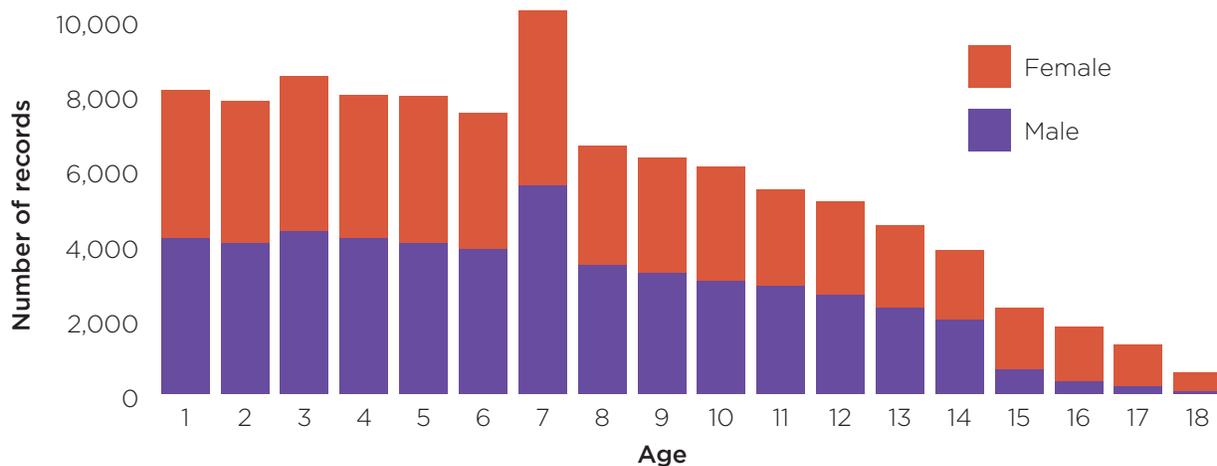
This comparison is shown in Figure 2, which distinguishes the gender of minors with the Islamic State by age groups. Several key points emerge. First, from the age of 15-18, there is a large amount of separation between the number of female and male minors in the ledger. This suggests that male minors, beginning at the age of 14, were increasingly siphoned off by the Islamic State into other roles

31 One other explanation for the spike in the number of seven-year-old minors is that seven was a "catch all" category when no date was provided for a minor. It sits halfway to what some have identified as the age at which the Islamic State recruits minors into its organization and could have potentially been a convenient middle ground. Polly Mosendz, "Children Are Not Children Anymore," *Atlantic*, October 23, 2014.

at higher rates than for females.<sup>32</sup> Previous research by scholars as well as journalist reporting that has examined the age dynamics related to the Islamic State's population of fighters supports this explanation and suggests that the age of 14 is an important turning point when males either begin to be siphoned off to other purposes or are able to play specific roles within the group, with the most likely explanation being military service with the Islamic State's army.<sup>33</sup>

Second, even though the decline appears to be more rapid for male minors, it is clear that it exists for female minors as well. This raises the possibility that female minors were also increasingly placed into other roles, with the most likely being marriage to a male member of the Islamic State. Recent data released by the United Nations' children advocacy organization, UNICEF, has shown a drastic increase within Iraq in the percent of females who are married before the age of 18.<sup>34</sup> In other words, even though males appear to have dropped off the list of minors at a higher rate than females, female minors were not exempt from making the transition from being a minor to being an "adult" or from otherwise being removed from the spreadsheet.

**Figure 2: Age Breakdown of Minors in Islamic State Registry by Gender**



However, even though these explanations might be intuitive in explaining the decline among the minor population, they cannot be proven with the data available in this particular document. What is more, even if the redirecting of minors into organizational roles explains part of the decline, it may not be the full explanation.

One other possibility is that families with older minors were more likely to flee the territory that the Islamic State was capturing, where as those with younger minors found it more difficult to travel and leave. Still another possibility is that, for some reason, older minors were simply less likely to be recorded on the group's registry for some bureaucratic or other reason. However, no internal documents have emerged that would support this conclusion.

32 Another related possibility is that families, knowing their male children would increasingly be in danger of being pressed into military service by the Islamic State, made greater efforts to send their male children away.

33 Mosendz; Mia Bloom, John Horgan, and Charlie Winter, "Depictions of Children and Youth in the Islamic State's Martyrdom Propaganda, 2015-2016," *CTC Sentinel* 9:2 (2016): pp. 29-32; Dakota Foster and Daniel Milton, "Children at War: Foreign Child Recruits of the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 11:6 (2018): pp. 11-17; Almohammad; James Morris and Tristan Dunning, "Rearing Cubs of the Caliphate: An Examination of Child Soldier Recruitment by Da'esh," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Online).

34 Gilhamesh Nabeel and Jacob Wirtschaffer, "Early marriage figures for Iraq are startling. Child advocates worry it could rise even more," *Public Radio International*, August 13, 2018.

## Minors Born After the Creation of the Islamic State’s Self-Declared ‘Caliphate’

Another interesting observation that emerges from this data is that it allows the authors to give an estimate of the number of minors born after the formation of the caliphate. It is important to understand that this data does not indicate which children were born in the physical territory of the caliphate. There is no information in the spreadsheet regarding the place of birth of any of the minors listed. It is possible that some of the minors listed here were born to locals or foreigners prior to the actual formation of the caliphate. It is also possible that some of the children listed as having been born after the formation of the caliphate were born outside of the territory of the group and then brought in at a later time.

With these caveats in mind, there is still value in understanding the potential size of the population born into the Islamic State. To obtain an estimate of minors in their dataset who were born after the creation of the Islamic State’s self-declared caliphate and whose male parent or guardian was accounted for in the Iraq-focused personnel roster, the authors simply counted the number of minors born after June 29, 2014. This is the day that the spokesman for the Islamic State, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, first declared that the caliphate had been reestablished and that the group that had been known up until that point as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria would henceforth only be known as the Islamic State. The count reveals that approximately 16,173 children, or almost 16 percent, of the total number of minors on the Islamic State’s registry in Iraq were born after the official declaration of the caliphate.

Assuming that the number of minors born to a parent or guardian that the Islamic State potentially accounted for on a similarly large, Syrian-focused personnel roster is at least equal to this, ultimately there may be more than 30,000 children who were born in territory that the Islamic State either controlled or deemed part of its caliphate. This provides some evidence of the magnitude of the potential challenge of “stateless” minors. The concern that has been raised by many is that if a minor was born after the child’s parents traveled into Islamic State territory, then legitimate documentation regarding that minor’s birth is unlikely to exist. This concern is well-founded, but paints too binary a picture regarding the possibilities that exist to assist and repatriate minors who may have been born in the conflict zone. Legal mechanisms in many nation-states exist to allow for the granting of nationality to minors on the basis of parentage, but the actual implementation of these legal mechanisms is not without their own set of challenges.<sup>35</sup>

## Minors and the Potential Loss of an Adult Male Parent/Guardian

One additional layer of complexity is that some portion of the children whose parents were in some way affiliated with the Islamic State may have to deal with the post-caliphate era without one or both of their parents. Because the authors can link the children in the spreadsheet to their fathers or male guardians, they can provide some insight into the scale and complexity of this problem. The authors do not have any data on the mothers of the children in this spreadsheet, so that limits what this data can contribute to an understanding of the entire issue of minors and their parents.

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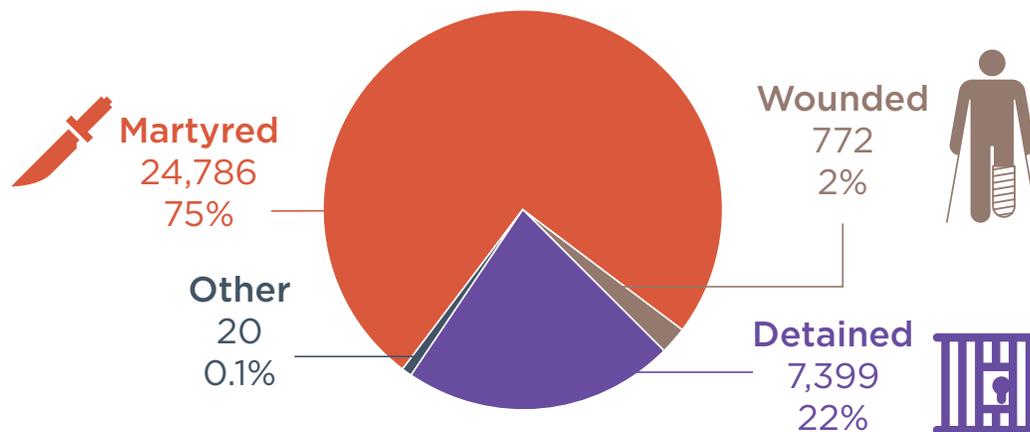
35 The principle of *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) may create opportunities for minors to claim nationality in a particular country on the basis of the citizenship of one or both of their parents. However, the application of this principle to minors born in the caliphate may be challenging if both parents are unavailable either due to incarceration, separation, or death. Additionally, the circumstances and criteria required may differ country by country.

In order to present this data, the authors utilized the fact that each minor was listed as being associated with or linked to an adult male. This link was made through an identification number issued to each adult male by the Islamic State. The authors were then able to assign a “status” variable to each child based on the information available in relation to each male on the “Payee” tab of the spreadsheet. The potential values of this variable were as follows:

1. Detainee – the male guardian is likely in the custody of law enforcement, a judicial body, or military forces
2. Lost – it is unclear what exactly this category means. The authors’ assumption was that it was something akin to missing in action, although it could also be another way of referencing a deceased individual<sup>36</sup>
3. Martyr – the male guardian has likely been killed through some form of combat or the result of enemy action (such as an airstrike)
4. Wounded – the male guardian has likely been wounded through some type of operational incident or other type of accident

In total, the authors were able to attach a status determination for the associated males of 33,123 minors in the dataset. The breakdown of this information appears in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Breakdown of Status of Male Guardian of Children**



What the data shows is a complicated future for these children when it comes to their parents. The largest group of children in the dataset for whom the authors were able to assign a status may have already experienced the loss of a parent due to violent action. Another segment of the child population faces a future in which a parent has been arrested or otherwise detained, or a future in which such an outcome is lurking.<sup>37</sup>

While the depth and diversity of effects each minor will potentially experience as a result of parental/guardian loss will naturally be case-specific and vary from person to person, the mere effect of separa-

36 In Figure 3, the “Lost” category is visually described for simplicity as “Other.” The “Other” category only contains data for individuals who were labeled as “Lost.”

37 A report released by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in May 2019 that focused on the evolving conditions in Al-Hol estimated “that there may be as many as 3,000 unaccompanied and separated children in al-Hol, some of them also taking care of siblings.” For background, see “Syria: Humanitarian Response in Al Hol Camp,” United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, May 29, 2019. For additional background, see Robin Wright, “The Kids of the Islamic State,” *Foreign Policy*, June 3, 2019.

tion itself is an important factor to consider as individual countries, and the international community broadly, seek to devise ways to address and manage the long-term impacts of both the Syrian civil war and the dismantling of the Islamic State's physical caliphate.

In some regards, especially given the possibility that detained males face long-term imprisonment or execution, the impact may be similar to what it is for children whose male guardian has been killed. And beyond the potential social and psychological impacts on the child, including other potential effects associated with growing up in an active conflict area experiencing trauma, there are also legal and economic ramifications. For example, if the deceased male guardian was a foreigner, how does that impact the child's future in terms of citizenship? These and many other questions have important individual and societal implications that need to be considered given the potential scope of the challenge, as illustrated here.

## Inferred Nationalities of Minors

The spreadsheet also contains information that allows the authors to engage in some guided speculation regarding the nationality of the minors listed. To be clear, any sort of assessment of nationalities in this spreadsheet is fraught with difficulties and shortcomings. It is important to note that the authors' use of the term "nationality" is not intended to confer any official status on any of the individuals listed in the spreadsheet. The information related to nationalities in the spreadsheet is unverified and has not been corroborated or disproven through any additional analysis.

In order to assess the nationality of the minors listed in the Islamic State spreadsheet, the authors needed to link each minor to the respective payee. While they will discuss the limitations of this approach at the end of this section of the report, one limitation is important to raise now. The fact that all payees were males means that the authors were unable to link children to a nationality on the basis of the nationality of their mother. What the authors present here ought to be interpreted in that regard. The fact that males seem to be the primary mechanism whereby the Islamic State identified minors also had broader implications for repatriation policy. While there may be some documentation or paper trail related to a minor's paternal lineage, if what is contained in this spreadsheet is any indication, such information seems to be less plentiful when it comes to the maternal line. States considering their legal obligations, as well as the challenges of repatriation, should evaluate those decisions with this consideration in mind.

The information utilized to assess the payee's nationality was based on their *kunya* (*nom de guerre*) or, secondarily, on their listed tribal affiliation.<sup>38</sup> As is well understood by scholars and analysts of militant organizations, but specifically of groups such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, individuals who participate in the organization often change their names to provide themselves with an additional level of anonymity—a cover name, or *kunya*.<sup>39</sup> It is also well understood that although these *kunyas* can have some reference to an individual's geographic origin and/or direct ties, this is not a rule and there are many cases where this does not hold.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, fighters have also been known to change their *kunyas* at different points in time during their overall experience in an organization. Results of analyses based on *kunyas*, therefore, should be viewed cautiously and with a critical eye to these

38 The authors sincerely thank Damon Mehl for his efforts in coding nationalities for payees based on *kunyas*.

39 For a brief discussion of the use of *kunyas*, see Vera Mironova and Karam Alhamad, "The Names of Jihad: A Guide to ISIS' Noms de Guerre," *Foreign Affairs*, July 14, 2017. Other scholars have used *kunyas* to assess nationality. Charlie Winter, *War by Suicide: A Statistical Analysis of the Islamic State's Martyrdom Industry* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2017).

40 For example, in the CTC's previous report on the registration forms of incoming Islamic State fighters, one fighter's *kunya* was Abu-al-Mandar al-Lubnani, suggesting that he may have been from Lebanon. Instead, he was listed as having been from Australia. It also works in the other direction, in which a *kunya* does not reference a geographic origin, even though internal files have revealed their actual location. See Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler.

shortcomings.<sup>41</sup> The simple rule the authors followed in coding was that if the geographic origin was clearly referenced in the individual's listed *kunya* (either by referring to a specific nation, region, or city), then they coded that particular payee as pertaining to the respective nation.<sup>42</sup>

For the tribal affiliation, the authors had a seasoned regional expert with detailed local tribal knowledge look through the tribal names attached to each payee and offer a best estimate of where they were from based on that information. There were over 3,000 different variations of tribal names, so the authors only asked the expert to do this for tribal names that were shared by at least six individuals in the dataset. This resulted in estimates being given for 500 of the 3,000 total tribal names. However, these 500 coded tribal names represented just over 92 percent of the total number of payees in the dataset. The authors then combined this information with the information based on *kunyas*, giving priority to the *kunya* if there was a conflict.

Using this procedure, the authors were able to assign nationalities to 76,273 of the minors in the dataset, or about 75 percent of the overall dataset.<sup>43</sup> The first intriguing finding is that the minors in the dataset come from 57 different nationalities (including Iraq and Syria, but not counting regions within other countries as separate nationalities). Although the specific number of children differs from one nation to the next, this data clearly shows that the challenge of assisting and reintegrating minors is not limited to a handful of nations and is instead an issue of international concern.

The individual breakdown of minors by nationality, presented in Table 1 and Map 1, provides even more insight into some of the potential dynamics arising from how best to help the children affected by the collapse of the caliphate. The number of children from Iraq is quite high, but that is not surprising given that the spreadsheet contains data with a heavy proportion of Iraq provinces in it. However, beyond Iraq, there is also a strong regional collective of children in the dataset. Jordan, Syria, Turkey, and Kurdistan<sup>44</sup> feature prominently at the top of the chart.

The challenges associated with minors from the specific regions affected by the conflict are no less important or complicated than those facing minors from distant countries. Indeed, although much of the focus has been centered on the repatriation of minors from foreign countries, this sheet reiterates that most of the minors impacted by the Islamic State and the surrounding conflict are locals. The fight is taking place in their backyard and homeland. This further suggests a pressing need for the international community to not only acknowledge the local dynamics related to these conflicts, but to push equally hard for local aid, technical assistance, and other forms of support to deal with the conflict once it is over.

**Table 1: Minors of Payees in Islamic State Registry, By Inferred Nationality**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of Children</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of Children</i>
Iraq	70,213	China*	17
Jordan	1,209	Germany	17
Syria	654	Albania	13
Turkey	380	Russia (Ingushetiya)*	12
Saudi Arabia	375	Georgia	10

41 Because the authors are limited to circumstances where an individual's *kunya* had a geographic reference, the figures presented here are likely a conservative estimate of the number of children pertaining to each nationality.

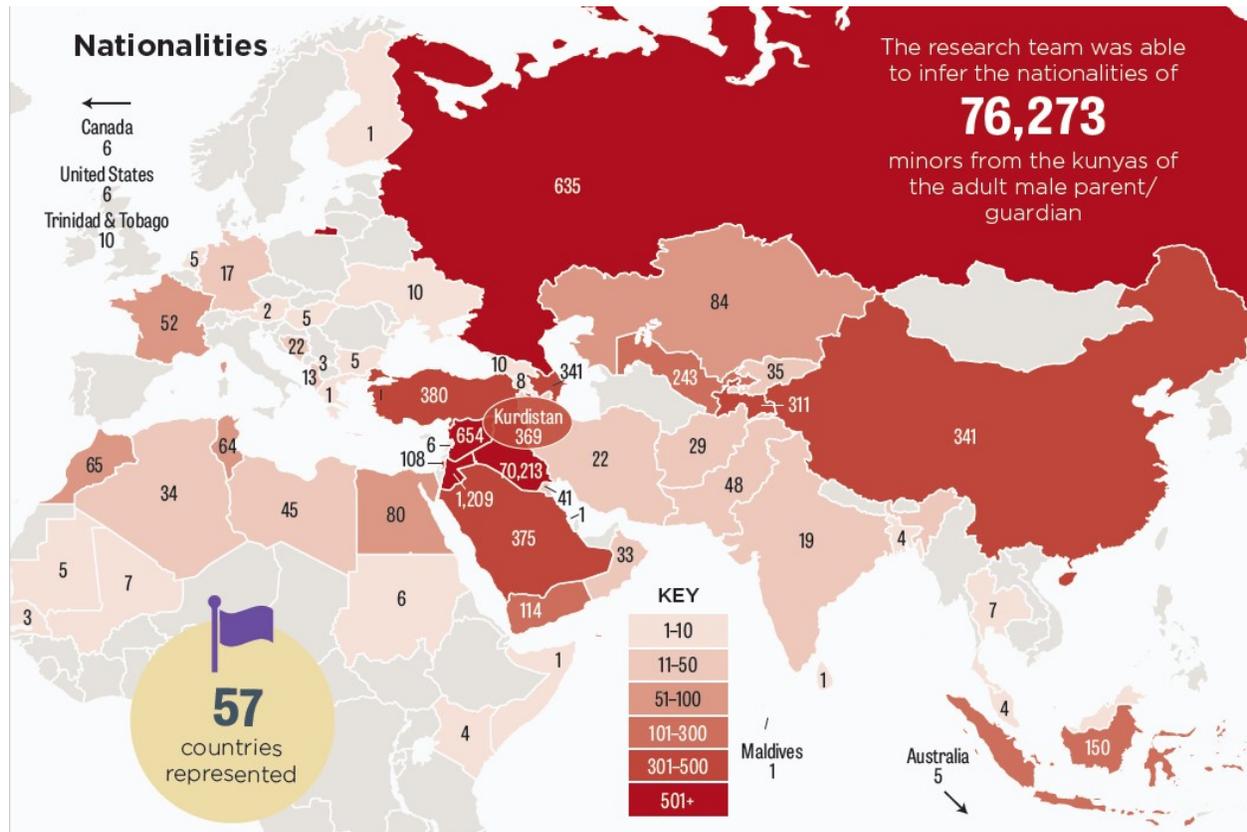
42 In cases where the individual's *kunya* suggested a foreign connection (for example, in cases where *Muhajir* (emigrant) was part of the *kunya*), the authors still left the nation coding blank absent any other identifying material.

43 The *kunya* and/or tribe were present but did not provide sufficient information to assign a nationality for over 17,000 other children.

44 The authors recognize that a number of geographic references included in Table 1, such as Turkistan and Kurdistan are not officially recognized countries. However, due to the unique political, social, and cultural legacy of each of these regions and their unique roles in counter-Islamic State operations, they opted to list them as separate entries in this table.

Kurdistan*	369	Trinidad and Tobago	10
Azerbaijan	341	Ukraine	10
China (Turkistan)*	324	Armenia	8
Russia (Dagestan)*	322	Mali	7
Tajikistan	311	Thailand	7
Uzbekistan	243	Canada	6
Russia (Chechnya)*	185	Lebanon	6
Indonesia	150	Sudan	6
Yemen	114	United States	6
Palestine*	108	Australia	5
Kazakhstan	84	Bulgaria	5
Egypt	80	Hungary	5
Russia	70	Mauritania	5
Morocco	65	Netherlands	5
Tunisia	64	Bangladesh	4
France	52	Kenya	4
Pakistan	48	Malaysia	4
Russia (Tatarstan)*	46	Kosovo	3
Libya	45	Senegal	3
Kuwait	41	Austria	2
Kyrgyzstan	35	Bahrain	1
Algeria	34	Finland	1
Oman	33	Greece	1
Afghanistan	29	Maldives	1
Bosnia	22	Somalia	1
Iran	22	Sri Lanka	1
India	19		

*\*Note: The authors recognize that Kurdistan, Palestine, Turkistan, Dagestan, Chechnya, Tatarstan, and Ingushetiya are not official countries. Turkistan is a reference to Xinjiang, an autonomous region located in northwestern China. Given the large number of individuals whose kunyas self-identified with these regions and the challenges associated with assigning a country to those individuals whose kunyas included “Kurdistani” or some similar variant, a decision was made to break them out and include them as a point of reference. When all “Turkistani” kunya or similar variant references are included as part of China, the total number of minors with an adult male guardian with ties to that country becomes 341. When all references to Russian territories are combined, the total number of minors with an adult male guardian with ties to that country becomes 635.*



The first country outside of the regional conflict zone that has a substantial number of minors is Russia (when all of the territories that pertain to Russia are combined into a single entry). The number of minors whose adult male guardian appeared to be of Russian heritage was not necessarily surprising, as prior, internal conflicts within Russia have involved the use and incorporation of jihad as a unifying theme. Ironically, these conflicts brought foreign fighters to Russia in support of the Chechen insurgency during the mid-1990s and early 2000s.<sup>45</sup> Thus, when war broke out in Syria and the call to arms was raised, thousands of Russians are said to have responded. Much has been written and said regarding the contributions of Russians, notably those from Chechnya, to the Islamic State's war efforts.<sup>46</sup> However, this data provides added fidelity to the scope of the non-fighting population dynamics related to the flow of Russians into the conflict zone. Ties to a parent or guardian with a Russian *kunya* account for close to 640 children in this dataset. This large number has created significant challenges for the Russian government, which has made strides to figure out how to at least bring a large number of these children home.<sup>47</sup>

The other prominent geographic outlier is not necessarily a specific country, but a regional one. The number of minors from the Central Asian area (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan,

45 Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31:5 (2008): pp. 412-433; Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, *Khattab* (Combating Terrorism Center: West Point, NY: 2015).

46 Olga Olikier, "Myths, Facts, and Mysteries About Foreign Fighters Out of Russia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 21, 2017; Neil Hauer, "Chechen and North Caucasian Militants in Syria," Atlantic Council, January 18, 2018; Vera Mironova and Ekaterina Sergatskova, "The Chechens of Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, September 7, 2017.

47 "Russia pioneering return of 'ISIS children,'" France 24, February 18, 2019; Samuel Ramani, "Why is Russia insisting on bringing home ISIS fighters' children?" *Washington Post*, April 9, 2019; Tom Parfitt, "Russia flies 27 orphaned 'cubs of the caliphate' home to Moscow," *Times*, February 11, 2019.

and Uzbekistan) is 673.<sup>48</sup> If the authors exclude Iraq from the data, that number of children represents over 11 percent of the total number of children in the dataset. It is important to realize that this is a conservative estimate, as a number of the minors from Russia could also be of Central Asian heritage. In short, there is a large contingent of children coming from these Central Asian states. Combined with previous research based on primary source documents that also showed a large proportion of female entrants into the caliphate coming from the same region, it appears that individuals from Central Asia have played a key role in sustaining the caliphate and the region will likely remain an important theater for the foreseeable future.<sup>49</sup>

Another geographic takeaway has to do with the contingent of minors coming from North Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia). Although the 288 minors from this region are comparatively smaller than the Central Asian area contingent, when data for Iraq is excluded they still represent a relatively large proportion of the sample at about five percent. This is an important population to consider, as the resources available in each of these countries to deal with the challenge of repatriating and caring for children who may have lived in the conflict zone differ greatly from one to the next.

Finally, while there are some minors listed from Europe and North America, the overall number of 100 is quite small.<sup>50</sup> Surprisingly, the dataset does not include any minors whose parent or guardian identifies as British or Belgian, when analysis of another Islamic State roster evaluated by the authors—as well as other open source information—points to noteworthy and relatively sizable numbers of foreign war volunteers who joined al-Baghdadi's group from these countries.<sup>51</sup> According to Save the Children, “at least 60 British children ... are trapped in north-east Syria after fleeing areas held by the Islamic State ...”<sup>52</sup>

The specific reason for these trends is unclear, but at least four possibilities are worth considering. First, it is possible that there are simply fewer children whose adult male parent/guardian is from Europe or North America. Although a significant portion of media coverage focuses on the “Western” angle of the problem, that does not mean that Western children are the more common cases that exist. Second, the authors assigned nationality on the basis of the *kunya* of the father, not the mother. The spreadsheet only provides very limited, peripheral information that could provide insight into the mothers of a small number of the children listed, so the authors are unable to make any meaningful or definitive connections along these lines. It has been well-documented that a large number of women traveled to the caliphate, some of whom married within the region and had children.<sup>53</sup> If the nationality of the individuals these women married differed from their own, that nuance would not be captured in the approach taken here. Third, the authors' decision to use *kunyas* as a proxy to assign nationality to Islamic State male payees could be skewing some of these results. For example, given its colonial history, Britain has a large population of Muslims with South Asian heritage whose family members migrated to the United Kingdom previously. Therefore, it is possible that the absence of Islamic State male payees from Britain in the dataset could be due to some of individuals having selected to take on a different *kunya*, such as al-Hindi, al-Pakistani, al-Bangladeshi, al-Kashmiri, etc., instead of “al-Britani” or some other geographic identifier from which the authors could infer British nationality. This issue naturally could be affecting other country-level results as well. Finally, another

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48 While the authors recognize that there is not agreement on what countries constitute “Central Asia,” they opt to use the geographic breakdown utilized by the United Nations' Statistics Division. See <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/>

49 Daniel Milton and Brian Dodwell, “Jihadi Brides? Examining a Female Guesthouse Registry from the Islamic State's Caliphate,” *CTC Sentinel* 11:5 (2018): pp. 16-22.

50 Canada and the United States were the North American countries in the registry. To identify which countries constituted Europe, the authors counted those countries that were a part of the European Union, which in this dataset included France, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland, and Greece.

51 For background, see Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler.

52 Peter Beaumont, “Syria: estimated number of UK children trapped doubles to 60,” *Guardian*, October 21, 2019.

53 Cook and Vale.

possible explanation for such a low number of minors from Europe and North America is that they were systematically not included in this registry. Perhaps the most obvious case would be that European and North American fighters may have been more likely to reside in Syria instead of Iraq, in which case they would not have been found as prominently in this registry, which, as discussed above, contains more data about individuals either from Iraq, or stationed in the country, than in/from Syria.

## Conclusion

Preliminary analysis of this key dataset cannot answer the large number of important and complex questions related to minors who lived under the Islamic State's territorial control. The document does, however, offer new insight into how the Islamic State collected data on individuals who lived in territory under its control and about the number and other personal aspects of minors in particular. At a fundamental level, this look at data on the Islamic State's own record of these minors from Iraq does at least provide for a data-informed perspective regarding some of the dynamics likely to emerge as countries struggle to deal with the challenges posed by the flood of minors who—sometimes alone and other times with families—have streamed into Al-Hol, other refugee camps, or across international borders in the wake of the collapse of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate.

One of the overarching implications of this report is that it is important to realize that minors who lived in Islamic State-controlled territory did not have a monolithic experience. Instead, their lives were likely shaped by an array of factors such their age, gender, nationality, and location, as well their family's position within the Islamic State hierarchy. Given the diversity of children in this dataset and the reality that their trajectories after the Islamic State range from returning to home countries to living in IDP camps, there is not one solution to this problem. For this reason, it is counterproductive to regard all minors with experience living under the Islamic State's rule as ticking time bombs or sleeper agents. Though some minors could potentially go on to commit acts of terrorism or return to conflict, more likely challenges arising in the short-, medium-, and long-term include increased rates of homelessness, trauma, anxiety and depression, unemployment, domestic violence, and petty crime. Ultimately, since the Islamic State invested in this demographic, solutions to address the problem have to do the same.

Beyond that macro-level implication, several other key takeaways emerge from this data. First, by looking at this registry of individuals on the Islamic State payroll in Iraq, the sheer size of the displaced minor population has been brought into more acute focus: over 100,000 minors were being supported by an individual that was on the payroll of the Islamic State. While not a large number in the context of the larger population migration that has taken place within the context of the civil wars in Iraq and Syria, this number is a reminder of the unique challenge posed by the recent military setbacks faced by the Islamic State. Because the Islamic State established and maintained some amount of state-like institutions, its diminution has created new and challenging dynamics for the minors who used to live under its control. If the issue of what to do with these minors is not handled appropriately, it seems quite predictable that it will lead to this issue becoming a future driver or sustainer of the generational conflict between groups like Islamic State and al-Qa`ida on the one hand and those countries that adhere to a nation-state model on the other.

Second, while the media generally focuses on the Islamic State's foreign recruits and the dependents of those individuals, the data reviewed in this report highlights how the overwhelming majority of minors being tracked by the group were linked to a male adult payee whose *kunya* indicated that they were from Iraq or Syria. Indeed, 93% of the minors in the dataset were children listed as being associated with a male parent or guardian from one of these two countries.<sup>54</sup> So, the number of minors in

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54 The percentage rises slightly higher to 93.3% when minors whose adult male parent indicated in their *kunya* that they identified as being from "Kurdistan."

the dataset that were linked to a foreign Islamic State payee (less than 10%) is a considerably smaller (but still not an insignificant or straightforward) part of the overall problem. This finding serves as an important reminder about not just the scale of the challenge at a local level, but also the likelihood that significant assistance in the rebuilding effort in these areas is also necessary in the human domain, and not just physical infrastructure.

Third, this data has revealed an interesting underlying gender dynamic within the broader issue of how to help minors impacted by the Islamic State. Although both males and females suffered under the group, there is compelling evidence that the Islamic State began to co-opt male minors at the age of 14 at rates that exceeded those of female minors. The question is not who suffered more; both male and female minors surely experienced trauma, deprivation, and distress as a result of living under the Islamic State's caliphate and in an active conflict zone. The key is to recognize that these difficulties may have been experienced unequally, or differently, across gender and that varied approaches are not just needed for minors as a group, but even more distinctly across other dimensions, with gender being one of them.

Fourth, it is likely that many of these minors, at least 16,000 in Iraq alone, have been born into the Islamic State's caliphate. As discussed briefly above, while some may have claim to citizenship in a country because of the citizenship of their parents, this process is not seamless, especially given the fact that in some cases their parent, or parents, may be incarcerated, unable to return to their home country, or dead. Even if they do return, legitimate documentation regarding the births of these children does not exist, creating more challenges if these children are ever going to be repatriated into society. However, despite the barriers to repatriation, including time, resources, and legal hurdles, there have been some positive signs. Some countries such as Germany, France, Kosovo, and Russia have been able to repatriate children of imprisoned individuals, although the specific circumstances of these cases are not known.<sup>55</sup> And regardless of the success stories, it seems likely that some children will find themselves in a legal limbo that, absent some sort of state action, will make it difficult for them to resolve their "stateless status."

The recent development of Turkey's military advance into northeastern Syria has certainly added layers of complexity to this situation. Nevertheless, there will almost surely be additional, longer-term challenges that some of these children will also need to confront. For example, regardless of whether or not these minors were inculcated with the Islamic State's worldview or continue to be exposed to radical narratives, it is possible that their time living in the caliphate will be something that impacts their identity and relationships to the states in which they live. This is not to say that these minors, because of their time in the caliphate, will choose to define themselves in certain terms or that they will necessarily have a difficult time reintegrating in society. The authors also cannot say for sure that an inability to reintegrate into society would be the cause of future radicalization for any of these minors.<sup>56</sup> Experience, identity, and radicalization are complex processes that defy simple explanations. Still, engaging with scholars and practitioners to find the best way to create the best chance for these minors in the future should be a top priority and will likely pay unforeseen dividends as time moves on.

Finally, although the issue of what to do with the children of the Islamic State is difficult, this brief look at the data has shown that it is not just an Iraqi or Syrian problem. The diversity of countries listed

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55 Elian Peltier, "France Repatriates Several Orphan Children Who Were Stranded in Syria," *New York Times*, March 15, 2019; Amie Ferris-Rotman, "In Russia, a path back from ISIS," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2019; Kujtim Bytyqi and Sam Mullins, "Returnee Foreign Fighters from Syria and Iraq: The Kosovan Experience," *CTC Sentinel* 12:7 (2019): pp. 25-30.

56 There is a large literature on the complexity of the radicalization process, and space does not allow for it all to be cited here. A few examples highlighting the difficulty of making any generalizations or claims about the complexity of these issues include Mark Sedgwick, "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22:4 (2010): pp. 479-494; Orla Lynch, "British Muslim youth: radicalisation, terrorism and the construction of the 'other,'" *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 6:2 (2013): pp. 241-261; and Sadeq Rahimi and Raissa Graumans, "Reconsidering the Relationship Between Integration and Radicalization," *Journal for Deradicalization* 5 (2015): pp. 28-62.

in the Iraq registry of the Islamic State make clear that these minors may have claims on citizenship in any number of nations around the world. While there appears to be widespread agreement that addressing the issue of children is critical, that does not make the complexity of the challenge any less. Dealing with this issue involves not only a legal dimension, but a moral and ethical imperative as well. These children will need a variety of legal, psychological, educational, and other assistance to avoid the bleak possibilities that lie ahead. Many of them had no choice in the circumstances that led to them being brought into territory possessed by the group.

Of particular concern are countries that do not typically get featured in the headlines when it comes to public discussion of this problem. States in Central Asia and North Africa, at least from the admittedly imperfect look offered by this report, appear to have a much larger challenge on their hands than do states in Europe and North America. The challenge is that these states that tend to have the larger (from a numbers perspective) population of minors are also unlikely to have sufficient resources to be able to adequately deal with this issue. As a result, one approach that states with smaller-scale challenges on this front can potentially do to help is through the provision of resources, training, and education to those states that lack in these areas. This might allow those states to better help minors that do return to have access to the services and programs that will assist in reintegration, and if needed and/or appropriate, some form of counseling.

It is also important to emphasize that this look at the data was not intended to suggest that all these minors are potential terrorists, that they have radicalized, or that they will pose a threat in the future. Nor is it to suggest that future problems will not emerge from this population of minors. Simply being listed on a registry of the Islamic State does not turn one into a terrorist, nor does it suggest a certain future course. Rather, this data has provided some empirical evidence from inside the Islamic State as a way to contribute to the broader conversation regarding the importance of designing policies that address the humanitarian and ethical challenges governments will likely face as they work through this complex and challenging issue.

Although the past few years have seen a marked increase in analysis and scholarship on the topic of minors and the related challenges arising from the territorial collapse of the caliphate, there is still more to be done.<sup>57</sup> The sheer size and diversity of the problem set that has been illustrated by this report emphasizes the importance of practitioners and policymakers obtaining a broader understanding of the relationships between terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State and minors. Such an understanding will be critical to devising ways to help minors who have lived under the rule of the Islamic State to recover and deal with the trauma they almost surely were exposed to or experienced. Additionally, properly informed and scoped efforts will be a key way to facilitate healing for those individuals and an important step to breaking, or limiting the future effects of, what has become a multi-generational struggle against jihadi violence.

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57 An exhaustive list of this research is more than can be cited here. In addition to what has already been cited previously in this report, the authors would add United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Gender Dimensions of the Response to Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Research Perspectives* (New York: United Nations CTED, 2019).



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AT WEST POINT