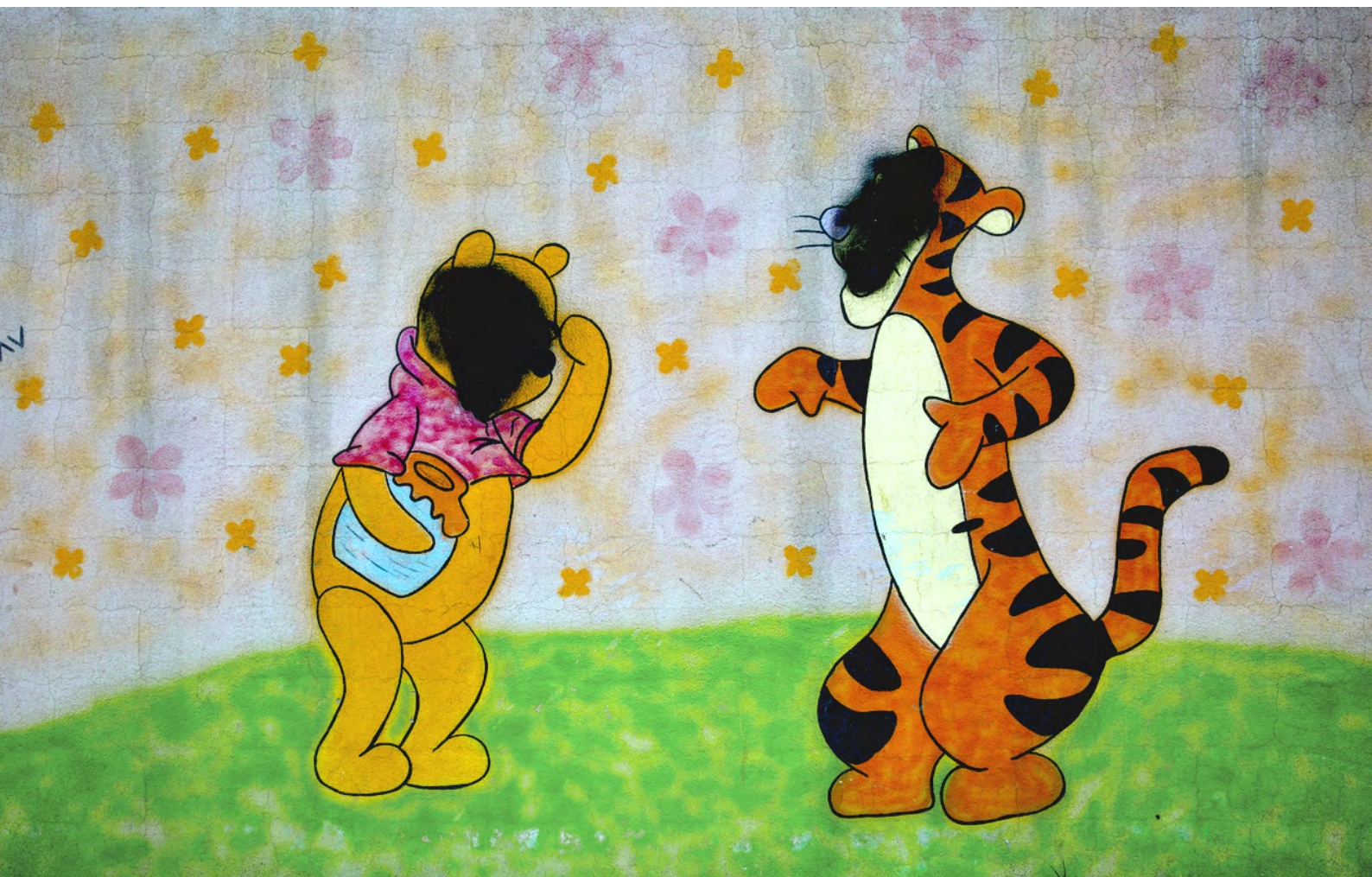


“After all, they were only children ...”

Assessing Needs and Possibilities for a Community-Reintegration Program for children formerly associated with ISIS and other affected children and youth



Pilot study by
Dr. Korinna Fritzemeyer



Federal Foreign Office

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About the author

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The basis for [the societal re-integration of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups], however, lies in well-trained and highly motivated staff, who dedicate their work to the idea that these children deserve all their empathy and who share the understanding that the children were exactly that at the time: children. They are not to be seen independently of the political situation they have been living in, but as vulnerable minors who can easily be seduced – especially at the beginning of adolescence, when peers and other surroundings become more important than parents as part of the natural separation and individuation process that is initiated at this point in their development.”

– Korinna Fritzemeyer, Jiyan Foundation

Since 2005: Jiyan Foundation supports traumatized survivors of war, torture, and sexualized violence in Iraq and Syria

“Children are our future” is an often-heard slogan used to indicate that children are the focus of an effort, that their protection and development are essential for the development of societies, and that we all care about them and their interests.

The reality is different. For decades, people in Iraq and Syria have been living with political persecution, armed conflict, displacement, and torture. Hundreds of thousands were killed, and even many more suffered through and survived serious human rights violations. They and those around them have to live and deal with the consequences. Heavily traumatized persons need urgent local help. This support enables restart, not only individually, but on a societal level as well.

In the prevalent situation, children lose a (functioning) parent, siblings, their home, their environment, their school, their childhood. They suddenly are no longer “our future”, but are reduced and de-personalized to “collateral damage”, by-products of acts of violence, and they receive very little support. On top of this, children that have experienced violence during war and conflict continue to live with the effects of war, be it through so-called domestic violence by traumatized parents or teachers or “simply” through the taboo or even negative stigmatization of their suffering. At Jiyan Foundation, we have treated children who have lost everything, including their will to live. There are the women who were abducted, under Saddam Hussein’s regime, as girls to be held in prisons as sex slaves, for a decade. Some people experienced unbelievable violence and now pass this violence on to their children. And there are the children who were abducted by armed groups and forced to go to war themselves, gun in hand. This brochure is about these militarized children.

Violence against children is not a nice topic, but we have to confront it. Many more affected survivors need the support and we must make sure they will receive it. This is the only way to guarantee that the children and societies affected will live in a future without violence and ethnic or religious division.

The Jiyan Foundation is well-equipped to provide this support. Based in Berlin (Germany) and Erbil (Kurdistan Region in Iraq), we offer support to refugees and internally displaced persons in Iraq and north-eastern Syria through centers in Baghdad, Chamchamal, Dohuk, Erbil, Kirkuk, Mosul, Qamishlo, Alqosh, and Sulaymaniya with their outreach facilities and branches, for example in camps. Every year we continue to provide psychological and medical treatment, as well as legal support, to thousands of women, children, and men who have survived the most severe human rights violations.

However, individual help remains incomplete without changing the ongoing potential for violence and trauma. Mental health issues are often taboo, and those affected are stigmatized. That’s why low-threshold information events are an important part of our work. They provide easy and unconditional access to our services for the wider communities, destigmatize mental health, and provide local legitimacy for our work and our (potential) clients. We involve the relatives of our clients in the treatment and work with state actors to improve the political framework.

In addition to that, we are campaigning for the legal recognition of survivors of human rights violations in Iraq. We helped shape legal protection for ISIS survivors through our leadership role in the Coalition for Just Reparations (C4JR), which was essential in drafting the law for (female) Yazidi survivors. The Iraqi parliament passed the law on 1 March 2021 and this was an important step, but it must not be the last. And through our dialogue program, people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds come together to share their experiences living under different regimes. Acknowledging each other’s suffering is an important step to bridge old and new societal divisions.

Highlights of our work

- Psychotherapeutic and medical support in Iraq and Syria, including for internally displaced persons, refugees, and returnees;
- Leading role in continuous education and professionalization of psycho-therapeutic treatment in Iraq and Syria, providing trauma-sensitive services such as art therapy. Thanks to our (so far) unique healing garden in Chamchamal, we also use garden therapy and – especially for highly traumatized children – animal-assisted treatment methods;
- Training program for our own and external psychotherapists, psychologists, and medical doctors in the trauma-sensitive treatment of survivors of severe human rights violations. Training courses for teachers;
- Specialized treatment center for survivors of sexualized violence during ISIS rule (mainly Yazidi women from the Sinjar area);
- Legal support for our clients in recovering personal documents and other personal status affairs;
- Development of training courses for therapists on LGBTQI+-sensitive treatment;
- And the development of approaches to support former militarized children in Iraq, the subject of this brochure.

We cooperate with partner organizations and sponsors, including the German Federal Foreign Office, Misereor, Johanniter International Assistance (JIA), Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Protestant Church of Hesse-Nassau (EKHN), the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT), and various private supporters.



Salah Ahmad,
Chairman

Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights

Executive summary

Introduction

From January 2020 until December 2021, the Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights researched the situation of former ISIS “Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups” (CAAFAG)¹. These children were forced to witness and be actively part in armed conflict and gross human rights violations.

The purpose of this research was to

- (1) assess the situation and needs of former CAAFAG with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS),
- (2) develop a deradicalization program,
- (3) perform advocacy on government support for the deradicalization program.

The research aimed to focus on two exemplary communities:

- (a) Yazidi youth in Khanke camp (Duhok area),
- (b) Sunni Arab youth in Laylan camp (Kirkuk area).

Summary of findings

Despite a growing body of reports on the needs of former CAAFAG in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – mostly on Yazidi youth – no official number for children formerly involved with ISIS exist. Overall, a number of 20,000 children are being said to have been abducted or lured into ISIS activities and mistreated in different capacities. For armed groups including and beyond ISIS, World Vision in 2019, for example, estimates the number of former CAAFAG in Iraq to amount to 52,300. For Syria, their estimates reach 96,100 former CAAFAG.² It is estimated that approximately 1,400 Yazidi children were CAAFAG (HRW, 2019) and that approximately 1,500 Sunni Arab boys are currently held in juvenile detention centers and are legally charged of being part of ISIS (HRW; 2019). Due to security issues or fear of Jiyan being accused of ISIS affiliation, inquiries about children forcibly associated with ISIS were and continue to be very near impossible. Yazidi CAAFAG youth show high levels of psychological burden, including

depression, withdrawal and aggressive behavior towards themselves and others. Findings are in line with other reports, developed during the study phase, which stress that the need for support of the families the returning youth live with is persistent.

Overall, it can be said that planning intervention with Sunni Arab former CAAFAG is more complex, while at the same time Sunni Arab children are at greater risk of not being able to (re-)integrate into society but instead to be re-recruited by military organizations. As Sunni Arab children face legal prosecution, they not only face the burden of stigmatization, which Yazidi youth have to face as well, but in addition they really have no place to go and to live other than IDP camps and the streets, hoping not to be identified.

It was confirmed that there is a great need for a change in the perception of former CAAFAG by Iraqi and Kurdish authorities as well as on a societal level, from seeing them as a threat to considering them as individuals in urgent need for protection and services. Training and continuous supervision for staff, also for staff involved in planning advocacy and lobbying on the ground, is of utter importance and must be the foundation of further endeavors.

Challenges

The greatest challenges which led to a much lower number of contacts with beneficiaries than expected included:

- (1) The COVID-19 pandemic that impeded on-ground interviews, research, a multi-day training as well as contact with beneficiaries and face-to-face exchange among Jiyan staff;
The closing of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, including Laylan camp in the Kirkuk area, where Jiyan had planned to reach out to Sunni Arab former CAAFAG³;
- (2) Security issues including Jiyan possibly being accused of affiliation with ISIS.

1 On terminology, please see section 1.2.

2 World Vision: No Choice. It takes a world to end the use of child soldiers, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/wv_itaw_no_choice_policy_report_2019_sp_online_2.pdf, p. 8.

3 OCHA: Iraq Camp Closure Status, 14 January 2021, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iraq_camp_closure_status_cccm-ocha_20210117.pdf.

Recommendations

Separate and specialized approaches must be developed for Sunni Arab youth on the one hand and for Yazidi former CAAFAG on the other. While an in-patient center for abandoned Sunni Arab children may offer these a real chance for developing a perspective and an identity that does not recur to radicalization and violent action with ISIS, Yazidi youth mustn't be again separated from their non-ISIS-affiliated community.

In general, future efforts in the field should consider and focus on:

- (1) **Outreach** work with a multi-layered strategy to find **entry points** to gaining trust of the clients. This should include any activities of interest for former CAAFAG who do not want to be perceived as children. Activities could include basic IT training or access to media (education);
- (2) Aiming at **long-term counseling** of individuals and their families with a minimum of 12-18 months, if not longer;
- (3) **Individual interventions** tailored to suit the case and living situation of children and youth. Each case must be treated with a high sensitivity for individual solutions and strategies as well as **resilience** that proved helpful to stabilize the individual client until the beginning of any intervention. Interventions may include **psycho-social and medical support, activity groups, individual and group**;
- (4) **Relatives** must be addressed and supported according to the needs of the family; **supportive groups for relatives** may serve as an effective means, which could facilitate acceptance within the community as well **reduce stigmatization**;
- (5) Paving ways into **reentering the educational system** and employment such as specific support to enter **vocational training** to mitigate against re-enlistment or re-recruitment from military groups;
- (6) **Legal support** (issuing official documents, legal defense in case of accusations) for Sunni Arab children;
- (7) Applying a **stigma reduction approach** (STRETCH);
- (8) Continuous **training and supervision** including biweekly reflective groups for training and supervision and multi-day intensive trainings should be offered also for a more in-depth

- confrontation with the topic;
- (9) Capacity building should **take into account cultural, social, and contextual factors**;
 - (10) To provide effective support for **detained former CAAFAG** a program must be developed which addresses guards and officials;
 - (11) Conduct **advocacy** to influence the legal and political framework;
 - (12) **Lobbying** (low profile, direct communication) and **awareness-raising** for the decriminalization of former CAAFAG;
 - (13) For effective lobbying and campaigning, **cooperation with other organizations** is of need.

These will help to meet the following psychosocial needs of former CAAFAG as outlined by Langer & Ahmad (2019):

- (1) **Basic needs**, including a feeling of security and stability (hard to achieve under conditions of displacement in IDP camps and nearly impossible in detention);
- (2) **Regaining social trust**, that was destroyed and lost within and after leaving ISIS, the ability to connect and relate to others, to form close and intimate relationships, to rely on others;
- (3) Dealing with the complex, confusing, intense, and contradicting feelings of loss, grief, mourning, guilt, lust, happiness, shame, hate, anger, loneliness, emptiness, etc. that reflect their time with ISIS and afterwards and their memories with ISIS. In a salutogenetic (Antonovsky 1987) perspective an essential goal would be to help the children **develop a sense of coherence**, that integrates the fragmented experiences and feelings in a narrative that allows the children to have a sense of comprehensibility of what has happened, a sense of meaningfulness of their lives and a sense of manageability of the current situation;
- (4) Articulating and **overcoming feelings of severe alienation**;
- (5) **Fostering empowerment**, agency, and the feeling of being heard and seen and belonging, of knowing that their lives and their stories also matter.

Table of Content

1. Background for research	8
1.1. Primary findings and necessary amendment of initial planning	8
1.2. Problematic terminology	9
2. What was done – achievements	10
2.1. Joint Reflective Practice Group	10
2.2. Needs assessment study	10
2.2.1. Case studies	10
2.3. Online documentation survey	11
2.4. Development of deradicalization and rehabilitation concept	11
3. Difficulties and shortages	12
3.1. Lack of contact with beneficiaries	12
3.1.1. Restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic	12
3.1.2. Closing of camps	12
3.1.3. Attitudes towards CAAFAG	12
3.1.4. Issue of security	12
3.2. Difficulties in capacity building and management	13
3.3. Advocacy – lack of contact with officials and responses by other actors	13
4. Results of the online survey	14
4.1. Sociodemographic data	14
4.2. Time with ISIS and traumatic experiences	14
4.3. Symptoms and outlook regarding (need for) therapy	14
4.4. Discussion and limitations of the online survey	15
5. Lessons learned	16
5.1. Former ISIS CAAFAG in need for services	16
5.1.1. Situation and needs of Yazidi CAAFAG	16
5.1.2. Situation and needs of Sunni Arab CAAFAG	16
5.2. Effects of perception of CAAFAG on capacity building and advocacy	17
5.3. Essentials for any reintegration program for former ISIS CAAFAG	17
6. The way forward – Recommendations	19
Literature	21

1. Background for research

From January 2020 until December 2021, the Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights implemented the pilot project “Deradicalization and Community-Reintegration Program for Former ISIS Child Soldiers and Vulnerable Children and Youth” as part of the project “Strengthening Resilience, Recovery and Deradicalization in Iraq” with support from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Its purpose was to conduct (1) a needs assessment study on the situation and needs of CAAFAG with ISIS, to (2) develop a deradicalization program in cooperation with international experts and to (3) perform advocacy on government support for the deradicalization program. It was to be implemented in four provinces of North Iraq, namely Mosul (Nineveh province), Kirkuk, Erbil, and Duhok.

The pilot project was developed and proposed on the basis of a study by the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin/Germany (Ahmad & Langer, 2019) that suggested that if children who were formerly involved with ISIS stay without support and continue facing stigma, there is hazard potential for re-radicalization and re-joining terrorist groups. It had also been understood that few effective psychotherapeutic services are available in the KRI and that a conceptual framework with guidelines on ethics and key principles is of need.

1.1 Primary findings and necessary amendment of initial planning

In January 2020, needs were assessed based on analysis of existing research studies as well as interviews, group discussions, and networking with (international) experts. Different actors and beneficiaries were mapped and the research conducted along the following parameters:

(1) As described previously (Langer & Ahmad, 2019; Amnesty International, 2020), it was confirmed by Jiyan staff and supervisors of our partner CVT that previously met former CAAFAG of the Yazidi community show high levels of psychological burden: high aggressiveness against themselves and others (incl. suicidality), depression and anxiety. There was no doubt at this point that this group is in great need for psychotherapy to be conducted by well-trained and experienced staff.

(2) Sunni Arab youth, which were trained and abused as CAAFAG, were reported to show similar problems. However, due to security issues and stigmatization encountering these children was found to be extremely difficult. Furthermore, Jiyan staff reported that at this point it would be impossible to openly carry out any MHPSS support for Sunni Arab children. This particularly applied to areas where Sunni Arab children live or where IDP camps for the so-called “ISIS families” exist. The security situation in Mosul, for example, did not allow reaching out to these children or families as it would have posed a danger to staff and the organization to be accused of supporting ISIS, and therefore running the risk of the Jiyan Foundation center being closed. Reaching out to the Sunni Arab children continued to be the greatest challenge (see section 3.1).

(3) It was understood that ISIS CAAFAG were perceived as perpetrators rather than as victims or survivors. This also applied to some of Jiyan staff and was to be addressed in the then to be established reflective practice groups. Before reaching out to beneficiaries it was found that designated Jiyan staff would need intensive training and close supervision to deal with these cases.

(4) Langer & Ahmad (2019) and amnesty international (2020) findings already called for no further “sole questioning” of former CAAFAG. This needed to be considered when designing a needs assessment study that should contribute in greater detail to the body of knowledge on the traumatic experiences, current emotional well-being, etc. of former CAAFAG. Such a needs assessment study would have to rely on more intensive contact with this group of children. It therefore became evident that they and their families mustn’t be further approached without offering hand-in-hand qualified and continuous MHPSS support.

(5) The legal situation in Iraq as well as in the KRI accounts Sunni Arab youth as fully accountable for their affiliation with ISIS, even when they were children at the time. If they are caught, they face the risk of staying in detention for the rest of their lives.

Consequently, the needs assessment study and the development of the deradicalization program was conceptualized as an intertwined program, hoping to make use of the available knowledge sooner and therefore reaching out to beneficiaries faster. It was also thought to allow reaching out especially to Sunni Arab children as their risk of being re-recruited by ISIS is greater as described by international experts such as Horgan (2019).

The study was set up as follows:

- (1) Piloting services to CAAFAG with ISIS in (a) Khanke camp (Duhok area) for Yazidi youth and in (b) Laylan camp (Kirkuk area) for Sunni Arab youth with an integrated needs assessment study conducted by therapeutic staff. Trained staff ought to cooperate with staff already addressing families in the frame of other projects reaching out to the Yazidi community and to Sunni Arab IDPs in the Laylan camp. Thereby, in the case of Sunni Arab youth, the families and youth would not be at risk of further stigmatization or exposure to legal prosecution;
- (2) Piloting of training of senior staff – trained in adult and/or child and youth psychotherapeutic techniques;
- (3) Close cooperation with Yazda to allow for networking and synergetic effects – also regarding advocacy.

1.2. Problematic terminology

“Child Soldier” and “Militarized Children”

In the course of this study, we have discussed these widely used terms – for example in the context of the “Red Hand Day”, 12 February – internally and with cooperating partners, i.e., “ISIS child soldiers”. We decided to refrain from the terms and instead use “Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups” in its acronym CAAFAG. This avoids problematic connotations associated with the constrictive term ‘soldier’ and ‘military’, especially among people that have survived crimes perpetrated by armed forces. By using CAAFAG we wish to highlight that the children, youth, and young people we address here – independently of their gender – were forced into and indoctrinated to a violent body of thoughts by different ways of involvement and capacities within armed groups, including but not at all limited to fighters, cooks, porters, messengers,

laying mines, and being violated for sexualized purposes etc. (cf. Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, 2007). We particularly want to respond to the Yazidi community’s wish to refrain from the term “child soldier” for children that have been abducted from their community. Due to the problematic connotation, it has proven to have detrimental effects on the reintegration efforts of all persons involved. The term CAAFAG carries less stigma.

“Deradicalization”

Someone being or becoming “radical” is a subjective perception which, normally, in political discourse describes a negative state or development that is opposed. The reasons or circumstances for a person adopting “radical” or “extreme” views are manifold and can change. And, subsequently, if “radicalization” is seen as a process, it consequently implies that this process is reversible, which explains the relevance of the term for pedagogical approaches.

Jiyan uses the term “deradicalization” because of this pedagogical value. The subject of this study are children and youth that have been lured into ISIS in one way or the other. These minors, the youngest of whom was abducted at two years of age, are to be treated neutrally in order to create space for their treatment and for the engagement with their direct environs.

Jiyan takes distance from the political connotation of “radicalization”. In Iraq over the decades, different political forces have resorted to various kinds of regimes and the gravest human rights violations. Some of them were deemed extreme by some, others were by others.

2. What was done – achievements

2.1 Joint Reflective Practice Group

The Jiyan Foundation has been cooperating closely with the Center for the Victims of Torture (CVT) with regards to supporting children. In June 2020, Jiyan Foundation and CVT, together with Yazda, a Yazidi non-governmental organization, set up the “Joint Reflective Practice Group”. Its aim was to increase awareness that working with children who have been exploited, abused, and indoctrinated by ISIS is one of the most challenging work areas for mental health professionals. Therefore, exchange about this experience is key.

The group was to open a forum to discuss different opinions, experiences, and clinical aspects of working with this target group.

Reflective practice was presented to be different from a standard supervision session as it focuses on the experience of working as clinicians rather than as a case discussion analysis. It should

- (a) offer the chance to speak out about clinical practice;
- (b) provide a safe environment for the professional and personal development journey;
- (c) promote reflective capacity on personal attitudes, values and beliefs, ethics and the impact on their work and
- (d) enhance the capacity to reflect on the interaction with clients, considering setbacks and difficult moments in therapy as well as learning moment (e.g. vicarious trauma and vicarious resilience).

The topics for a curriculum were outlined for a couple of weeks in advance but adapted according to the needs that have been identified by the guiding staff (Luca Modenesi, Eivor Laegreid, Korinna Fritzemeyer). Two therapists, respectively, were identified among Jiyan staff to work with former ISIS CAAFAG in the Duhok and in the Kirkuk areas. Five Yazda staff participated in the biweekly groups, which particularly served as an entry point to better understand the Yazidi experience.

From January to December 2021, the reflective practice group met bi-weekly (approx. 25 sessions, 90 minutes) via Zoom (virtual platform). The group

members shared challenges and frustrations working with the target group or in trying to reach out to the group in the face of the pandemic and the high trauma load.

The reflective groups also served as trainings for empowering staff and supported empathetic contact with this target group, the members of which are highly depressive, aggressive, and lack perspective.

2.2. Needs assessment study

The needs assessment study was developed on the background of not receiving official, comprehensive government data on children recruited by ISIS. There is unofficial knowledge that the KRI government holds statistical data about former CAAFAG which it doesn't share. As Jiyan Foundation has not been successful in retrieving numbers as planned through governmental institutions, the needs assessment study had to rely on the information of other stakeholders. The methodology included literature analysis, interviews and discussion groups with key informants and mind-mapping findings.

2.2.1 Case studies

Assessed cases were male former ISIS CAAFAG of the Yazidi community introduced to Jiyan's women's clinic in Chamchamal, when their mother's received support. The following behavioral patterns were described:

- threatening and disrespectful behavior towards women;
- playing war games;
- disruptive, aggressive behavior;
- withdrawal, shyness, lack of eye contact;
- enuresis, hyperactivity and sleeping problems;
- fear of stigma, denying problems.

Staff at the all-female staff run women's clinic reported the lack of possibilities to support male children who had been abducted by ISIS.⁴ However, it was also reported that some Yazidi children opened up after some time and accepted to have appointments with female staff, too.

4 It was understood that boys indoctrinated by ISIS men didn't accept speaking to female staff in the beginning.

2.3. Online documentation survey

The online documentation survey on CAAFAG youth is available via this link:

<https://ee.humanitarianresponse.info/x/yEuCilzY>.

Translations are available in Kurdish (Kurmanji) and Arabic. Instructions to enter and share the study are available in English, Arabic, and Kurdish (Kurmanji). 20 Jiyan staff in Duhok, Kirkuk, Alqosh and Mosul (Nineveh) were trained on the documentation system, although interventions did not take place in Alqosh and Mosul at the time. The scientific evaluation was done in cooperation with the International Psychoanalytic University of Berlin/Germany. The available data is presented in section 5.

2.4 Development of deradicalization and rehabilitation concept

The identified needs of former CAAFAG and necessary (therapeutic) approaches are the cornerstones of a deradicalization and rehabilitation concept (DeRaRe). It includes necessary elements of capacity building including necessary topics which ought to be understood by staff in contact with CAAFAG (elements of a curriculum).

In short, it consists of the following elements:

- (a) specialized support for former CAAFAG including specific psycho-social and medical support, activity groups, individual and group sessions, as well as family therapy;
- (b) paving ways into reentering the educational system and employment such as specific support to enter vocational training or providing possibilities for vocational training with the aim that CAAFAG can develop a future other than seeking to be re-recruited by militarized groups;
- (c) legal support (issuing official documents, legal defense in case of accusations);
- (d) conduct advocacy to influence the legal and political framework (incl. position paper with the clear message: Persons that were minors (below 18 years of age) at the time of ISIS-affiliation and/or (alleged) criminal actions cannot be held accountable, including CAAFAG);
- (e) lobbying (low profile, direct communication) and awareness-raising for the decriminalization of (former) CAAFAG and the needs of war-traumatized youth;
- (f) capacity building: Continue biweekly reflective

groups for training and supervision purposes as well as intensified multi-day training.

A list of existing deradicalization programs currently in place across the world, that cater to children and adults was developed and is available upon request. Program information was considered when developing the basic columns of the deradicalization and reintegration program.

3. Difficulties and shortages

3.1. Lack of contact with beneficiaries

Altogether, few clients could be reached out to during the pilot MHPSS project phase, which started with the initiation of the Joint Reflective Practice Group. The training sought to prepare staff to reach out to former CAAFAG in the designated areas (Khanke camp in the Duhok area and Laylan camp in the Kirkuk area).

The most important reasons for lack of contact with beneficiaries are outlined below.

3.1.1 Restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic

The restrictions due to the pandemic, especially before vaccination was available in Kurdistan in spring 2021, were severe. Reducing contact did not only restrict outreach in camps, orphanages, youth detention facilities and other places of contact, but it also made contact among staff difficult to exchange for the coordination of efforts. The extreme level of insecurity caused by the pandemic added to the political insecurity, which Jiyan staff and the population of the KRI and Iraq have to bear in general. Jiyan believes that the heightened fear in Kurdistan and Iraq due to the pandemic has also increased reluctance among staff to reach out to this militarily trained group of children that is difficult to reach out to anyway (see below).

Also, the in-person trainings could not take place as planned. Instead, the program adjusted to regular Zoom meetings and relied very much on this adaptation for maintaining contact, study progress, and staff motivation.

3.1.2. Closing of camps

At the end of 2020, just when Jiyan applied for permission to reach out to further IDP families in Laylan camp (Kirkuk) for offering interventions to Sunni Arab children under the umbrella of general services in the camps, Laylan camp was closed in December 2020 and did not reopen. Khanke camp was only temporarily closed, but it was difficult to regain access for therapeutic staff in the first half of 2021.

New strategies of reaching out both to Yazidi as well as to non-Yazidi former CAAFAG were developed but

did not prove successful due to different reasons. Jiyan’s Kirkuk juvenile prison team was denied entry on a regular basis and if sessions were conducted, prison guards continuously disrupted these. Jiyan staff in Duhok found it difficult to get access to the beneficiaries at all and this target group did not visit the center for help.

3.1.3. Attitudes towards CAAFAG

Overall, this study found that the attitude towards CAAFAG is characterized by prejudice and stigmatization. The training and supervision group revealed, even among therapists, the belief that Sunni Arab children had a distinct choice to join ISIS. Therefore, Sunni Arab children are – in contrast to Yazidi children, who were abducted by ISIS – perceived as having joined voluntarily.

However, as it is known today, ISIS lured children in, using systematic grooming techniques. This had to be discussed in the supervision groups, as this is the basis for working with CAAFAG as victims of indoctrination and so forth. Otherwise, they will continue to be perceived as perpetrators. Although, over time, attitudes and fear of contact with CAAFAG changed, a reluctance to meet these children, who are aggressive, who deny the cultural values of their parents, etc., is present and further training and supervision to emotionally embed the gained knowledge is necessary. Otherwise, therapists and other staff will not be able to get into a trustful contact with beneficiaries. This topic is currently being further explored by students of the IPU Berlin in cooperation with Jiyan.

3.1.4. Issue of security

The general security situation, particularly in the Kirkuk area, and the common mistrust among the population due to ongoing political tensions in the region, made reaching out and inquiry with politicians, etc. impossible. Jiyan experienced that trying to reach out to and even inquiring about these children put staff as well as the Jiyan Foundation as an organization at risk of being accused of supporting ISIS, especially in Mosul and Kirkuk, where Sunni Arab CAAFAG live.

3.2. Difficulties in capacity building and management

Finding a local coordinator who was trained and experienced enough to coordinate endeavors and to meet the required capacity-building needs proved difficult. Reasons overlap with the reasons mentioned above: fear of staff regarding COVID-19 infection (lockdowns), security issues, and prejudices/perception of CAAFAG as perpetrators rather than victims. As in-person trainings were not possible, the requirements for an intense discussion could not be fully met.

3.3. Advocacy – lack of contact with officials and responses by other actors

Jiyan learned that elaborate advocacy endeavors were not possible at the time when the study was conducted. Planned cooperation with further organizations were halted, probably because the issue was too politically sensitive at the time. Reasons for the halt were not provided. Overall, it was found that, while now at the end of the study phase more politicians and ministries are officially responsible for the Yazidi CAAFAG file and therefore more open to talk about their situation, bringing up the topic of supporting CAAFAG among political decision-makers was too dangerous, as Jiyan feared to be perceived as supporting ISIS.

4. Results of the online survey

The following analysis only applies to the data of the online survey. At this point, 14 cases have been documented by Jiyan staff as best as they knew of their clients, whom they did not see more often than 3-4 times at this point. Staff documented contacts took place between February and November 2021

4.1. Sociodemographic data

The age average of the 14 cases was 14 years, the youngest being 11 today. 11 cases were male, two of them Yazidi, as well as three Yazidi females. Eight cases were documented in Kirkuk (detention facilities), three from Sinjar (Nineveh), and one from the Nineveh area. 13 cases don't have access to a mobile phone and are fully dependent on their families or in prison and fully rely on the institution or food support, incl. from their parents. Eight are said to be able to read and write, but left school without graduation; for the remaining six cases, such information is not available.

4.2. Time with ISIS and traumatic experiences

On average, children were about eight years old when they were brought into ISIS, Yazidi children being younger. One Yazidi girl was abducted when she was only two years old. The oldest one being a Sunni Arab boy (still imprisoned), who was 14 years old, when he was lured into ISIS. On average, children were with ISIS for 2-4 years. Among Sunni Arab youth in prison all are reported to have joined “voluntarily” (as described by staff), due to ideological reasons or desired social status, one was said to be pressured by family members. All Yazidi children were forcefully abducted by ISIS. All cases have gone through ISIS run schooling / religious training or it is not known (n=4). Little is known about training at further military camps, etc.

As far as Jiyan therapists learned, seven cases are said to have gone through brainwashing and indoctrination, six were isolated from family, five witnessed violence, torture, etc. of family members, four Yazidis were forced to convert to Islam, three were forced to express dehumanizing behavior, three were shown videos of beheadings, torture, etc., three given a new name and denied speaking in their mother tongue, one witnessed beheadings, for one case no such information was available. None reported to having actively participated in

beheadings, torture, etc. Most Yazidi children were able to run away, Sunni Arab children were captured or freed by national forces. Four are said to still follow ISIS ideology (category “rather yes”), but to maintain no known contact with combatants.

The reports of traumatic experiences were found to be inconsistent and can therefore not be fully reported on at this point. However, it can be said that few cases are reported to having been forced to conduct extreme forms of violence themselves, but instead witnessed violence against others or experienced beatings and extremely poor living conditions, with lack of food and water and situations which are known to be perceived as threats to life in a context of war.

Overall, a minimum of seven and a maximum of 24 traumatic events have been reported per case. No rape has been reported, nor has military involvement. However, this might be attributed to the fact that Yazidi children (and especially girls) were not forced into armed service and that Sunni Arab boys in detention probably would not share any such involvement during their contact in prison for fear of retribution. This is reflected in the therapists' assessment of the reliability of clients' shared information: On average, client's information about themselves is perceived as mostly true, with more doubt regarding information from Sunni Arab youth in detention. These children are said to open up less to therapists in general due to fear of never being released from prison, as also therapists report that their sessions are being repeatedly interrupted by prison staff.

4.3. Symptoms and outlook regarding (need for) therapy

For most of their clients, Jiyan therapists reported anxieties, depression (and withdrawal) and some are reported to show aggressive behavior (against themselves or others). Three spoke about killing themselves. Overall, Yazidi children are reported to show more internalizing problems and problems

in general (sleep disorder, anxiety, concentration problems, aggressiveness incl. aggressiveness with family members), while Sunni Arab children in prison are reported to show more externalizing problems. The Sunni Arab boys in prison are reported not to have many psychological problems at all. This finding could reflect that children either don't confide in therapists in prison or that they actually psychologically over-adapt.

Children are described to have an overall burden of 40-60 in a range from 0-100 with 0-20 indicating a healthy life and supportive surrounding and 100 indicating extreme burden and being fully reliant on the help of others. Children in prison are reported to have less burden as they live in an institution. However, this impression of the children may have to do with not confiding in staff under the observed circumstances as well as a misunderstanding of the question by therapists.

Most Jiyan therapists describe a great need for individual and group therapy, as well as schooling or need for sheltered housing among Sunni Arab youth, mostly. Some children are described to not having an idea about how therapy sessions could serve them as they state to not have any problems (Sunni Arab children in detention centers).

4.4. Discussion and limitations of the online survey

The analysis of data has shown that more training is needed regarding the answering of the questions of the online survey as some data give the impression that the questions were not understood fully, despite the translations available, which is of concern. This applies to the answering of the section on traumatic events, as well as global assessment of the child's overall burden. Due to the small number of cases documented at this point, little can be said about a more general situation of CAAFAG.

But the cases documented do provide a glimpse at the burden and great need of psychological support. Jiyan staff reported less psychological burden for Sunni Arab children in detention facilities than for Yazidi youth. This may have to do with the fact, that children in detention centers over-adapt more and therefore show less signs of distress but instead deny having problems. As the experience of Yazidi youth is

more accepted and they are being perceived as being victims/survivors (as opposed to the perception of Sunni Arab former CAAFAG) – although they are also reported to experience stigma and bullying by other children – it seems as if they can dare to show more psychological burden and symptoms. The experiences of the cases documented, including indoctrination, witnessing and experience of violence including constant threat to their lives, if they do not obey to ISIS rules and regulations, suggest a great need for reintegration services to prevent re-enlistment and re-recruitment by militarized groups, especially if youth don't receive any schooling or training that will allow them to provide for themselves as adults.

5. Lessons learned

5.1. Former ISIS CAAFAG in need for services

Despite a growing body of reports on the needs of former CAAFAG in KRI – mostly on Yazidi youth – no official number or list exists for children formerly involved with ISIS. Overall, a number of 20,000 children are being said to have been abducted or lured into ISIS activities and abused in different capacities (cf. Horgan, 2017).

5.1.1. Situation and needs of Yazidi CAAFAG

It is estimated that approx. 1,400 Yazidi children were forcibly associated with ISIS (HRW, 2019) during its rule and oral reports exist of attempts to re-recruit youth into other militias in Northern Iraq. As it has been described previously (Amnesty International, 2020, Kizilhan & Noll-Hussong, 2018, Langer & Ahmad, 2019, SEED Foundation, 2020), this study confirms that Yazidi CAAFAG show high levels of psychological burden: aggressiveness against themselves and others (incl. suicidality), depression and anxiety. Preliminary data of the online survey suggests that they display more symptoms in comparison to Arab Sunni boys in detention facilities, but this can only serve as a hypothesis at this point due to the limitations of this study, esp. the low number of cases.

Findings from interviews and reports from Jiyan therapists during the joint reflective practice groups are in line with reports from SEED (2020) and others, who stress that the need for support of the affected children’s families is persistent and has been neglected. Particularly children whose parents died are reported to hold on to ISIS ideology and the identity they have formed with ISIS. They live with distant relatives, who often struggle to support them, i.e., help them to deal with their losses, while at the same time dealing their own losses and traumatic experiences such as destruction of their homes and loss of close relatives. Most Yazidi CAAFAG live in camps near Duhok, in Sinjar, and in Niniveh. Among the camps are Essiyan, Mam Rashan, Baadry, Quadia, Bersive (1 and 2), Shariya, Kaberto (1 and 2), Chammishko, Dawdy, and Khanke.

5.1.2. Situation and needs of Sunni Arab CAAFAG

Unfortunately, only contacts with detained Sunni Arab youth could be documented for this study. It was not possible to reach out to Sunni Arab children in IDP camps, due to the reasons mentioned above (i.e., the closing of camp, security issues). In Duhok, all imprisoned CAAFAG (except supposedly one; as of 2020) were released from the juvenile detention centers in 2020 and moved to camps in the Nineveh and Kirkuk areas, where some activities with CAAFAG minors have taken place initiated by other non-governmental organizations.

It is estimated that approx. 1,500 Sunni Arab boys are currently charged of being part of ISIS (Human Rights Watch, 2019) and held in juvenile detention centers such as in Kirkuk, Baghdad, and possibly Mosul. In Mosul, former CAAFAG are assumed to be living in camps such as Hammam al-Alil, Salamia and Quayara. However, no encounters were able to take place there either, due to security issues or fear of Jiyan to being accused of ISIS affiliation. This would have detrimental effects on the Jiyan center in Mosul, where ISIS still hold some influence. Near Erbil, in Dibaga IDP camp, terre des hommes were said to actively work with CAAFAG, but also here no further information was retrievable.⁵ Other Sunni Arab youth are hiding with their parents or live in the streets, as Jiyan staff found in Kirkuk, especially after the closing of Laylan IDP camps (1 and 2), where it was estimated that approx. 50 former CAAFAG had lived with their mothers and families. When camps closed, some of the parents – mostly mothers – returned to their hometowns such as Mosul, but had to leave their children behind because they would face legal prosecution if caught when passing checkpoints. Overall, it can be said that the Sunni Arab former CAAFAG situation is more complex and that they are at greater risk due to not being able to (re-)integrate into society, but instead are at risk to be re-recruited by military organizations. It is hypothesized here that Sunni Arab children and youth only show less symptoms and stress disorder because, in comparison with Yazidi children, they were not required to forgo

5 Reaching out to other NGOs for cooperation was found to still be causing questions and mistrust. Open dialogue and cooperation were difficult to establish, and Jiyan decided to focus on cooperation with Yazda.

their families and religious identities. This is also suggested by the “collective stories”⁶ of Sunni Arab boys, collected by Langer & Ahmad (2019), that were discussed during the reflective practice groups. (Detained) Sunni Arab youth, who took part in the study, shared how ashamed they are of having been seduced by the outlook of higher social status and financial means as promised by ISIS.

However, against the background of knowledge about children’s abuse, their possibly greater assimilation to the abuse and the day-to-day threats they faced during indoctrination and training as CAAFAG, gives reason for greater concern, and stresses the need for a more intense intervention. Children who were abused and indoctrinated to a greater extent and for a longer period of time, especially during developmental phases crucial to the formation of their identity, need more in-depth and long-term interventions, which allow them to develop a different sense of self, with a real perspective for their lives.

5.2. Effects of perception of CAAFAG on capacity building and advocacy

The hypothesis was confirmed that there is a need for change in the perception of former CAAFAG – from seeing them as a threat to considering them as individuals who need to be protected and who urgently need services. The bi-weekly reflective practice groups made it very clear (see section 3.1.3) that even among staff elaborate defense mechanisms – such as ‘identification with the aggressor’ and ‘denial’ – prevail, which serve as a protection against realizing the enormous traumatization and abuse these children have experienced. Labelling especially Sunni Arab children as the “bad child soldiers” who “voluntarily” joined ISIS, was found to serve – even for trained therapeutic Jiyan staff – as grounds for not “having to empathize” with children recruited by military groups, protecting themselves from realizing that perhaps even their own children could have been groomed by ISIS under different circumstances. Training and continuous supervision for staff is therefore essential if the aim is to offer affected youth rehumanizing contact which will allow them

to mourn their losses, including the loss of the “safe” ISIS structures and the social status they had possibly gained. Only when youth are given the chance to mourn their losses will they find the capacity to reintegrate into their community, not feeling stigmatized, and then to develop a perspective for their future.

It was difficult to identify staff that wanted to work with the affected children because of the found prejudices. As described by Langer & Ahmed (2019) and as aimed at by Jiyan, having a political framework as well as an advocacy and campaigning strategy is the foundation for therapeutic efforts. Only when therapeutic staff find their work accepted and supported by the society they serve (cf. section 4.3), interventions will be effective. Overall, Jiyan believes that a great effort must be made to get CAAFAG out of the shadow of stigmatization, which puts so much stress on them (cf. the most recent guidelines and literature review by UNICEF, 2022). Jiyan Foundation’s findings and experience in the field of cooperation regarding the reparation efforts of Yazidi women (in the Coalition for Just Reparations, C4JR) shows that this effort can only be successful when a critical number of NGOs based in the KRI and Iraq are brought together to continue what has been initiated by the roundtables on the topic by the German Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the IPU Berlin, which could not be continued due to the COVID-19 pandemic during the study phase. Jiyan’s cooperation with Yazda and the IPU remains strong and consists the basis for future initiatives.

5.3. Essentials for any reintegration program for former ISIS CAAFAG

Overall, it was found that at this point separate and specialized approaches must be developed for Sunni Arab CAAFAG on the one hand and for Yazidi former CAAFAG on the other. Jiyan therapists believe that for Sunni Arab children a center where they can live and learn could be an effective intervention, especially for abandoned children. However, this is not believed to serve well for Yazidi children who were abducted and only just returned to family members, even if distant.

6 Collective storytelling refers to a participatory method, developed by Langer & Ahmad for this context, where groups of three to five children that had been affiliated with ISIS come together to jointly develop a story, with professional facilitation, around a fictional character of an ISIS child soldier that begins prior to ISIS, follows the character through his ISIS time into the present, with a brief outlook to his possible future.

Here, the support of family members is of utmost importance as this will have the most influence on the child’s reintegration, the lessening of distress due to stigmatization, and the facilitation of discussion within the communities. In this regard, group sessions for siblings and caretakers of former CAAFAG are to be established.

It was stressed in all talks with experts that there is not only the great need to offering opportunities for (psychosocial) health development and life in the community, as well as advocacy and lobbying (see section 3.5), but also the necessity to place former CAAFAG in schools or to provide vocational training that can lead to jobs and financial conditions that mitigate against re-enlistment or re-recruitment into military groups. The basis for this, however, lies in well-trained and highly motivated staff, who dedicate their work to the idea that these children deserve all their empathy, and who share the understanding that the children were exactly that at the time: children. They are not to be seen independently of the political situation they have been living in, but as vulnerable minors who can easily be seduced – especially at the beginning of adolescence, when peers and other surroundings become more important than parents as part of the natural separation and individuation process that is initiated at this point in their development. The beneficiaries proved to be extremely difficult to reach out to, therefore staff has got to step down from the approach that clients from this group seek support at the centers and instead develop outreach interventions. This can serve as an entry point for a trustworthy relationship that can be developed into long-term counselling of these children.

6. The way forward – Recommendations

Future efforts in the field should consider and focus on:

- (1) **Outreach work** with a multi-layered strategy to find **entry points** into gaining trust of the (potential) clients. This may include any activity of interest for former CAAFAG who do not want to be perceived as children anymore – a common mistake of initiatives addressing former CAAFAG (cf. UNICEF, 2022).⁷ Activities could include basic IT training or access to media (education). An inquiry among the to-be-beneficiaries as well as their current people of contact in the field (caretakers, counselors, camp managers) should take place to validate interest in the activities to be offered;
- (2) Aiming at **long-term counselling** of individuals and their families with a minimum of 12-18 months, if not longer;
- (3) **Individual interventions** tailored to suit the case and living situation of child or youth. Each case must be treated with a high sensitivity for individual solutions and strategies as well as **resilience** that proved helpful to stabilizing the individual child until the beginning of any intervention. Interventions may include psycho-social and medical support, activity groups, individual and group sessions, and must consider that having been freed from ISIS is also often accompanied by loss of attachment figures at the time, power, and social status, and what was perceived as stability at the time. Literature on long-term abuse of children and their grooming must be studied by therapeutic staff;
- (4) **Relatives** including siblings must be addressed and supported according to the needs of the family; supportive **groups for relatives** may serve as an effective means, which could facilitate acceptance within the community as well **reduce stigmatization**;
- (5) Paving ways into **reentering the educational system** and employment such as specific support to enter **vocational training** or providing possibilities for vocational training to mitigate against re-enlistment or re-recruitment from military groups;
- (6) **Legal support** (issuing official documents, legal defense in case of accusations) for Sunni Arab children⁸;
- (7) Applying a **stigma reduction approach** (STRETCH) as suggested in most recent reviews of interventions by UNICEF (2022) is one of the most important strategies as stigmatization, such as being perceived as dangerous, can result in further withdrawal of former CAAFAG with further disintegration. This can ultimately lead to leaving the society and possible re-enlistment as acts of desperation in search of a place where they feel a sense of “belonging”;
- (8) Working therapeutically with former CAAFAG is one of the greatest challenges for psychotherapists. Therefore, **continuous training and supervision** is of utter importance. A curriculum should consist of several topics but should be applied flexibly according to the needs of staff. Biweekly reflective groups for training and supervision serve the purpose well to offer continuity in dealing with this strenuous topic. Multi-day intensive trainings should be offered also for a more in-depth confrontation with the topic;
- (9) Capacity building should **take into account cultural, social, and contextual factors** as well as any religious or spiritual traditions to better understand the situation of the children and to facilitate reintegration and rehabilitation;
- (10) To provide effective support for **detained former CAAFAG** a program must be developed which addresses guards and officials to establish grounds for undisturbed work in the detention facilities;
- (11) Conduct **advocacy** to influence the legal and political framework (incl. position paper with the clear message: Minors below 18 cannot be held

⁷ Unicef (2022) states that a common mistake in interventions is to infantilize and over-protect former CAAFAG in post-conflict situations. Yazidi adolescents also stated that they do not wish to be treated as children, when they had, for example, a wife and status during their time with ISIS.

⁸ Yazidi former CAAFAG do not face the same legal problems. In their case there is no official doubt that they were forced to join ISIS, therefore they are not criminalized but returned to their communities.

accountable for criminal actions, including former CAAFAG);

(12) **Lobbying** (low profile, direct communication) and **awareness-raising** for the decriminalization of former CAAFAG;

(13) For an effective lobbying and campaigning, **cooperation with other organizations** is of need.

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“ After all,
they were
only children ... ”