

**Growing alarm as Terrorist  
exploitation of children rapidly evolves,  
outpacing Member State responses**



United Nations Security Council  
Counter-Terrorism Committee  
Executive Directorate (CTED)

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## OVERVIEW

This Trends Alert was prepared by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) in accordance with Security Council resolution 2617 (2021). In that resolution, the Council reaffirms the essential role of CTED within the United Nations to identify and assess issues, trends and developments relating to the implementation of resolutions 1373 (2001), 1624 (2005), 2178 (2014), 2396 (2017) and other relevant resolutions.

CTED Trends Alerts are designed to increase awareness, both within the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee and among United Nations agencies and policymakers, of emerging trends identified through CTED's engagement with Member States on their implementation of the relevant Council resolutions. The Alerts also include relevant evidence-based research conducted by members of the CTED Global Research Network and other researchers.

## INTRODUCTION

The exploitation of children through recruitment, use, and association by terrorist organizations is a complex challenge for Member States. Thousands of children worldwide have been subjected to exploitative practices by terrorist groups.<sup>1</sup> These children are subjected to multiple forms of physical and psychological harm, including torture and sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup> Children's roles within terrorist groups vary significantly, with their experiences regularly characterized by violence. Children are exploited as fighters, suicide bombers, informants, and in supporting roles providing services such as cooking, cleaning and carrying supplies, yet many cases remain undetected by authorities.<sup>3</sup> Many children, especially girls, are subjected to various forms of sexual violence. The exploitation of children by terrorist groups extends across various regions and requires comprehensive responses that range from prevention to rehabilitation and reintegration.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Strive Juvenile, *Child Recruitment, Exploitation and Reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria*, (Geneva, 2024). Available at [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/justice-and-prison-reform/strive/targeted-by-terrorists-child-recruitment-exploitation-and-reintegration-in-indonesia-iraq-and-nigeria.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/justice-and-prison-reform/strive/targeted-by-terrorists-child-recruitment-exploitation-and-reintegration-in-indonesia-iraq-and-nigeria.html).

<sup>2</sup> UNODC, "Children associated with terrorism." Available at [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism/expertise/children-associated-with-terrorism.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism/expertise/children-associated-with-terrorism.html).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, *Report on Children and Counter-Terrorism*, (Italy, 2016). Available at <https://unicri.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/Report%20on%20Children%20and%20Counter-Terrorism.pdf>; Save the Children, "Invisible wounds: the impact of six years of war on the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of children in Syria", 2017; and Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, "Who will care for us? How the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the child recruitment crisis", 2020.

## TRENDS ALERT

CTED has been alerted by Member States to their increasing concern about the accelerating exploitation of children by terrorist groups around the world – including terrorists’ sophisticated online recruitment strategies targeting children. Member States have also raised concerns about the challenges in responding to this phenomenon.

### (I) OVERVIEW AND TREND ANALYSIS

The global scale of grave violations against children in armed conflict has reached unprecedented levels, with 41,370 grave violations against 22,495 children in 2024, the highest number since the United Nations mandate on children and armed conflict began almost 30 years ago.<sup>4</sup> This is a 25 per cent increase from 2023’s already record-breaking 32,990 violations against 22,557 children, marking the third consecutive year of alarming increases.<sup>5</sup> Non-State armed groups, including armed groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United Nations, were responsible for approximately half of all recorded abuses of children documented by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in his 2024 annual report on children and armed conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Terrorists’ sophisticated recruitment strategies represent an urgent challenge for Member States from a security and a child protection perspective.

While youth aged 15–25 represent the primary target demographic across all terrorist ideologies, recruitment has been documented in children as young as 8–9 years old. In Europe and North America, children account for 42 per cent of terror-related investigations – a threefold increase since 2021.<sup>7</sup>

Terrorist networks have developed intricate systems for targeting children that combine traditional physical methods with increasingly advanced digital methods, creating recruitment ecosystems that exploit multiple vulnerabilities simultaneously. Terrorist groups have developed systematic, gender-differentiated recruitment strategies, based

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<sup>4</sup> UN News, “‘We are at a point of no return’: Grave violations against children surge for third year”, 20 June 2025. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164646>.

<sup>5</sup> Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, “22,495 haunting cries: children affected by conflict endured an unconscionable number of grave violations in 2024”, 19 June 2025. Available at <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2025/06/22495-haunting-cries-children-affected-by-conflict-endured-an-unconscionable-number-of-grave-violations-in-2024/>.

<sup>6</sup> Jo Becker (Human Rights Watch), “Violations soar against children in armed conflict”, 20 June 2025. Available at [www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/20/violations-soar-against-children-in-armed-conflict](http://www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/20/violations-soar-against-children-in-armed-conflict).

<sup>7</sup> Vision of Humanity, “Youth radicalisation: a new frontier in terrorism and security”, 20 March 2025. Available at [www.visionofhumanity.org/youth-radicalisation-a-new-frontier-in-terrorism-and-security/](http://www.visionofhumanity.org/youth-radicalisation-a-new-frontier-in-terrorism-and-security/).

on demographic analysis and psychological profiling, such as “masculine crisis narratives” for boys or targeting girls through messaging centred on family roles and religious purification.<sup>8</sup> Recent analysis indicates that youth recruitment and indoctrination by terrorist groups are evolving rapidly and, in some cases, are fuelled by technological advancements, ideological fragmentation, and sociopolitical instability.<sup>9</sup>

### a. Online recruitment strategies

Digital recruitment introduced a paradigm shift in terrorist methodology, enabling efficient global reach with low operational costs. The rise of the Internet and social media transformed how terrorist groups recruit and influence young people; they no longer rely solely on physical networks but operate within digital spaces, reaching potential recruits through online forums, encrypted messaging apps and gaming platforms, while algorithms on social media platforms reinforce certain ideologies by creating echo chambers where their views are normalized.<sup>10</sup>

Terrorist groups across the ideological spectrum employ sophisticated “funnel strategies” that guide potential recruits from mainstream platforms through increasingly extreme content channels. Groups begin recruitment on easily accessible platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and/or TikTok and gradually move users to encrypted messaging apps like Telegram, Signal and Wire as commitment deepens.<sup>11</sup> This approach has been documented among various groups, including Da’esh, terrorist groups based on xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief (XRIRB), and other violent movements. These tactical connections appear to result from adaptation to common operational challenges, such as evading content moderation, as well as cross-group learning, where successful recruitment methods spread across ideological boundaries due to their effectiveness.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> UNODC, *Targeted by Terrorists: Child Recruitment, Exploitation and Reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria*, (Geneva, 2024). Available at [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/justice-and-prison-reform/strive/targeted-by-terrorists\\_-child-recruitment--exploitation-and-reintegration-in-indonesia-iraq-and-nigeria.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/justice-and-prison-reform/strive/targeted-by-terrorists_-child-recruitment--exploitation-and-reintegration-in-indonesia-iraq-and-nigeria.html).

<sup>9</sup> Vision of Humanity, “Youth radicalisation: a new frontier in terrorism and security”, 20 March 2025. [www.visionofhumanity.org/youth-radicalisation-a-new-frontier-in-terrorism-and-security/](http://www.visionofhumanity.org/youth-radicalisation-a-new-frontier-in-terrorism-and-security/).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Mariam Shah, Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), “The digital weaponry of radicalisation: AI and the recruitment nexus”, 4 July 2024. Available at <https://gnet-research.org/2024/07/04/the-digital-weaponry-of-radicalisation-ai-and-the-recruitment-nexus/>.

<sup>12</sup> Friederike Wegener, GNET, “Striking similarities between Islamist terrorism and violent right-wing extremism”, 18 September 2020. Available at <https://gnet-research.org/2020/09/18/striking-similarities-between-islamist-terrorism-and-violent-right-wing-extremism/>; Jacob Ware, Program on Extremism, George Washington University, “The Third Generation of Online Radicalization” (June 2023). Available at <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/2023-06/third-generation-final.pdf>.

Terrorist recruitment has also targeted youth through gaming environments, with many groups designing extremist-themed first-person shooter games, “modding”<sup>13</sup> existing games to insert violent messaging and using in-game chat functions for recruitment conversations.<sup>14</sup> A recent report identified systematic exploitation across Discord, Steam, Roblox, Fortnite and Xbox Live platforms, with recruiters exploiting these spaces where young people spend significant time and form social connections.<sup>15</sup> XRIRB groups have been particularly active in gaming spaces, using memes, jokes and gradual ideological exposure to normalize their viewpoints among teenage users.<sup>16</sup>

XRIRB groups have pioneered a “youth-on-youth” recruitment model where teenage conscripts actively recruit their peers, making detection more difficult for authorities and parents.<sup>17</sup> This peer-to-peer approach exploits adolescent social dynamics and has been increasingly adopted by other ideological movements, creating recruitment networks that operate within schools, youth organizations and online communities.<sup>18</sup>

## b. Traditional recruitment methods

Despite digital innovations, traditional physical recruitment methods remain central to terrorist operations. Abduction continues to be a primary recruitment strategy targeting children in conflict zones, with Boko Haram’s routine kidnappings of schoolchildren in Nigeria exemplifying the scale of forced recruitment.<sup>19</sup> In regions affected by conflict, weak governance, and socioeconomic instability, youth recruitment is particularly noticeable, with groups such as Da’esh and Al-Qaida and their affiliates focusing on indoctrinating young people in these areas, capitalizing on the absence of strong institutions and social safety nets.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Modding refers to the practice of modifying existing video games, software or hardware by users or third-party developers to alter functionality, add new features, or change content.

<sup>14</sup> Makenzi Taylor (Global Affairs Review, Centre for Global Affairs, New York University), “ISIS recruitment of youth via social media”, 2 February 2020. Available at [https://wp.nyu.edu/schoolofprofessionalstudies-ga\\_review/isis-recruitment-of-youth-via-social-media/](https://wp.nyu.edu/schoolofprofessionalstudies-ga_review/isis-recruitment-of-youth-via-social-media/).

<sup>15</sup> United States of America, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, National Counterterrorism Centre, “Terrorist exploitation of online gaming platforms”, First Responders Toolbox, 2023. Available at [www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/144s\\_-\\_First\\_Responders\\_Toolbox\\_-\\_Terrorist\\_Exploitation\\_of\\_Online\\_Gaming\\_Platforms.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/144s_-_First_Responders_Toolbox_-_Terrorist_Exploitation_of_Online_Gaming_Platforms.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Mariam Shah, GNET, “The digital weaponry of radicalisation: AI and the recruitment nexus”, 4 July 2024. Available at <https://gnet-research.org/2024/07/04/the-digital-weaponry-of-radicalisation-ai-and-the-recruitment-nexus/>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Dayana Rizal (MustShareNews), “Youth radicalisation a ‘growing concern’ in S’pore, AI & the internet used as tools for terrorism: MHA”, 30 July 2025. Available at <https://mustsharenews.com/youth-radicalisation-mha/>.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), “The state of Nigeria’s children 2024”, 2024. Available at [www.unicef.org/nigeria/reports/updated-situation-analysis-nigeria-2024](http://www.unicef.org/nigeria/reports/updated-situation-analysis-nigeria-2024).

<sup>20</sup> Vision of Humanity, “Youth radicalisation: a new frontier in terrorism and security”, 20 March 2025. [www.visionofhumanity.org/youth-radicalisation-a-new-frontier-in-terrorism-and-security/](http://www.visionofhumanity.org/youth-radicalisation-a-new-frontier-in-terrorism-and-security/).

Al-Shabaab's recruitment patterns in Somalia indicate its extensive exploitation of children. Children represent a significant number of Al-Shabaab's new recruits, drawn in through abduction and forced recruitment, indoctrination and taxation of their families. Al-Shabaab reportedly abducts children as young as 3 years old, with boys joining combat training from the age of 13, while younger children are indoctrinated in schools set up by the group.<sup>21</sup> Al-Shabaab is ranked as the biggest perpetrator in recorded incidents of recruitment and use of children (902 of a total of 1,094 children were recruited and used by Al-Shabaab), and abduction of children (663 out of 696 reported child abductions (in Somalia) were by Al-Shabaab).<sup>22</sup>

Terrorist organizations further exploit governance gaps by providing essential services, including healthcare, education, financial assistance and conflict resolution in areas where government services are inadequate or absent.<sup>23</sup> This service provision creates dependency relationships and community legitimacy that facilitates recruitment, particularly among youth whose families benefit from these essential services and who may feel obligated to support the groups that provide them.<sup>24</sup> Thus, by positioning themselves as alternative governance providers, terrorist groups create environments where joining the organization appears as both a rational choice and a social obligation rather than coercion.

### c. Trafficking in persons

CTED's research flagged that human trafficking has been increasingly attractive to terrorist entities, with trafficking central to the operations of groups such as Da'esh, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab.<sup>25</sup> Human trafficking linked to terrorist groups has important age and gender dimensions, and the intersection between human trafficking in children and terrorist recruitment represents a particularly concerning trend that exploits existing vulnerabilities in child protection systems. Women, men, girls, and boys may be targeted and exploited differently by terrorist groups and for a variety of exploitative purposes

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<sup>21</sup> Security Council, Letter dated 15 October 2024 from the Panel of Experts on Somalia addressed to the President of the Security Council, (S/2024/748), paras. 192–196.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Dounia Bouzar and Carol Rollie Flynn, Foreign Policy Research Institute, "ISIS recruiting: it's not (just) ideological", 5 September 2017. Available at [www.fpri.org/article/2017/09/isis-recruiting-not-just-ideological/](http://www.fpri.org/article/2017/09/isis-recruiting-not-just-ideological/).

<sup>24</sup> Mercy Corps, "Motivations and empty promises: voices of Former Boko Haram combatants and Nigerian youth", April 2016. Available at [www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/boko-haram-nigerian](http://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/boko-haram-nigerian).

<sup>25</sup> CTED, "Identifying and exploring the nexus between human trafficking, terrorism, and terrorism financing", 2019. Available at [www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/content/identifying-and-exploring-nexus-between-human-trafficking-terrorism-and-terrorism-financing](http://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/content/identifying-and-exploring-nexus-between-human-trafficking-terrorism-and-terrorism-financing).

recognized in the definition of trafficking, including for the purposes of sexual exploitation and forced labour.<sup>26</sup>

The operational methods through which terrorist groups exploit trafficking networks reveal sophisticated systems that blur traditional distinctions between criminal and security threats. Terrorist organizations have developed trafficking operations that serve multiple functions: generating revenue through exploitation of trafficked persons; creating dependency relationships with local populations; and establishing recruitment pipelines that target individuals in vulnerable situations.<sup>27</sup> These integrated operations allow for situations where children experience overlapping victimization through both trafficking and terrorist recruitment processes, pointing to legal and protection challenges with which many Member States are struggling.

Counter-terrorism approaches often fail to recognize trafficked children as victims, while anti-trafficking efforts may inadequately address the security implications of children coerced into terrorist activities.<sup>28</sup>

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for Children and Armed Conflict, in close collaboration with the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, have emphasized the need for integrated approaches that simultaneously address the prevention of trafficking and terrorist recruitment while prioritizing child protection and rehabilitation.<sup>29</sup> However, evidence suggests that current institutional setups often create competing priorities between security responses focused on threat mitigation and protection responses focused on victim support. In practice, this means front-line officials must navigate complex decisions about whether to prioritize immediate security screening, trauma-informed care, or legal proceedings – choices that can significantly affect a child’s recovery trajectory.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., “Towards meaningful accountability for sexual and gender-based violence linked to terrorism,” November 2023. Available at [www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/cted\\_report-sgbv\\_linked\\_to\\_terrorism\\_final.pdf](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/cted_report-sgbv_linked_to_terrorism_final.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, Siobhán Mullally, Report on the intersections between trafficking and terrorism, (A/76/263), 3 August 2021. Available at [www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/report-intersections-between-trafficking-and-terrorism](https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/report-intersections-between-trafficking-and-terrorism).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, “New study sheds light on linkages between child trafficking and grave violations against children in armed conflict; calls for increased prevention, protection, accountability,” 31 October 2024. Available at <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2024/10/new-study-sheds-light-on-linkages-between-child-trafficking-and-grave-violations-against-children-in-armed-conflict-calls-for-increased-prevention-protection-accountability/>.

<sup>30</sup> Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, Siobhán Mullally, Report on the intersections between trafficking and terrorism, (A/76/263), 3 August 2021; and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office of the Special Representative and Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, *Trafficking in Human Beings and Terrorism: Where and How They Intersect – Analysis and Recommendations for More Effective Policy Responses* (Vienna, 2021). Available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/7/491983.pdf>.

## (II) CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY MEMBER STATES

- ❖ **As terrorist tactics for recruiting and exploiting children evolve faster than protective measures can adapt, Member States face complex security and child protection challenges.**

The speed at which terrorist groups adapt their recruitment strategies has created an “acceleration gap”<sup>31</sup> or a widening distance between terrorist innovation and State response capabilities. This concept describes the temporal asymmetry whereby terrorist groups can pivot their recruitment strategies within weeks, whereas Member States typically require longer periods of time to develop, legislate and implement new policies. This has been particularly evident in the digital realm, where terrorists have become adept at “platform hopping” or quickly migrating from one online space to another as authorities develop countermeasures.

The evolving ways in which new technologies are being used indicate operational adaptation rather than ideological change. This technological exploitation specifically targets youth populations through sophisticated mechanisms that exploit the digital environments of younger generations. For example, Member States face challenges in gaming environments as online gaming is a successful, multibillion dollar industry, and one in which a large number of children are immersed. Research findings indicate that XRIRB recruiters exploit gaming platforms as venues to target and recruit children.<sup>32</sup>

Terrorist organizations increasingly leverage integrated digital ecosystems to target children and youth. Gaming-adjacent platforms (namely Steam, Twitch, and Discord) have gained notoriety owing to their ability to be seen as “digital playgrounds” for terrorists to exploit.<sup>33</sup> These platforms provide key organizational infrastructure that facilitates recruitment activities and the development of like-minded communities, offering terrorists sophisticated tools for building networks and spreading their ideologies.<sup>34</sup>

Traditional terrorist ideologies remain a threat, but the terrorism landscape is becoming increasingly fragmented. Young individuals are being influenced by a mix of ideologies, conspiracy theories and hybrid violent extremist movements that do not fit within

<sup>31</sup> See Brian A. Jackson, “Technology acquisition by terrorist groups: threat assessment informed by lessons from private sector technology adoption”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 24, No. 3 (2001), pp. 183–213; and Jessica Stern, “The Protean enemy” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 82, No. 4 (July/August 2003), pp. 27–40.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Koehler, Irina Jugl and Verena Fiebig, GNET, “Extreme right radicalisation of children via online gaming platforms”, 24 October 2022. Available at <https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/24/extreme-right-radicalisation-of-children-via-online-gaming-platforms/>.

<sup>33</sup> W. Allchorn and Elisa Orofino, “Policing extremism on gaming-adjacent platforms: awful but lawful?” *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 16 (July 2025).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

conventional classifications. This ideological fluidity creates unprecedented challenges for Member States whose counter-terrorism frameworks were mainly designed around more clearly defined ideological categories. Recent analysis found that most deadly attacks stemmed from nihilistic subcultures, outpacing defined ideologies in a shifting threat landscape,<sup>35</sup> which challenges traditional classification and response approaches.

Particularly concerning is the targeting of teenagers, where evidence increasingly shows teenagers being “negatively impacted by violent extremist content and in some cases exploited by extremist groups.”<sup>36</sup> Youth without education and employment opportunities are more vulnerable to exploitation by criminal and terrorist groups.<sup>37</sup> Yet Member States often lack the comprehensive systems and capacities needed to identify at-risk children before recruitment occurs, meaningful consultation frameworks that engage youth in decision-making processes for preventing violent extremism, adequate funding for youth-led prevention initiatives, human rights-based rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, and effective coordination mechanisms between government agencies, civil society and youth networks. These gaps leave many States ill-equipped to address both the immediate risk and long-term prevention needs of vulnerable young people.

The October 2024 communiqué of the African Union Peace and Security Council highlighted the need for Member States to “invest in innovative approaches for effectively countering online radicalization narratives and preventing the online recruitment of African youth.”<sup>38</sup>

- ❖ **While many Member States recognize the gender-specific dimensions of child recruitment and systematic gendered indoctrination, they often lack the expertise to translate this awareness into effective prevention and response strategies, resulting in critical vulnerabilities in their counter-terrorism efforts.**

While many terrorist groups have developed sophisticated, gender-differentiated recruitment strategies that exploit specific vulnerabilities among girls and boys, most

<sup>35</sup> Jared Holt, Cody Zoschak and Katherine Keneally, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “Online radicalization and the nexus to violence in the US: 2024 year in review”, 18 July 2025. Available at [www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/online-radicalization-and-the-nexus-to-violence-in-the-us-2024-year-in-review/#:~:text=in%20review%20%2D%20ISD-,Online%20radicalization%20and%20the%20nexus%20to%20violence,US%3A%202024%20year%20in%20review&text=In%20recent%20years%2C%20violent%20attacks,categorize%20extremist%20and%20terrorist%20movements.](http://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/online-radicalization-and-the-nexus-to-violence-in-the-us-2024-year-in-review/#:~:text=in%20review%20%2D%20ISD-,Online%20radicalization%20and%20the%20nexus%20to%20violence,US%3A%202024%20year%20in%20review&text=In%20recent%20years%2C%20violent%20attacks,categorize%20extremist%20and%20terrorist%20movements.)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> UNODC, “UNODC supports Member States in the Sahel to promote meaningful youth engagement in preventing violent extremism”, March 2024. Available at [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism/latest-news/2024-unodc-supports-member-states-in-the-sahel-to-promote-meaningful-youth-engagement-in-preventing-violent-extremism.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism/latest-news/2024-unodc-supports-member-states-in-the-sahel-to-promote-meaningful-youth-engagement-in-preventing-violent-extremism.html).

<sup>38</sup> African Union Peace and Security Council, Communiqué of the 1237th meeting of the Peace and Security Council. Available at [www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-1237th-meeting-of-the-peace-and-security-council-held-on-23-october-2024-on-consideration-of-the-au-commission-report-on-combating-terrorism-in-the-continent](http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-1237th-meeting-of-the-peace-and-security-council-held-on-23-october-2024-on-consideration-of-the-au-commission-report-on-combating-terrorism-in-the-continent).

Member States continue to apply gender-blind approaches to counter-terrorism that fail to address the distinct pathways through which boys and girls are targeted and recruited.

Simultaneously, Member States are increasingly confronting new forms of gender-based violent extremist threats that challenge traditional counter-terrorism frameworks. The OSCE has observed that “[n]ot only is violent misogyny in violent extremist narratives across the ideological spectrum becoming increasingly evident in online space, but harmful content is reaching and influencing younger and younger audiences.”<sup>39</sup> Several Member States have taken steps to address misogynistic and male supremacist ideology as terrorism: Canada became the first country to prosecute an incel-motivated attack as terrorism in 2020,<sup>40</sup> while France’s counter-terrorism authority launched its first investigation into incel-related threats in 2025.<sup>41</sup> These developments reflect growing recognition of gender-based extremist violence as a counter-terrorism concern, yet there is no consensus on how to address this trend.

❖ **Member States encounter difficulties in developing age verification systems that are both effective in protecting children and respectful of digital rights.**

In November 2024, Australia passed the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act, 2024, requiring age-restricted social media platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent users under the age of 16 from having accounts, with social media companies facing penalties up to \$A 49.5 million for non-compliance.<sup>42</sup> In June 2025, Norway proposed raising its minimum age for social media use from 13 to 15 through amendments to the Personal Data Act.<sup>43</sup> France enacted legislation in 2023 requiring social media platforms to obtain parental consent for users under 15, with companies facing up to 1 per cent of their global revenues for non-compliance.<sup>44</sup> In 2023, China introduced a regulatory framework that limited time spent gaming online and using live streaming platforms, video-sharing sites and social media.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> OSCE, “OSCE strengthens inter-regional co-operation between women professionals from Central Asia and South-Eastern Europe addressing violent extremism and terrorism”, 21 October 2024. Available at [www.osce.org/secretariat/578875](http://www.osce.org/secretariat/578875).

<sup>40</sup> Mélissa Godin (TIME Magazine), “Canadian teen charged with terrorism over alleged ‘incel’ attack”, 20 May 2020. Available at <https://time.com/5839395/canada-teen-terrorism-incel-attack/>.

<sup>41</sup> France 24, “Should France's incel threat be treated like terrorism?” (accessed on 4 July 2025). Available at [www.france24.com/en/france/20250704-should-france-s-incel-threat-be-treated-like-terrorism](http://www.france24.com/en/france/20250704-should-france-s-incel-threat-be-treated-like-terrorism).

<sup>42</sup> Australia, eSafety Commissioner, “Social media age restrictions” (accessed on 16 September 2025). Available at <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/industry-regulation/social-media-age-restrictions>.

<sup>43</sup> Norway, “Norway moves forward with age limit for social media”, 24 June 2025. Available at [www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/norway-moves-forward-with-age-limit-for-social-media/id3108682/](http://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/norway-moves-forward-with-age-limit-for-social-media/id3108682/).

<sup>44</sup> France 24, “France approves law requiring parental consent for minors on social media”, 29 June 2023. Available at [www.france24.com/en/france/20230629-france-approves-law-requiring-parental-consent-for-minors-on-social-media](http://www.france24.com/en/france/20230629-france-approves-law-requiring-parental-consent-for-minors-on-social-media).

<sup>45</sup> Tianyi Zhangshao, Ben Egliston and Marcus Carter (The Conversation), “China restricted young people from video games. But kids are evading the bans and getting into trouble”, 2024. Available at <https://theconversation.com/china-restricted-young-people-from-video-games-but-kids-are-evading-the-bans-and-getting-into-trouble-245264>.

The technical implementation of age verification systems creates significant operational challenges for Member States. Legal frameworks vary considerably: some jurisdictions prohibit platforms from collecting government-issued identification or accessing accredited Digital ID services for age verification purposes, requiring alternative methods that must still ensure robust privacy protection. Conversely, other Member States permit or even mandate linking user accounts to national identity documents and deploying facial recognition technology to monitor content creation and platform access. This regulatory inconsistency complicates platform compliance and creates uneven protection standards across different jurisdictions.

❖ **Member States grapple with tensions between protective intentions grounded in the best interest of the child principle and potential restrictions on children's digital rights.**

Minimum age requirements can limit children's right to access and participate in digital spaces, which may not align with the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child that national policies allow children to benefit from engaging with the digital environment while ensuring safe access.<sup>46</sup> However, the Committee also recognizes that age-appropriate restrictions may be necessary to protect children from harm, consistent with the best interest of the child principle.<sup>47</sup>

These protective measures raise questions about their practical effectiveness and unintended consequences. When platforms implement blanket age restrictions without robust verification systems, they may inadvertently reduce industry incentives to develop meaningful safety features for younger users who circumvent these barriers, potentially leaving the most vulnerable children with fewer protections.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, such policies risk being developed without adequately consulting children themselves, a key requirement under the Convention on the Rights of the Child for any intervention that affects their rights.<sup>49</sup>

The challenge lies in striking an appropriate balance: implementing measures that genuinely serve children's best interests while preserving their fundamental rights to

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<sup>46</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment," (CRC/C/GC/25) March 2021. Available at <http://undocs.org/en/CRC/C/GC/25>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., paras. 9–13.

<sup>48</sup> Sophia Cope, Aaron Mackey, and Jason Kelley (Electronic Frontier Foundation), "Protecting kids on social media act: amended and still problematic", 20 November 2023. Available at [www.eff.org/deeplinks/2023/11/protecting-kids-social-media-act-amended-and-still-problematic](http://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2023/11/protecting-kids-social-media-act-amended-and-still-problematic); Jason Kelley (Electronic Frontier Foundation), "The law should not require parental consent for all minors to access social media", 18 May 2023. Available at [www.eff.org/deeplinks/2023/05/law-should-not-require-parental-consent-all-minors-access-social-media](http://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2023/05/law-should-not-require-parental-consent-all-minors-access-social-media).

<sup>49</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 12.

access information, express themselves, and participate in digital communities in age-appropriate ways.

❖ **Member States face difficulties when implementing child protection measures for digital platforms that operate beyond national boundaries.**

The borderless nature of the Internet means that effective child online protection requires coordination across multiple stakeholders at local, national, regional and international levels, often creating enforcement gaps that can be exploited by malicious actors.<sup>50</sup> However, even when Member States implement coordinated responses they encounter systemic obstacles that complicate the protection of vulnerable children.

Digital platforms operate across multiple legal frameworks simultaneously, creating jurisdictional complexity for Member States. This challenge becomes particularly acute when data storage locations differ from platform operations sites, user locations, and content creation sites, creating what researchers term “a legal tug-of-war”, where different countries’ data protection rules create conflicting compliance requirements.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, Member States’ different regulatory frameworks may impede collaboration as a result of differing ethical, legal or procedural approaches.<sup>52</sup> Cross-border data flows create jurisdictional issues that become complex when Member States have different data protection standards. Platforms and malicious actors can exploit varying Internet regulations across countries by basing their operations in jurisdictions with the most permissive laws.

❖ **Member States encounter multifaceted implementation challenges when processing children exploited by terrorist groups through criminal justice systems while ensuring compliance with international human rights law and children’s rights obligations.**

International juvenile justice standards require that any action taken against children prioritizes rehabilitation and reintegration. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 40 (1), States Parties recognize that children alleged of or accused of having infringed penal law must be treated in a manner “which takes into account the child’s age and the desirability of promoting the child’s reintegration and the child’s assuming a

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<sup>50</sup> International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and World Bank, Digital Regulation Platform, “The ITU guidelines on child online protection”. Available at <https://digitalregulation.org/the-itu-guidelines-on-child-online-protection/>.

<sup>51</sup> Fran Casino et al., “SoK: cross-border criminal investigations and digital evidence”, *Journal of Cybersecurity*, vol. 8, issue 1 (January 2022). Available at <https://academic.oup.com/cybersecurity/article/8/1/tyac014/6909060>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

constructive role in society”.<sup>53</sup> Article 37 of the Convention requires that any deprivation of liberty must be used as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate time. Article 39 requires States Parties to take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of child victims, including those who have experienced armed conflicts.<sup>54</sup>

Under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, children remain entitled to special protection, which requires States to consider juvenile justice standards and alternatives to prosecution and to focus on rehabilitation and reintegration. The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols establish that children shall be the object of special respect and shall be protected against any form of indecent assault.<sup>55</sup> The Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions provides that “children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities”<sup>56</sup> and that “the special protection provided by this Article to children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall remain applicable to them if they take a direct part in hostilities [...] and are captured”.<sup>57</sup> The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict reaffirms “that the rights of children require special protection”<sup>58</sup> and requires States to take “all feasible measures to ensure that persons within their jurisdiction recruited or used in hostilities contrary to the present Protocol [...] are accorded all appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social reintegration.”<sup>59</sup>

In the Security Council’s unanimously adopted resolution 2427 (2018) on children and armed conflict, it encourages Member States to consider non-judicial measures, as alternatives to prosecution and detention, that focus on the rehabilitation and reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, taking into account that deprivation of liberty of children should be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.<sup>60</sup> In the resolution, the Council explicitly acknowledges that parties to armed conflict should treat children who had been

<sup>53</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 37; Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 10 (2007) on children’s rights in juvenile justice (CRC/C/GC/10), available at <https://docs.un.org/en/CRC/C/GC/10>, and general comment No. 24 (2019) on children’s rights in the child justice system (CRC/C/GC/24), available at <https://docs.un.org/en/CRC/C/GC/24>.

<sup>54</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, arts. 37, 39, and 40; Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 10 (2007) and general comment No. 24 (2019).

<sup>55</sup> Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols of 1977.

<sup>56</sup> Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), art. 4(3)(c).

<sup>57</sup> Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), art. 4(3)(d).

<sup>58</sup> Preamble.

<sup>59</sup> Art. 6(3).

<sup>60</sup> Security Council resolution 2427 (2018).

recruited by armed groups as victims, including those associated with groups designated as terrorist organizations.

Many Member States lack specialized legislation that addresses children’s involvement with terrorist groups while respecting their rights. Children charged with terrorism crimes are often denied juvenile protections and are subjected to adult criminal proceedings, including military tribunals and adult detention facilities.<sup>61</sup>

Globally, there has been a considerable shift towards recognizing the importance of specialized juvenile justice. Nonetheless, not many States have a specialized system to deal with children in conflict with the law, and this encompasses situations in which specialized laws may exist, but profound implementation gaps persist.<sup>62</sup> Even in jurisdictions with well-developed juvenile justice frameworks, terrorism cases may present unique challenges that expose critical gaps in existing legislation and procedures. Most systems lack terrorism-specific provisions, sufficient diversion options, and alternative sentencing appropriate for children in terrorism contexts.<sup>63</sup> The purpose of juvenile justice systems is to encourage rehabilitation in lieu of punishment and to provide juveniles with procedural and substantive protections not typically afforded defendants in the adult criminal justice system. However, terrorism cases often trigger exceptional procedures that contradict these foundational principles.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has said that “A comprehensive child justice system requires the establishment of specialized units within the police, the judiciary, the court system and the prosecutor’s office, as well as specialized defenders”.<sup>64</sup> However, many Member States lack specialized juvenile courts for terrorism-related cases, child-friendly court procedures and environments, separate detention facilities for children, and specialized prosecution units trained in counter-terrorism and child rights.<sup>65</sup>

CTED has noted that criminal justice systems exhibit structural fragmentation that undermines their capacity to address complex cases involving children exploited by terrorist organizations. This fragmentation manifests across multiple dimensions: horizontally between specialized legal domains, e.g., criminal law, juvenile justice,

<sup>61</sup> UNODC, “Crime Prevention & Criminal Justice Module 13 Key Issues: Justice for children in conflict with the law”, (accessed 16 September 2025). Available at [www.unodc.org/e4j/en/crime-prevention-criminal-justice/module-13/key-issues/4--justice-for-children-in-conflict-with-the-law.html](http://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/crime-prevention-criminal-justice/module-13/key-issues/4--justice-for-children-in-conflict-with-the-law.html).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., “Global Programme to end Violence Against Children – Overview”, (accessed 16 September 2025). Available at [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/justice-and-prison-reform/global-programme-to-end-violence-against-children\\_overview.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/justice-and-prison-reform/global-programme-to-end-violence-against-children_overview.html).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 24 (2019) on children’s rights in the child justice system (CRC/C/GC/24), para. 106. Available at <https://docs.un.org/en/CRC/C/GC/24>.

<sup>65</sup> UNODC, *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System*, (Vienna, 2017). Available at [www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook\\_on\\_Children\\_Recruited\\_and\\_Exploited\\_by\\_Terrorist\\_and\\_Violent\\_Extremist\\_Groups\\_the\\_Role\\_of\\_the\\_Justice\\_System.E.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf).

counter-terrorism legislation, and anti-trafficking frameworks; vertically across jurisdictional levels, i.e., local, national, regional, and international levels; and procedurally throughout different stages of the justice process. Each specialized area operates within distinct legal frameworks, procedural requirements, and institutional cultures, creating systematic barriers to coherent case management.<sup>66</sup>

Within justice systems, different institutional actors – police, prosecutors, judges, corrections officers, and probation officers – frequently operate in isolation without adequate information-sharing mechanisms or unified strategic approaches.<sup>67</sup> This is compounded by insufficient coordination with essential services outside the criminal justice sector, including educational institutions, healthcare providers, social services, child protection agencies, and community-based organizations.<sup>68</sup> The lack of inter-agency protocols means that children exploited by terrorist groups often encounter multiple, uncoordinated interventions that may be contradictory or duplicative.<sup>69</sup>

Children exploited by terrorist organizations have complex needs that require coordinated responses across multiple sectors. Unlike conventional juvenile offenders, these children often require specialized assessments to distinguish between their roles as perpetrators versus victims of exploitation, necessitating expertise in counter-terrorism and child protection.<sup>70</sup> Poor coordination between criminal justice and support services can result in children being processed through adult counter-terrorism courts rather than juvenile justice systems, with limited or unavailable access to rehabilitative services. The lack of integrated case management often leads to children being interviewed multiple times by different agencies, with limited information-sharing between institutions, exposing them to repeated trauma.<sup>71</sup>

A regional analysis in Europe and Central Asia by UNICEF highlights the challenge of developing appropriate responses for children below the minimum age of criminal responsibility who have allegedly engaged in criminal conduct. This continues to pose difficulties across many countries in the region.<sup>72</sup>

- ❖ **Establishing the age of individuals suspected of terrorism-related offences poses procedural and evidentiary challenges for Member States, particularly when documentation is absent or unreliable.**

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, “In focus: access to justice for children”, October 2024. Available at [www.unicef.org/eca/reports/focus-access-justice-children-2024](http://www.unicef.org/eca/reports/focus-access-justice-children-2024).

In its assessments, CTED has encountered multiple instances where Member States lack adequate procedures to determine the age of individuals in terrorism-related cases. In such instances, some Member States defaulted to treating individuals of uncertain age as if they were adults, proceeding with cases under adult criminal procedures without proper age verification. Such an approach undermines child protection principles.<sup>73</sup>

The absence of reliable age determination mechanisms creates a presumption against childhood that directly contradicts international standards. Without proper documentation systems, forensic age assessment capabilities or standardized protocols for handling cases involving uncertain age, justice systems may default to approaches that prioritize administrative convenience over child protection obligations. This creates a systematic bias where the burden of proving childhood falls on individuals who may lack the resources, knowledge or support necessary to establish their age, effectively denying them access to the special protections and procedures mandated under international law for children in conflict with the law.<sup>74</sup> This gap in procedural safeguards can result in children being subjected to adult criminal proceedings, exposing them to harsher penalties (including the death penalty – contrary to international law), inappropriate detention conditions and procedures that fail to account for their developmental needs and vulnerabilities. This approach directly contradicts the requirement that children’s best interests guide all decision-making processes affecting them, including those in counter-terrorism contexts.<sup>75</sup>

❖ **Member States face challenges in the rehabilitation and reintegration of children associated with terrorist groups.**

The rehabilitation and reintegration process for children is inherently long-term and multifaceted, requiring a comprehensive approach that encompasses promoting individual mental health and well-being, family support, educational success, community support, and public safety. The complexity of these processes is compounded by the severe psychological trauma these children have experienced. Research shows that trauma-related mental ill-health should be considered central to efforts to reintegrate children formerly associated with terrorist groups, as many of these children exhibit elevated post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression and other psychiatric

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<sup>73</sup> See Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>74</sup> United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the Beijing Rules), General Assembly resolution 40/33, annex; Convention on the Rights of the Child, arts. 37 and 40.

<sup>75</sup> Security Council resolution 2427 (2018), para. 20: “emphasizes that children who have been recruited in violation of applicable international law by armed forces and armed groups and are accused of having committed crimes during armed conflicts should be treated primarily as victims of violations of international law”.

disorders.<sup>76</sup> In some cases, it may take several years to fully reintegrate people into society.<sup>77</sup> Research shows that managing trauma-related mental health problems is key to education success, which is central to successful rehabilitation.<sup>78</sup> However, many Member States lack the specialized therapeutic capacity to address the complex trauma experienced by children recruited by terrorist groups.<sup>79</sup>

The multi-year nature of effective rehabilitation programmes creates substantial resource demands. Successful reintegration requires sustained investment in specialized therapeutic services for trauma recovery, educational support and catch-up programmes, family and community reconciliation processes, long-term monitoring and support systems, and specialized staff training in child development and terrorism-related trauma.<sup>80</sup>

### (III) CONCLUSIONS

The complex challenges identified in this Trends Alert underscore the need for systematic knowledge collection and dissemination mechanisms that can keep up with the pace of change of terrorist methods. Given its mandate under Security Council resolutions 2396 (2017), 2617 (2021), 2178 (2014), 2427 (2018), CTED is well placed to facilitate the knowledge transfer that Member States require to address these rapidly evolving changes in the terrorist exploitation of children. The examples cited in Member State responses indicate that good practices exist but remain isolated within individual jurisdictions.

CTED will engage with Member States to establish systematic collection and sharing of challenges, good practices and lessons learned related to addressing terrorist exploitation of children. This engagement will focus on documenting experiences of implementation across the spectrum of prevention, prosecution, and rehabilitation and reintegration responses, with particular attention to the various challenges identified in this Trends Alert.

Through its Member State assessments and dialogue with relevant United Nations entities, international, regional and subregional organizations, the private sector, civil society and the research community, CTED will continue to monitor this phenomenon with a view to identifying ways to strengthen Member States' responses.

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<sup>76</sup> Rezhna Mohammed and Frank Neuner, "Putative juvenile terrorists: the relationship between multiple traumatization, mental health, and expectations for reintegration among Islamic State recruited adolescent and young adult fighters", *Conflict and Health*, vol. 16 (October 2022). Available at <https://conflictandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13031-022-00489-3>.

<sup>77</sup> OSCE, "The difficult path of re-integration", 15 October 2021. Available at [www.osce.org/secretariat/501055](http://www.osce.org/secretariat/501055).

<sup>78</sup> Stevan Weine and Heidi Ellis (Just Security), "Rehabilitating and reintegrating child returnees from ISIS", 6 July 2020. Available at [www.justsecurity.org/71021/rehabilitating-and-reintegrating-child-returnees-from-isis/](http://www.justsecurity.org/71021/rehabilitating-and-reintegrating-child-returnees-from-isis/).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> OSCE, "The difficult path of re-integration", 15 October 2021. Available at [www.osce.org/secretariat/501055](http://www.osce.org/secretariat/501055).