



**WAR**  
child

# BEING 'A FORCE FOR GOOD'

How the UK can tackle Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Forces and Armed Groups

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

March 2023



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The recruitment of girls and boys by armed forces and armed groups – and their use in hostilities – is among the most egregious violations against children in armed conflict. It is also one of the most widespread, affecting tens of thousands of children across the globe at any given time.<sup>1</sup> Not only is the deployment of children into combat unlawful, but their use facilitates multiple other human-rights abuses, including killing, maiming and sexual violence. It also denies affected children the right to education, health, a family life and other fundamental rights.

This report, the third in War Child's series Being a 'Force for Good' on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), looks at how the UK government applies its legal obligations and commitments to prevent child recruitment and use, and how it supports children's release and reintegration.<sup>2</sup> Fundamental to this is the principle that children associated with armed forces or armed groups (CAAFAG) are, first and foremost, victims of serious human-rights violations, who are entitled to assistance for their release and reintegration. This applies equally to British children who have been recruited by armed groups, as it does to children who are nationals of conflict-affected countries.

In practice, this principle is sometimes ignored by the government, resulting in inconsistent actions towards CAAFAG. Worryingly, only some CAAFAG are perceived as victims in need of protection, while others are seen as threats to security to be treated as criminals. While there are positive examples of UK support for furthering protection for children who have been – or are – at risk of recruitment and use, there are also missed opportunities and examples where UK responses to CAAFAG are directly at odds with the government's stated commitment to "end all violations against children in armed conflict", and thereby its aspiration to be a "force for good" in the world.<sup>3</sup>

### Note on terminology:

"Terrorism" and "violent extremism" have no internationally accepted definition and are often used interchangeably. In this report, they are referred to in inverted commas to indicate that their use does not reflect a judgement by War Child. In all cases, these terms include groups designated by the UN as "terrorists". Rather than characterising children associated with such groups as "extremist" or "terrorist", the phrase "recruitment and use of children by armed groups in violation of applicable international law" is used.

CAAFAG refers to any person below 18 years of age recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children –boys and girls –used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking – or has taken – a direct part in hostilities. (See Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups<sup>11</sup>). The term "child soldiers" is used by some stakeholders and appears in this report when quoting them.

Based on consultations and interviews with nearly 50 experts working on CAAFAG-related issues, this report highlights the need for a more integrated, cross-government approach to CAAC. Specifically in relation to CAAFAG, there is a need to consider how children and their rights are impacted by policies and actions in areas such as: counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism; stabilisation and development support to conflict-affected and fragile States; military-support relationships; and diplomatic, political and other engagement with national authorities in conflict-affected countries.

**War Child believes that greater priority must be given to:**

- 1. Ensuring the protection of British children associated with – or at risk of association with – armed groups** by repatriating them and their families detained in northeast Syria without delay. Young adults who were recruited as children should be recognised, first and foremost, as victims of crimes under international law, and provided with specialised age- and gender-appropriate support for their return, rehabilitation and reintegration.
- 2. Strengthening UK military responses to CAAFAG** by committing to use all necessary resources to achieve the full and rapid integration of doctrine on human security in defence across all military operations, including those relating to CAAC.
- 3. Opposing the detention of CAAFAG and supporting efforts to ensure any CAAFAG that are detained are treated in accordance with international child rights standards.** The UK should proactively encourage and support States where CAAFAG are detained by security forces to adopt handover protocols to facilitate their swift and safe transfer to civilian child protection actors for appropriate support services including, but not limited to, reintegration.
- 4. Enhancing support for global CAAFAG reintegration efforts** and coordinating with like-minded States and donors to proactively encourage and support national authorities in conflict-affected countries to develop and implement comprehensive policy and legal frameworks for the release and reintegration of all CAAFAG, without discrimination and in compliance with other international child rights standards and best practice.
- 5. Reversing all cuts to overseas aid budgets** that impact negatively on global efforts to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups and support the recovery and reintegration of former CAAFAGs including by reinstating funding to OSRSG CAAC and UNICEF.

**1 UK CHAMPIONING UN SECURITY COUNCIL EFFORTS TO PREVENT CHILD RECRUITMENT AND USE**

The UK has played an important role in supporting the UNSC's CAAC agenda, of which ending child recruitment and use is a core aim.<sup>4</sup> It is generally regarded as a "good ally" on the issue by UN and other stakeholders in New York, and has acted as convenor of important conversations on strengthening responses, including to CAAFAG, under the CAAC agenda.<sup>5</sup>

Successive UK-supported UNSC resolutions on CAAC have condemned child recruitment and use and called for action to curb it.<sup>6</sup> As a member of the UNSC Working Group CAAC, the UK has also supported robust conclusions and other responses to child recruitment and use in country-specific situations.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, it has traditionally been a strong supporter of the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC), whose role includes advocating for, and engaging with, parties to armed conflict to agree and implement action plans to end child recruitment and use, and to release children already in the ranks of fighting forces.<sup>7</sup>

As important as support for such initiatives is, they represent only part of the action that is needed to end the scourge of children's involvement in armed conflict. It must also be ensured that those already associated with armed actors receive the support they need to enable their return to their families and communities, and to participate fully and meaningfully in civilian life. Consideration must be given to the causes and consequences of children's association with fighting forces and how failure to embed child rights and protection into relevant policies could contribute to grievances that fuel conflict, and may therefore perpetuate patterns of child recruitment, re-recruitment and use.<sup>8</sup>

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## 2 FAILING TO PROTECT BRITISH CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH/AT RISK OF ASSOCIATION WITH ARMED GROUPS

### UK legal obligations and commitments to CAAFAG

- Under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), the UK is required to take measures to ensure that children are not used in hostilities and to prevent all recruitment of under-18s by non-state armed groups.
- The CRC and International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour require State parties to protect children from exploitation and other conflict-related harms, including preventing their military recruitment and use.
- The CRC and OPAC require State parties to provide appropriate assistance to support the physical and psychological recovery and reintegration of child victims of armed conflict/CAAFAG. OPAC also requires State parties to provide international assistance to prevent the unlawful recruitment and use of children and to support their recovery and reintegration.
- Under the CRC and Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (Paris Principles), even when a child is suspected of committing a serious crime during their association with armed forces or armed groups, detention shall only take place as a measure of last resort, for the shortest period of time, and in line with international child justice standards, with measures, where possible, of dealing with children without resorting to judicial proceedings.
- Under the Paris Principles, children should never be prosecuted or punished, or threatened with prosecution or punishment, solely for their membership of an armed force or armed group.

Inconsistencies in UK government approaches are most starkly illustrated by the contrasting positions it has taken in support of the UNSC CAAC agenda and its response to British children who became caught up in armed conflict in Iraq and Syria. When it comes to British children held in camps and other detention facilities in northeast Syria because of their or their parents' affiliation with IS, or young British adults who were unlawfully recruited by IS as children, the government has been resistant to recognising them as victims or, with few exceptions, repatriating them to the UK.

Between 30 and 60 British children are thought to be among around 62,000 people (mainly women and children) still held in Al Hol and Roj camps in northeast Syria, where they have been since the fall of the IS "caliphate" in 2019.<sup>9</sup> To date, the UK is known to have repatriated just ten children.<sup>10</sup> Most, if not all, were orphans or unaccompanied.<sup>11</sup> While positive that the extreme vulnerability of children living in camps without parents or guardians is recognised, the rights and well-being of all children, including British ones, detained in the region are at daily risk. By prioritising the return of certain categories of children, the UK is reinforcing deeply damaging global trends in which unlawful distinctions are made between CAAFAG who are perceived as victims in need of protection, and CAAFAG who are regarded as threats to security and/or treated as criminals.

Moreover, the poor conditions in these camps have been widely reported on, including severe overcrowding, restrictions on freedom of movement, inadequate shelter, and limited access to food, water, healthcare, education and other basic services.<sup>12</sup> Disease, including Covid-19, spread rapidly in this environment, and children have died of preventable diseases, malnutrition and dehydration. Violence is also rife, and increasing amidst rising tensions in the camps. In 2021, 74 children reportedly died in Al Hol, eight of whom were murdered.<sup>13</sup> In 2022, shootings and other violent incidents were also reported, resulting in further deaths and injuries of women and children, including foreign nationals.<sup>14</sup>

Children in these camps also face many other dangers, including sexual and gender-based violence and other forms of physical, mental or psychological abuse. British children are believed to be among hundreds of boys held in detention facilities in the region.<sup>15</sup>

Whether in camps or other detention facilities, British nationals are being held in northeast Syria without adequate legal basis, which should be considered unlawful. Among them are girls and boys who were taken to Syria or Iraq by their parents, or who were conceived through acts of rape or sexual coercion and who are, in effect, being punished for the actions of their parents, or for the circumstances of their birth.

### Examples from other States

Other States have demonstrated that concerns around risks to national security can be managed by putting in place domestic arrangements to address the challenges involved in bringing back children and their guardians who may have been members of IS or exposed to radical ideologies. Because these require coordinated, multi-disciplinary approaches, such arrangements are necessarily resource-intensive, but are well within the capabilities of relevant UK domestic services and agencies.

Despite the political sensitivities around returns, the need to balance the best interests of the child with national security concerns has been explicitly recognised by some governments. For example, following the return to Germany of 23 children and eight of their mothers from Roj camp in October 2021, the German Foreign Minister stated that “the children are in no way responsible for their circumstances” and should be enabled to “grow up in a safe and appropriate environment”. The Finnish government is also reported to have determined that separating children from their mothers is not in the best interest of the child and has repatriated adults along with Finnish children.

That repatriations are possible is clear. The UK has already demonstrated that it can organise returns, and civilian delegations from other countries have been able to access their nationals to organise repatriations of large numbers of children with their parents or guardians, with the support of the local authorities and other international actors present in the region.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the UK has also provided financial and other assistance to build and manage detention facilities in which British nationals may be being held simply reinforces their responsibilities, in addition to raising questions about the UK’s complicity in contributing to a situation in which serious human-rights violations are being committed.<sup>17</sup>

### 3 ACTION NEEDED TO IMPROVE THE BRITISH ARMED FORCES’ PROTECTION OF CAAFAG IN MILITARY OPERATIONS AND VIA ITS OVERSEAS MILITARY-SUPPORT RELATIONSHIPS

Encounters with CAAFAG, who are entitled to special protections under international human-rights and humanitarian law, create particular legal, moral and practical dilemmas for armed forces and, although important advances have been made in incorporating protections into British military doctrine and training, implementation remains at a relatively early stage.

The risks and responsibilities in relation to CAAFAG are partially acknowledged in the latest iteration of the MoD Joint Service Publication on Human Security (HS) in Defence (JSP 985), which requires that “all reasonable steps” are taken “to ensure we do not undertake training or partnering with units employing children in active combat roles or those that detain children solely for membership, perceived or actual, of armed groups.”<sup>18</sup> However, existing processes to manage the risks associated with military training and other assistance to partner forces are not sufficiently robust. In fact, the UK continues to partner with some forces that arbitrarily detain CAAFAG, and – in some cases – has provided material and other support to the unlawful detention of children.

There are, nevertheless, some encouraging signs that the detention of CAAFAG, and broader concerns relating to military-support relationships, are beginning to be addressed. In its written response, the MoD noted that in recognition of the importance of this issue, its Human Security Policy Team are planning to conduct “dedicated research into the human security risks associated with the use of partner forces” that will include “consultations with civil society and academic experts to build understanding of this field and what more can be done to mitigate risks.” The MoD response also stressed that the aim of providing assistance to overseas partners is to “strengthen compliance with human rights and international humanitarian law in the countries we engage with.”<sup>19</sup>

### 4 OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE UK TO CHAMPION GLOBAL CAAFAG RELEASE AND REINTEGRATION

Both as a State and donor with significant interests and influence in many conflict-affected countries, the UK also has a vital role to play in supporting broader global efforts to ensure the release and reintegration of CAAFAG in accordance with international legal standards and best practice.

Among the tools for protecting captured CAAFAG are agreements to swiftly transfer children captured by State security forces or armed groups to child-protection actors for appropriate support services, including reintegration assistance. These agreements, known as handover protocols, have been signed in a number of countries where they have contributed to protecting children from human-rights violations associated with military detention, by providing a rapid and critical referral pathway for reintegration.<sup>20</sup>

Nigeria is among these countries, where the adoption of a handover protocol was called for in response to the detention of thousands of children for suspected association with Boko Haram – a group that has become notorious for its abduction and forcible conscription of girls and boys. These children have been used in combat roles (such as planting improvised explosive devices, as suicide bombers and as spies), in support roles, and for sexual purposes.<sup>21</sup> Negotiations for the adoption of a handover protocol were ongoing and in September 2022, the government of Nigeria, the UN system in Nigeria and UNICEF secured the protocol for children encountered in the course of armed conflict in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin Region. The British High Commission in Nigeria was reported to have been actively involved in supporting the adoption of the protocol, and the issue was raised during the inaugural dialogue of the UK-Nigeria Security and Defence Partnership earlier in the year.<sup>22</sup>

However, there is more the UK government can do in Nigeria and elsewhere. Since 2014, Iraqi and Kurdish authorities have arrested thousands of children on suspicion of IS membership and, according to UN figures, as at December 2021, 1,267 children were in detention on national-security-related charges, including for their actual or alleged association with armed groups, primarily IS.<sup>23</sup>

Concerted support is needed for the development and implementation of national policy frameworks so that the tens of thousands of other Iraqi children who were caught up in armed conflict receive the long-term support needed to ensure their effective reintegration, regardless of what armed group they may have been affiliated with, or which ethnic or religious group they belong to. Likewise, in northeast Syria, concerted efforts and funding are needed to support the release and reintegration of tens of thousands of Syrian and other children who are living in camps, or are otherwise detained alongside the British children.

At a moment when the need to protect children from involvement in armed conflict has never been greater, there are worrying signs that the UK's commitment to this agenda may be waning. There have been significant cuts to the two UN institutions that lead global efforts to prevent and respond to child recruitment and use – notably the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC) and UNICEF. In April 2021, the UK government informed UNICEF – the leading UN operational agency for the protection of children – that it intended to reduce its core funding to the agency by approximately 60%. At the time, UNICEF warned that cuts to this budget, which allows it to respond rapidly to the most pressing child protection emergencies, would have “serious consequences for children.”<sup>24</sup>

Although the full impact of these cuts is, as yet, unclear, there is little doubt that the cumulative effect will increase children's vulnerability to recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups. Simultaneously, the capacity of child protection actors to prevent it will be reduced, as will the ability to support the release and reintegration of girls and boys who have fallen victim to exploitation by parties to armed conflict.



# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

War Child believes that greater priority must be given to:

## ENSURING THE PROTECTION OF BRITISH CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH - OR AT RISK OF ASSOCIATION WITH - ARMED GROUPS:

- All British children and their families detained in northeast Syria must be repatriated without delay. Young adults who were recruited by IS as children should be recognised, first and foremost, as victims of crimes under international law, and provided with specialised age- and gender-appropriate support for their return, rehabilitation and reintegration. This should include reinstatement of citizenship where it has been withdrawn.
- Review, in close consultation with child rights and child protection experts, the UK's support for countering "terrorism" and "violent extremism" in partner States to ensure that it does not put children's rights or best interests at risk in these countries.

## OPPOSING THE DETENTION OF CAAFAG AND SUPPORTING EFFORTS TO ENSURE ANY CAAFAG THAT ARE DETAINED ARE TREATED IN ACCORDANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL CHILD RIGHTS STANDARDS:

- Publicly and categorically oppose the detention, prosecution or punishment of CAAFAG solely on the basis of their alleged association with armed forces or armed groups.
- Proactively encourage and support States where CAAFAG are detained by security forces to adopt handover protocols to facilitate their swift transfer to civilian child protection actors for reintegration.
- Where CAAFAG are accused of serious crimes under international law, provide political, financial and technical support to national authorities to pursue prosecutions in line with international child-justice standards, which call for the use of detention as a measure of last resort, for the shortest period of time, and which encourage non-judicial alternatives to judicial proceedings and institutional care.

## STRENGTHENING UK MILITARY RESPONSES TO CAAFAG:

- Commit to using all necessary resources to achieve the full and rapid integration of doctrine on human security in defence across all military operations, including those relating to CAAC.
- Put in place robust processes, including conditionalities, to ensure that the UK does not partner with overseas militaries that recruit and use children, or that detain them solely for their association or perceived association with an armed group or force.
- Revise policies and doctrine in accordance with recommendations by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for all captured children under the age of 18 to benefit from special protection.

## ENHANCING SUPPORT FOR GLOBAL CAAFAG REINTEGRATION EFFORTS:

- Coordinate with like-minded States and donors to support authorities in conflict-affected countries to implement policies for the release and reintegration of all CAAFAG, in compliance with international child rights standards.
- Coordinate with other donors to ensure the availability of sufficient long-term, flexible funding for community-based, gender- and age-appropriate CAAFAG reintegration programmes, and factor children's reintegration into support for stabilisation, development, transitional justice and other relevant programmes.

## REVERSING FUNDING CUTS:

- All cuts to overseas aid budgets that impact negatively on global efforts to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups should be reversed. To aid CAAFAG reintegration, funding to OSRSG CAAC and UNICEF should be reinstated.



## END NOTES

1. See UNICEF, [Children Recruited by Armed Forces or Armed Groups](#), accessed 23 June, 2022.
2. This report is the third in War Child's series, Being a 'Force for Good' on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC). The two previous reports are available at [Our Policies and Reports – War Child](#).
3. See [Response to a Question by David Jones MP on Children and Armed Conflict by Vicky Ford, Parliamentary Under-Secretary Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office \(FCDO\)](#), 15 December, 2021.
4. The UNSC CAAC mandate was established 25 years ago by UN General Assembly resolution 51/77 (1997). For further information on the mandate and its development, see OSRSG CAAC, [25 Years to Better Protect Children Affected by Armed Conflict](#).
5. For example, the UK – in association with Save the Children, War Child, OSRSG CAAC and the Norwegian government – hosted a three-day event in April 2022, [Preparing the Children and Armed Conflict Agenda for the Future](#), that brought together key CAAC stakeholders and conflict-affected youth.
6. Thirteen resolutions on CAAC have been adopted by the UNSC since 1996. They are available at [Library – Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict \(un.org\)](#).
7. The UNSC Working Group on CAAC reviews reports on grave violations against children in armed conflict committed by parties that are listed in the annexes to the Secretary-General's annual report and recommends action to end/prevent such violations from occurring. For further details, see [Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict | United Nations Security Council](#).
8. Further information on agreed action plans and their implementation status is available at [Action Plans – Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict \(un.org\)](#).
9. There is no publicly available information available on the precise numbers. The estimated figures are based on information contained in All-Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Trafficked Britons in Syria Inquiry, Submission of Written Evidence by Save the Children, November 2021; Reprieve, [Trafficked to Syria: British Families Detained in Syria After being Trafficked to Islamic State](#), 30 April 2021, and Rights and Security International (RSI), [UK Failing to Prevent Torture of Citizens In Northeast Syria, Despite Global Move to Protect Vulnerable People](#), 13 July 2022.
10. RSI, [Global Repatriation Tracker](#), accessed 13 July 2022, and UK Special Representative for Syria, [Tweet](#), 5 April 2022.
11. A child separated from both parents and who is not being cared for by an adult, who in law or by custom has responsibility to do so.
12. See, for example, Save the Children, [When Am I Going to Start to Live?: The Urgent Need to Repatriate Foreign Children Trapped in Al-Hol and Roj Camps](#), 2021; RSI, [Abandoned to Torture: Dehumanising Rights Violations Against Children and Women in Northeast Syria](#), 13 October 2021; Reprieve, [Trafficked to Syria](#), 30 April 2021; Human Rights Watch (HRW), [Thousands of Foreigners Unlawfully Held in NE Syria](#), 23 March 2021; and UNICEF, [UNICEF Urges Repatriation of All Children in Syria's Al-Hol Camp Following Deadly Fire](#), 28 February 2021.
13. Save the Children, [Speed Up Repatriations or Foreign Children could be Stuck in North East Syria Camps for up to 30 Years, Warns Save the Children](#), 23 March 2022.
14. See Save the Children, [Speed Up Repatriations or Foreign Children could be Stuck in North East Syria Camps for up to 30 Years, Warns Save the Children](#), 23 March 2022, and The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), [Al-Hawl Camp: Nearly 15 Women and Children Killed and Wounded in Violent Clashes Between Military Forces and ISIS Cells](#), 29 March 2022.
15. The presence of British children in prisons could not be verified. It is unclear if the UK government has access to this information, but it is expected that they would be making proactive efforts to establish this either way in order to inform responses.
16. For example, in October 2021 the German Foreign Minister thanked the US for assistance in the repatriation of German children and their mothers. Federal Foreign Office, [Foreign Minister Maas on the Repatriation Operation from North- East Syria](#), 7 October 2021.
17. In a [letter](#) to the UK Government, a group of UN special rapporteurs outlined that under Article 2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), States "undertake to respect and ensure" the realisation of rights in the Covenant and that actions of the State that contribute to the violation of fundamental rights create responsibilities that are subject to the State's jurisdiction.
18. MoD, [JSP 985 Human Security in Defence Volume 1: Incorporating Human Security in the Way We Operate](#), Version 1.0 Dec 2021.
19. MoD, Written response, 23 May 2022.
20. For further details about where protocols have been agreed and guidance on them, see Watchlist, [A Path to Reintegration: The Role of Handover Protocols in Protecting the Rights of Children](#), December 2020, and Watchlist and Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, [Operational Guidance: Negotiating and Implementing Handover Protocols](#), March 2022.
21. UN Secretary-General Report on Children and Armed Conflict in Nigeria, UN Doc. S/2020/652, 6 July 2020.
22. In the final communiqué following the meeting, the UK government welcomed Nigeria's efforts to formalise the handover protocol, encouraged its prompt finalisation and offered to explore opportunities to support its implementation. See [UK-Nigeria Security and Defence Partnership Dialogue Communiqué](#), February 2022.
23. UN Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, 2022. According to Terre des Hommes (TdH), a survey in December 2020 found that at least 2,344 minors were detained in official prisons in Iraq for association with IS, but information was lacking for many prisons/detention facilities. See TdH, [Outside the Field of View: IS-Associated Children and Adolescents in Iraq](#), 2021, unofficial translation.
24. [UNICEF Statement on UK Funding Cuts](#), 30 April 2021. UNICEF leads implementation of the UN's CAAC agenda in countries affected by armed conflict, including by co-chairing the Country Task Forces on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMRs), or their equivalent working groups in designated 'situations of concern' which are responsible for leading implementation of the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations against children.

### Photo credits

Cover Image: Juvenile cell at a prison in Iraq taken in April 2019. © 2019 Human Rights Watch/Private  
Page 2: Women's cell at a prison in Iraq taken in April 2019 © 2019 Human Rights Watch/Private  
Page 11: Children sit among their family's belongings after being detained in a camp in northeast Syria © 2021 Sam Turling  
Page 14: A boy flies a home made kite at a camp in northeast Syria. © 2021 Sam Turling



**War Child UK**

Part Fourth Floor East, Dunn's Hat Factory, 106-110 Kentish Town Road, London NW1 9PX

+44 207 112 2555

[info@warchild.org.uk](mailto:info@warchild.org.uk)

[warchild.org.uk](http://warchild.org.uk)

UK registered charity no. 1071659

