

2.4. Child recruitment

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Children were recruited to Taliban ranks during their time as an insurgency.735 Sources have suggested that children have remained in Taliban ranks after the Taliban takeover,736 and that child recruitment has continued.737

The de facto authorities have been taking measures to remove and avoid recruiting young boys into their ranks, including by forming a commission for this purpose,738 and issuing a command order prohibiting the recruitment of children not showing signs of puberty.739 However, many people in Afghanistan do not know their age and do not perceive the age of 18 years as the end of childhood,740 rather this is assessed based on signs of puberty.741 The Taliban, including in their capacity as the de facto authorities, have been assessing the age of boys based on their beard's growth.742 The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan reported on the ambiguous legal definition of a child leaving adolescent children vulnerable to recruitment into the de facto armed forces.743 However, according to the Afghan analyst, many children have been removed from armed forces in this process, and young boys are not present among Taliban fighters in the same manner as directly after the takeover – although it was not a very common sight back then either.744

In 2023, the UN Secretary-General reported on 342 boys being used in combat and in support roles by the de facto authorities. Most boys (333) were released from Taliban ranks that year following negotiations with the UN. In the same report, the UN Secretary-General reported on 29 boys and 2 girls being detained for alleged association with opposing groups, of which one child died in custody.745 In July 2025, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, reported that the engagement of the UN with the de facto authorities had 'led to the release from their ranks of 58 children and their reintegration' in the period August 2024–July 2025.746

According to the USDOS Trafficking in persons report, published on 24 June 2024, children have been recruited by both the Taliban and other armed groups as soldiers for combat and support roles. The report states that the Taliban have been recruiting children in *madrassas* in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and often recruits children through coercion, fraud, and false promises', as well as by encouraging relatives to send their children to join Taliban ranks in order to 'expand its trusted personnel'. 747 In contrast, in their research on *madrassas* in Afghanistan, Rahimi and Watkins did not find any support for public *madrassas* engaging in militarised training or education, although they could not rule out that *madrassas* were being used for recruitment into the de facto administration. The prevalence of child recruitment was

not mentioned in the research paper.748 In an interview with the EUAA, Rahimi noted that although public *jihadi madrassas* may be used to identify suitable future de facto officials, it may take many years to complete such an education.749 More information is available in section 1.2.6. Impact on the education sector.

USDOS further stated that the NRF and the ISKP use children in 'direct hostilities', including to plant and detonate IEDs, carry weapons, spy and as guards. Recruitment strategies of such armed groups include targeting children from impoverished and rural areas, and displaced children are reportedly particularly vulnerable.750 It has not been possible to corroborate this information with other sources. Meanwhile, a research study carried out by Afghanistan expert Antonio Giustozzi suggested that the ISKP sought to recruit university students.751 The UN Sanctions and Monitoring Team also reported on the new ISKP leader focusing on recruiting more educated individuals and extending recruitment to non-Salafists.752 A research paper of Centre on Armed Groups identified the most common pathway to join the ISKP as through personal relationships or through religious institutions, and that the ISKP has 'capitalised on the Taliban's harassment of Salafists'. The report makes reference to child recruitment, but outlines how a 'younger generation' of ISKP recruits joining after the Taliban takeover in 2021 were inspired my male relatives that had previously joined the ISKP.753

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