

**Detention of Children in Times of Conflict:  
Are Rehabilitation Centres Used as an Ideological  
Instrument  
and as such Further Violate Their Rights?**

*A Comparative Analysis of Northeast Syria and Ukraine/Russia*

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14th June 2024, Geneva

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## **Executive Summary**

This comparative analysis draws from our desk-based literature review for the Applied Research Project on “Detention of Children in Times of Conflict: Are Rehabilitation Centres Used as an Ideological Instrument and as such Further Violate Their Rights?”. Based on the findings from the literature review, and insights gathered from expert interviews, this document highlights the multiple facets of children’s detention in times of conflict, specifically in Northeast Syria (NES) and Ukraine/Russia (UKRR), and emphasises the complexities of this phenomenon.

The analysis concludes that rehabilitation centres are employed as an instrument or strategy to detach children from their previous ideologies, religions, and cultures, placing them in environments where narratives and beliefs align with the overarching objectives of the governing authorities. In Northeast Syria (NES), rehabilitation centres are used to “de-radicalize” boys who are perceived as future threats due to their association with ISIS ideology. In Ukraine/Russia (UKRR), rehabilitation centres are designed to “integrate” Ukrainian children, through Russian centric education, into the Russian government’s notion of national culture, history, and society.

## **List of Abbreviations**

<b>AANES</b>	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
<b>HRW</b>	Human Rights Watch
<b>ICC</b>	International Criminal Court
<b>ICG</b>	International Crisis Group
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
<b>NES</b>	Northeast Syria
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>SDF</b>	Syrian Democratic Forces
<b>UKRR</b>	Ukraine/Russia
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNHRC</b>	United Nations Human Rights Council
<b>US</b>	United States

## Introduction

This comparative analysis, derived from our desk research titled “Detention of Children in Times of Conflict: Are Rehabilitation Centers Used as an Ideological Instrument and as such Further Violate Their Rights?” delineates similarities and differences concerning “rehabilitation centres” in the two examined case studies.<sup>1</sup>

The categories are structured thematically to help readers gain a clearer understanding of rehabilitation centres. The study starts with an examination of the ideological components of the centres and the occurring children’s rights violations. It then narrows it down to more technical and specific characteristics of the centres.

The analysis begins by seeking to decipher the rationale behind the rehabilitation centres, delving into the role ideology plays in sanctioning their establishment. Diverse aspects concerning the rehabilitation centres, such as their location, conditions, targeted groups, gendered dimension, composition, access to legal recourse are explored thereafter. The analysis reveals the range of actors involved in the abduction and transfer of children and how these centres are controlled and managed on a day-to-day basis. The legal framework explores the procedural rules, national legal frameworks, and violations of children’s rights. It is discussed how children’s illegal transfer breaches international laws.

Following each subcategory, a comprehensive analysis and expert assessment is provided. Conducting interviews with experts was pivotal and integral for our research. They allowed us to validate our information and findings, bolster the credibility of our research, and strengthen its legitimacy. The interviews also illuminated areas for further research. It is important to note that we encountered obstacles during the interview process. Given the sensitive nature of the subject—pertaining to children and their custody by powerful states—we faced significant reluctance from the practitioners approached for interviews. Due to these constraints, expert assessments could not be conducted for every subsection, as we relied on the knowledge and willingness of the interviewees to share information. Furthermore, we were unable to conduct any interviews with practitioners working with Ukrainian children for the Ukraine/Russia (**UKRR**) case. In the case of Northeast Syria (**NES**), language barriers arose as the local interviewees primarily spoke Arabic, necessitating the involvement of a translator.

When it comes to the **NES** case, we successfully carried out verification interviews with Mr. Jérôme Drevon, Senior Analyst at the International Crisis Group (ICG), a staff member of a Syrian NGO, and a

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<sup>1</sup> In light of this, all the provided information can be found cited in the literature review.

local researcher from Syria. The two latter interviewees requested to be referred to in an anonymous manner.

## **The Rationale Behind the “Rehabilitation Centres”**

In this section, we examine the alleged reasons, contributing factors, and ideologies leading to the unlawful detention of minors within rehabilitation or re-education centres in the case study of Ukraine/Russia (**UKRR**) and Northeast Syria (**NES**).

### **Ideology Behind the Camps**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, specific narratives and ideologies that align with those of the governing authorities are being forcibly imposed on children.
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In <b>NES</b>, there is a clear religious ideology underpinning to the establishment of rehabilitation centres, as a response to the perceived threat the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) hold of young boys being indoctrinated with military training and the ideology of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Thus in <b>NES</b>, the rehabilitation centres aim to de-radicalise young and adolescent boys allegedly tied to ISIS, and align them more greatly with the ideologies of the SDF and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).</p> <p>In the context of <b>UKRR</b>, Russia’s actions are motivated by a desire to "denazify", and perhaps more importantly to “russify" Ukrainian children. Considering the historical nature of Russia’s invasion into Ukraine and the narrative presented by President Vladimir Putin, the abduction, detention, and forcible transfer of Ukrainian children to rehabilitation centres indicates a clear ethnic and nationalistic subtext.</p>

### ***ANALYSIS***

The common narrative behind placing children in these so-called rehabilitation centres is to move them away from their past affiliations, family bonds, or cultural, religious, and national identity and to instill in them new beliefs and knowledge that align with the ideologies of the governing authorities.



## EXPERT ASSESSMENT

A local staff from a Syrian-based NGO has confirmed that children are being involuntarily detained based on the authorities' arbitrary perspectives. It has been stressed that these children should be seen as 'victims' of the conflict. Although there is no evidence of the children's direct affiliation with ISIS, it is true that their families had connections to the terrorist organisation, and some mothers continue to support ISIS persistently. Nonetheless, it is emphasised that these collective circumstances should not justify children's transfers and detentions as it is against children's rights and the law.

## The Targeting of Children

<b>Similarities</b>	Children are targeted in both cases as the strategies in <b>NES</b> and <b>UKRR</b> aim to “re-educate” and reshape the identities of the younger generation to prevent future opposition. Thus, the primary objective of targeting children appears to align with the aim of mitigating the potential for future extremism ( <b>NES</b> ) and threats to Russian nationalistic ideologies ( <b>UKRR</b> ).
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In the case of <b>NES</b>, the boys were detained and considered a potential threat because their parents had ties to ISIS, and the boys themselves were presumed to have connections to or were affiliates of ISIS.</p> <p>In the case of <b>UKRR</b>, Russia's practice of abducting Ukrainian children not only robs Ukraine of its future generations and erases Ukrainian identity, but also eliminates the potential for future resistance. At the same time, the Russian Federation portrays Ukrainian children as victims of the “Nazi regime in Kyiv”.</p>

## ANALYSIS

For the **UKRR** case, it is important to note that despite Russia's portrayal of Ukrainian children as victims, they are not treated as such. Reports from Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Al Jazeera reveal the mistreatment suffered by Ukrainian children who escaped re-education centres, where they were subjected to disdain and humiliation by the staff due to their Ukrainian identity. In **NES**, children are labelled as

victims of ISIS ideology and brainwashing, yet they are also regarded with suspicion, as the goal is to de-radicalize them to prevent potential future threats if they join extremist groups.

**EXPERT ASSESSMENT**

Through an interview with a Syrian-based NGO, it was confirmed that male children are viewed as a ‘potential threat’ due to their parents’ association with ISIS. While there is no concrete evidence proving their dangerousness, it was verified that some mothers are attempting to groom their male adolescents to become the next generation of ISIS fighters. It is emphasised that boys are often perceived as a risk primarily due to their association with radicalised mothers. The camps Al-Hol and Al-Roj are recognized for housing the most radicalised inhabitants. However, there is no documented evidence or interview materials revealing the specific locations within the camps where radicalization is most thriving and where young boys are being targeted and kidnapped.

**Gendered Dimensions**

<b>Similarities</b>	-
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In <b>NES</b>, it is mainly young and adolescent boys, due to their perceived affiliation with ISIS, who are placed in the detention camps.</p> <p>In the case of <b>UKRR</b>, there is less obvious gender segregation, as research indicates that both girls and boys are arbitrarily detained and placed in rehabilitation centres.</p>

**ANALYSIS**

In the **NES** (and broader Middle East), men are traditionally associated with engaging in military combat and fighting, while girls are excluded from these activities as they are not perceived as a threat. In contrast, in **UKRR**, women participate in military service, leading to the perception that they could pose a potential threat in the future and may need to be detained and re-educated.

## EXPERT ASSESSMENT

Gender-based differentiation has been verified through interviews with a staff member of a Syria-based NGO and Mr. Drevon, Senior Analyst at the International Crisis Group (ICG). The primary rationale for specifically removing male adolescents from the detention camps is to stop the exploitation of these young boys by radicalised mothers. Specifically, within the Al-Hol camp, there is evidence that some highly radicalised mothers are seeking to conceive children with male adolescents, driven by their belief in the ISIS ideology and their desire to raise the next generation of ISIS supporters. This suggests that the perception of threat has something to do with gender roles within ISIS ideology.

Moreover, both interviewees shared new information that could not be uncovered through desk research. According to a worker from an NGO in Syria, there are rehabilitation centres specifically for girls within the Al-Hol camp. These centres aim to help girls and orphans who lack communication and integration skills due to traumatic experiences. However, these centres are struggling due to a lack of financial, administrative, and material support, impacting the quality of education, healthcare, and basic necessities they can provide. While Mr. Drevon confirmed the presence of rehabilitation centres within Al-Hol, he noted that they lack organisation and coordination compared to off-camp centres such as Al-Houri or Orkesh, and are better described as a single structure offering some classes to female children, rather than rehabilitation centres.

## Composition Inside the Centres

<b>Similarities</b>	-
<b>Differences</b>	The situation is highly context-specific and thus the composition inside the centres varies based on the nature of and narrative for the conflict. In <b>NES</b> , the children detained in the centres are mainly composed of young and adolescent boys. Boys' nationalities consist of over 57 different countries, as their families and relatives initially travelled to the NES to join ISIS from all over the world. In <b>UKRR</b> , Ukrainian children are specifically targeted and placed in rehabilitation centres, leading to a more homogeneous situation.

## ***ANALYSIS***

The difference arises from the unique geopolitical contexts in which the conflicts are taking place. In **NES**, individuals from various countries have come together to fight for the Islamic State due to their ideological beliefs. In contrast, the **UKRR** case shows that Russia is advancing an expansionist agenda driven by ethnicity.

### ***EXPERT ASSESSMENT***

The differentiation of nationality is confirmed through interviews with a local NGO worker in Syria for two primary reasons: administrative purposes and risk management. Firstly, Syrians and Iraqis do not accept foreign nationals in Al-Hol due to cultural lifestyle differences, which leads to the separation of residential areas such as main camps and several blocks in the Annex of the Al-Hol. Secondly, in the Al-Roj camp, women from third-country nationals are highly radicalised and promote ISIS ideology, necessitating measures to prevent radicalization among other detainees. Research and interviews have revealed that Orkesh rehabilitation centres are focused on providing rehabilitation programs for foreign children, demonstrating how distinctions in nationality are reflected in the management of rehabilitation centres. Nonetheless, due to restricted access to other rehabilitation centres, even for local researchers it is difficult to verify the management of each rehabilitation facility.

## **Legal Framework**

This section emphasises the international legal framework on the detention and abduction of children and examines how in both Ukraine/Russia (**UKRR**) and Northeast Syria (**NES**), these laws and the rights of children are violated. Subsequently, we also explore the international measures, though limited, that have been taken in light of these violations.

### **Procedural Rules and National Legal Framework**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, the detention of children is arbitrary, does not abide by the rule of law, and does not follow procedural rules as set out under international law. Furthermore, in both cases, children cannot appeal their detention, as should be their right.
<b>Differences</b>	In <b>Russia</b> , there is a national framework justifying the forcible transfer of children. This is seen through the passing of Decree No 330, which accelerates the process of “adopting” Ukrainian children. In <b>NES</b> , however, there is no legal framework in place that justifies or legitimises the detention of children.

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### **Violation of Children’s Rights**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, the children are being arbitrarily detained and forcibly separated from their families. This detention (already illegal in and of itself under international law) is often indefinite, with a lack of a proper judicial process. Furthermore, in both cases, the socio, cultural, and religious rights of the children are being consistently violated.
<b>Differences</b>	In <b>UKRR</b> , the largest aspect of this is the systematic erasure of their national, cultural, and religious identity, through Russian centric education (“russification”), pro-Russia propaganda, and “denazification”. This kind of systematic erasure of identity is not necessarily present in <b>NES</b> . In <b>NES</b> , however, the largest aspect of rights violations is gender-based discrimination. This is not the case in <b>UKRR</b> . This gender-based discrimination, which targets young and adolescent boys (based on allegations that these children are “criminals” with perceived ties to ISIS) severely violates their family

	<p>rights, and their indefinite detention with no clear threshold for when “de-radicalisation” has been achieved, violates international law.</p> <p>It is important to note, however, that in both cases the violations of the children’s rights is far more extensive than what has been discussed.</p>
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**Actions on the International Level**

<b>Similarities</b>	<p>In both cases, action has been taken on the international level, though their approach differs. These contexts are highly sensitive, and even if the international community aims to improve conditions, it would be exceedingly difficult as the local authorities are unlikely to permit any external actors access to these areas.</p> <p>In <b>NES</b>, the constraints of the access are severe, with their activities being highly restricted. Achieving this access has been the result of years of effort, investment, coordination, and collaboration with local authorities, leading to the development of trust and acceptance and enabling negotiation for some level of access.</p> <p>Even if the international community were willing, their scope of action is quite limited since most of the available instruments, particularly those from the United Nations (UN), are not legally binding in the contexts of <b>NES</b> and <b>UKRR</b>.</p>
<b>Differences</b>	<p>For the case of <b>UKRR</b>, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued arrest warrants for President Putin and L’vova-Belova, condemning the forcible transfer of children.</p> <p>For the case of <b>NES</b>, international actions have more so been focused on calling for states to reintegrate the children held in these detention centres.</p>

## **Detention of children in “rehabilitation centres”**

In the upcoming section, we analyse the characteristics of targeted groups and detail how each actor in Ukraine/Russia (**UKRR**) and Northeast Syria (**NES**) carries out the process from the abduction to the detention of children. Furthermore, we conduct a comprehensive examination of the fate of these children.

### **Targeted Groups**

<b>Similarities</b>	<p>In both cases, minors (up to 17-18 years old) are the primary focus. Reportedly, no children over 18 years old are targeted. In both regions, children who share vulnerability are targeted although there are differences in type of ‘vulnerability.’</p> <p>The <b>UKRR</b> case reveals that, particularly children with pre-existing vulnerabilities such as physical/intellectual handicaps or situations of being deprived of parental care (orphans) are susceptible to forced transfers.</p> <p>Children of <b>NES</b> are primarily forced to live in vulnerable and stigmatised conditions due to their parents’ affiliations to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (<b>ISIS</b>) and its radical ideology, rather than their pre-existing vulnerability.</p>
<b>Differences</b>	<p>Gender - The targeting of boys in <b>NES</b> indicates specific ideological reasons behind the selection, while the targeting of both genders in the <b>UKRR</b> case suggests different aims behind the targeting.</p> <p>Nationality - Northeast Syrian authorities are not only focusing on their own nationals but also on children from third countries, indicating a religious ideology and a complex geopolitical situation. Initially, individuals from third countries travelled to join <b>ISIS</b>; however, their countries of origin are now hesitant to repatriate them. Consequently, these centres may serve as a securitization means for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (<b>AANES</b>) and Syrian Democratic Forces (<b>SDF</b>). In contrast, Russian authorities are explicitly targeting Ukrainians, reflecting Russia’s motives based on historical and ethnic grounds.</p>

	<p>Age - AANES primarily targets adolescents (11-18 years old), while Russian authorities capture Ukrainian children across various age groups. This shows that there is a sense of age-based distinction deriving from the context of each conflict.</p> <p>Official Agenda - Some UKRR cases show that the Russian Federation applies a filtration process to Ukrainians and sorts out who to deport or not. In NES, there is no such a process, and decisions of transfer are completely arbitrary.</p>
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***ANALYSIS***

It has been uncovered that the AANES and the Russian Federation are taking advantage of vulnerable children, particularly minors. This implies that they are purposely targeting children who are unable to protect their own rights and who lack the necessary support that children require, such as education, parental guidance, or a safe environment.

Significant differences exist in the motives, methods, and demographics of how children are targeted. In **NES**, the focus is on rehabilitating teenage boys who have been influenced by ISIS and its ideology, with decisions on their relocation appearing to be made arbitrarily. This suggests that security concerns may not be based on factual evidence or that authorities make decisions without proper justification.

Conversely, children are targeted based on their nationalities in the case of **UKRR**. With the focus on the ethnic origin of children, Russian authorities are taking a more comprehensive targeting of children of all ages, exploiting groups with pre-existing vulnerabilities. These differences may be due to unique geopolitical, historical, ideological, and ethnic circumstances in each region.



## **EXPERT ASSESSMENT**

A local researcher from Syria has confirmed that the Al-Houri and Orkesh rehabilitation centres exclusively cater to male adolescents, with no female children present. Interestingly, the researcher noted that all boys in these centres have been convicted of crimes. However, Mr. Drevon, Senior Analyst at the International Crisis Group (ICG), has argued that it is highly challenging to verify the boys' alleged crimes. One reason for this difficulty is that crimes committed by children are often hard to prove. Additionally, both a Syrian local NGO and Mr. Drevon have confirmed that the decisions to transfer boys are arbitrary. Considering this fact, boys may be transferred with no concrete evidence of committed crimes to justify these transfers.

## **Actors of Abduction and Transfer of Children**

<b>Similarities</b>	Abductions are conducted by the forces which belong to each country. In <b>NES</b> , Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the security forces of the AANES. Meanwhile, Russian Federation forces are the actors of children's deportation in <b>Ukraine</b> .
<b>Differences</b>	Although the government of the <b>Russian Federation</b> is an internationally recognized country by the UN, <b>Northeast Syria</b> is currently under the control of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), an autonomous authority established by the Kurdish ethnic community and is not politically recognized by any countries.

## **ANALYSIS**

Although there are disparities in political recognition and control, both scenarios entail the forcible abduction of minors by forces representing each country's presence. Although the context of the conflicts differs between the two cases, the common thread of separating children from their families against their will indicates a strategic agenda to exploit children that is intended by official channels.

## *EXPERT ASSESSMENT*

The SDF is involved in the forcible removal of male children, and currently, there is no official and reasonable explanation provided for the decision to transfer boys. These facts have been verified by a local worker from a Syrian NGO and Mr. Drevon, Senior Analyst of the ICG. One possible narrative suggested through desk research is that AANES authorities believe it is crucial to separate detainees based on their level of radicalization for several reasons. This approach allows for tailored rehabilitation programs, reduces the influence of highly radicalised individuals, and enables better monitoring of detainees' progress for more successful deradicalization and reintegration. That being said, the official agenda for male children's transfer is not fully confirmed.

### **Target Locations by Actors**

<b>Similarities</b>	-
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In <b>NES</b>, children are targeted in compartmentalised places such as detention camps, the Annex of the camp, or sometimes prisons. As for the reported cases, there is no prior notice given to children's families by the SDF.</p> <p>In the case of <b>UKRR</b>, the Russian Federation targets Ukrainian children in varying locations. Some cases show that in institutionalised settings with no parents' presence, such as boarding schools, orphanages, or summer camps. Other cases show that parents are forced or tricked to let go of their children under coercion. In <b>UKRR</b>, this forcible separation occurs most often during the process of filtration.</p>

### ***ANALYSIS***

In both **NES** and **UKRR** cases, children are abducted, albeit in different ways and contexts. All cases are seemingly without judicial decisions affiliated with individual accusations against children; rather, they are based on arbitrary decisions of each region's authority. Children and their families will face constant risk of coercive separations as long as children are considered a 'risk' to national security on a whole by each regional authority.

## *EXPERT ASSESSMENT*

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the NGO staff member from Syria revealed that the majority of male adolescents are taken during the campaign that the SDF carries out. Specifically, the SDF requests women to assemble at a designated location, so that they can identify and abduct male adolescents. The SDF forcibly separates male children from their mothers or families, causing mothers to try to hide their children by digging holes in the ground, but the SDF systematically inspects each tent to look for the presence of any boys. It is also unravelled that these abductions occur formally during the daytime.

### **Ultimate Locations of Children**

<b>Similarities</b>	<p>In both scenarios, the specific whereabouts of individual minors become untraceable once they are deemed "rehabilitated" or "re-educated" in the facilities.</p> <p>In the case of <b>NES</b>, there is no official documentation regarding the ultimate placement of the children. Repatriation by their respective countries appears to be the most feasible resolution. Meanwhile, the <b>Russian Federation</b> has an official strategy to integrate deported Ukrainian children into Russian society by granting them Russian citizenship and arranging for them to live with Russian families.</p>
<b>Differences</b>	-

### ***ANALYSIS***

The most pressing issue that can be found in both cases is the lack of knowledge about the final destinations of the children. After the so-called 'rehabilitation' and 're-education' processes are completed, there seem to be no official explanations for children's families and where exactly children are sent to, which makes it difficult for their families or relatives to trace children's fate. This significant information gap not only impedes the work of NGOs, field experts, and researchers but also perpetuates a cycle of uncertainty and precarity for children and their families.

## **EXPERT ASSESSMENT**

All interviewees unanimously agreed that repatriation is the only solution for children trapped in the cycle of indefinite detention. Notably, children of third-country nationals have no meaningful alternatives besides repatriation. According to a local NGO worker in Syria who spoke anonymously, male adolescents of foreign nationals who are detained in rehabilitation centres are transferred to prisons once they reach 18 years of age. There are no documented cases of children being returned to detention camps such as Al-Hol and Al-Roj and being reunited with their mothers or families after being discharged from the rehabilitation centres. It is recognized that Syrian and Iraqi children are released after the payment of ransom by their families and reintegrated into local communities. The interviews revealed the challenges faced by families or relatives in locating the children's final whereabouts, as confirmed by the desk research findings.

### **How Children are Placed in Detention Facilities**

<b>Similarities</b>	<p>Children are taken away from their caregivers or parents without consent or legal procedure, causing forced separation.</p> <p>There is a lack of consistent communication regarding the explanations or criteria for children's transfer by AANES authorities in <b>NES</b>. Similarly, in the case of <b>UKRR</b>, children's transfer is solely decided by the Russian Federation authorities. While the Russian authorities reportedly provide some official justification for their decisions, it is considered to lack credibility.</p>
<b>Differences</b>	-

### **ANALYSIS**

In both **NES** and **UKRR**, children being separated from their families without proper consent or transparency are confirmed. Although there may be varying levels of official explanation, the fundamental problem of unilateral decision-making and inadequate accountability persists in both cases. This suggests that children's transfers are not based on proper judicial decision and procedures, amounting to violation of international law.

### *EXPERT ASSESSMENT*

Mr. Drevon, a Senior Analyst at the ICG, has verified that children lack access to proper legal representation and procedures. The transfer process is often a deliberate decision by the SDF, and lacks coordination, leading to insufficient communication of explanations to the children's mothers or families. Furthermore, he was unable to confirm the criteria for children's transfer decisions, as not all male adolescents are transferred to rehabilitation centres; some are sent to prisons. The absence of a legal basis and transparency in the selection process was confirmed in the interview, as the desk research findings indicate.

## **The conditions in the rehabilitation centres**

In the subsequent passage, the detention conditions for children in rehabilitation or re-education centres will be expanded upon. Through an examination of these conditions, an assessment can be made regarding the extent to which the treatment of children complies with established human rights standards.

### **Detention Conditions**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both <b>Northeast Syria (NES)</b> and <b>Ukraine/Russia (UKRR)</b> , children are detained in poor living conditions.
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In the <b>NES</b> case, rehabilitation facilities such as Orkesh and Al-Houri are better coordinated than camps or prisons. According to Ní Aoláin, “Position of the United Nations Special Rapporteur”, efforts to provide improved material conditions to meet international standards are recognized, with access to running water, beds, and a courtyard.</p> <p>Meanwhile, <b>UKRR</b> cases show that children are subjected to forced transfers to harsh camps with restrictions on expressing their identity. Several news reports, such as The New York Times, extreme living conditions and gross mistreatment inside these camps.</p>

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### **Healthcare**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both <b>Northeast Syria (NES)</b> and <b>Ukraine/Russia (UKRR)</b> , there is limited available information on the operations and overall healthcare conditions of the centres.
<b>Differences</b>	The literature implies that rehabilitation centres, such as Orkesh and Al-Houri, are trying to provide better healthcare services. However, the reality remains unclear due to limited information on operations of rehabilitation centres in <b>NES</b> .

	In <b>UKRR</b> , numerous concerns have been reported regarding the mental health of some of the children. However, there is no available information on the overall healthcare condition of the centres.
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## Education

<b>Similarities</b>	In both <b>Northeast Syria (NES)</b> and <b>Ukraine/Russia (UKRR)</b> , there seems to be limited access to formal education.
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In some centres of <b>NES</b>, children have limited opportunities for informal education, primarily focused on craft making or vocational training, where young and adolescent boys learn skills such as tailoring or barbering. In other centres, there is no access to informal education whatsoever</p> <p>In <b>UKRR</b>, at least 32 centres have been identified to engage in systematic “re-education” efforts, advertised as integration programs for Ukrainian children. These programs subject the children to indoctrination, or education aligning with the Russian government’s vision of national culture, history, and society. Furthermore, in certain rehabilitation centres, there is evidence of Ukrainian children being subjected to military training, with boys, for example, learning how to handle firearms.</p>

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## Contact with Families

<b>Similarities</b>	In both the cases of <b>NES</b> and <b>UKRR</b> , the children have limited contact with their families.
<b>Differences</b>	In the case of <b>NES</b> , the extent to which young and adolescent boys have contact with their families is unclear. Whilst some sources claim that families can be reached twice a week through phone calls and regular visits are arranged with mothers, other sources claim that the young boys have very limited contact.

	In the case of <b>UKRR</b> , it is reported that parents are told to not send cell phones with their children to camp, they are not given contact details for camp officials, and children are moved without parental notification.
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### Duration of Detentions

<b>Similarities</b>	In both the cases of <b>Northeast Syria (NES)</b> and <b>Ukraine/Russia (UKRR)</b> , the children are being detained for an indefinite duration of time.
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In the case of <b>NES</b>, the detention of young and adolescent boys is based on efforts of de-radicalisation. However, in many cases, these boys are sent to adult prisons once they turn 18 leading to uncertainty in the duration of their detention.</p> <p>In the case of <b>UKRR</b>, the indefinite detention is influenced by several factors. In some cases, for example, children were sent willingly by their parents to Russian summer camps. However, following the supposed end of these camps, parents encountered difficulties in retrieving their children, resulting in prolonged detention. For children forcibly transferred to orphanages, this uncertainty is even greater.</p>

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### Legal Representation

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, the children have a lack of legal representation, or access to appropriate judicial proceedings.
<b>Differences</b>	In the case of <b>NES</b> , children are not provided with legal justification for their detention, nor are they represented in administrative proceedings leading to their detention.



	In the case of <b>UKRR</b> , evidence on legal representation and judicial proceedings is limited, though research demonstrates a lack of legal consent from parents regarding their child's attendance to the summer camps.
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**International Response**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, concerns have been raised by international organisations.
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In the case of <b>NES</b>, both the UN and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have raised concerns regarding the conditions of these rehabilitation centres. After a site visit, the UN Human Rights special rapporteur noted that many boys were traumatised by being separated from their mothers. In addition, HRW observed children wandering around the courtyard or sitting and staring into space, instead of attending ‘vocational training’, as part of the detention program.</p> <p>In the case of the <b>UKRR</b>, the ICC has issued warrants of arrest for Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Commissioner for children's rights in the Office of the President, Maria Lvova-Belova. The ruling stated that they are “allegedly responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. This ruling was supported by the Council of Europe, which urged for its enforcement.</p>

**Violations of Human Rights**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, the children are being arbitrarily detained and forcibly separated from their families. This detention (already illegal in and of itself under international law) is often indefinite, with a lack of a proper judicial process. Furthermore, in both cases, the socio, cultural, and religious rights of the children are being consistently violated.
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<b>Differences</b>	In <b>UKRR</b> , the largest aspect of this is the systematic erasure of their national, cultural, and religious identity, through Russian centric education (“russification”), pro-Russia propaganda, and “denazification”. In addition, Ukrainian children are coerced into accepting Russian citizenship. This kind of systematic erasure of identity is not necessarily present in <b>NES</b> . In <b>NES</b> , however, the largest aspect of rights violations is gender-based discrimination. This is not the case in <b>UKRR</b> . This gender-based discrimination, which targets young and adolescent boys (based on allegations that these children are “criminals” with perceived ties to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) severely violates their family rights, and their indefinite detention with no clear threshold for when “de-radicalisation” has been achieved, violates international law.
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**Government Accountability**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, there is limited government accountability.
<b>Differences</b>	In <b>NES</b> , the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and regional authorities are implicated with limited accountability. Though condemned on an international level, the actions in the case of <b>UKRR</b> are justified through a national framework, leading to a lack of accountability and President Putin himself denying wrongdoing.

**ANALYSIS**

Children in both **NES** and **UKRR** endure detention with poor living conditions, limited healthcare, education, and family contact. In **NES**, both the Orkesh and Al-Houri rehabilitation facilities aim to meet international human rights standards by providing better material conditions with running water, beds, and access to a courtyard. However, activities are limited to craft-making, with no formal education available. There is limited information available about living conditions inside **UKRR**’s rehabilitation centres, but in Reuters special report the children revealed they lived in overcrowded rooms, slept on hard beds with thin blankets, they were forced to sing the Russian national anthem and received training to make military equipment. International concerns are raised in both cases, with limited government accountability: SDF authorities in the **NES** case and denial of wrongdoing by the Russian government in the **UKRR** case.

## *EXPERT ASSESSMENT*

As per his interview, Mr. Drevon, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group (ICG), confirmed that the rehabilitation centres' conditions are more organised than detention camps. A Syrian researcher has corroborated the details of the operations at the Al-Houri and Orkesh rehabilitation centres. The boys receive craft-making classes, vocational training, and language classes (in Arabic and English) but do not have access to formal education. The researcher added that the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) grants children a weekly family visit for Al-Houri and Orkesh rehabilitation centres. However, further verification needs to be provided that the regular visit is maintained because, through desk research, multiple reports mention children's mothers residing in camps being cut off from communication with their children, seemingly transferred to the rehabilitation centres. As for the frequency of phone calls, the researcher did not have any solid confirmation.

The researcher noted that maintaining the same standard of living is challenging due to insufficient funds. In interviews with a local researcher and local NGO staff in Syria, it was revealed that the ICRC and Save the Children have access to the Orkesh and Al-Houri rehabilitation centres. Save the Children is closely collaborating with the AANES to uphold some minimum human rights standards, however, access and scope of activities are limited. Additionally, the both interviewees confirmed that the boys are detained for approximately 6 to 7 years. Considering that they were captured at the age of 11 or 12, and the rehabilitation centre accepts boys up to 18 years old, this seems highly plausible.

## **The Rehabilitation Centres**

This section provides an encompassing outline of rehabilitation centres situated in Ukraine/Russia (**UKRR**) and Northeast Syria (**NES**). This overview will include their scope, objectives, and geographical characteristics. Furthermore, the examination will entail an in-depth exploration of the managerial structures of these centres.

### **Number of Centres**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, numerous facilities that are targeting children are identifiable, though those explicitly focused on ‘rehabilitation’ and/or ‘re-education’ are less evident.
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In <b>NES</b>, as of June 2022, a total of 28 facilities with varying sizes and conditions have been identified, encompassing detention centres, prisons, and “rehabilitation centres”, which specifically targeted children. However, the exact count of rehabilitation centres for children within this total remains unclear, although at least two were specifically identified by Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Al-Houi and Orkesh rehabilitation centres.</p> <p>In <b>UKRR</b>, a network of 43 “rehabilitation centres” has been identified, 41 of them already existed prior to the conflict. These centres are concealed under various guises such as summer camps, filtration centres, and social institutions for orphans or ‘problematic’/ ‘difficult’ teenagers.</p>

### ***ANALYSIS***

Identifying facilities specifically designated as “rehabilitation centres” can be challenging for several reasons such as ambiguous terminology, concealment, dual functions, limited access, and lack of transparency. Ambiguous terminology may, for example, make it difficult to identify these centres solely based on their names. In other cases, authorities may deliberately conceal the true nature of these facilities to avoid scrutiny and criticism. Other centres may serve multiple factors, complicating efforts to categorise them as “rehabilitation centres”.

This stark difference in the number of known facilities between **NES** and **UKRR**, with **UKRR** having nearly double the amount, underscores several factors at play. One key factor could be territorial limitations. While the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is constrained to operating within **NES**, Russia faces no such constraints possessing vast geographical expanse of its own borders and

occupied territories. Moreover, utilising pre-existing facilities eliminates the need for new construction, providing a strategic advantage. Therefore, it is highly probable that there are numerous unidentified or unverified centres in **UKRR**.

In contrast, the case of **NES** faces hurdles in expanding its number of facilities due to financial constraints. Although the AANES intends to increase the number of “rehabilitation centres” in its territory, their current lack of funding impedes their ability to do so.

**EXPERT ASSESSMENT**

According to a local Syrian researcher who spoke on the condition of anonymity, pinpointing the exact total of rehabilitation centres in NES proves to be a challenging task. While it is speculated that there may be around twenty-eight detention facilities through desk research, distinguishing those that function as rehabilitation centres remains a complex endeavour. This statement was also verified by Mr. Drevon, Senior Analyst of the International Crisis Group (ICG). The information was confirmed through an interview with a local Syrian researcher that the lack of attention and fundings from the international community is also one of the backdrops hindering the plan. Moreover, the determination of the exact number of camps is hindered by the presence of different conceptualisations of what a rehabilitation camp is by different international organisations.

**Purpose of Centres**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, the centres aim, through ‘re-education’ and ‘rehabilitation’, to address ‘issues’ related to children’s exposure to certain ideological beliefs or behaviours.
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In <b>NES</b>, the official narrative for the “rehabilitation centres” is to de-radicalise, disengage, and rehabilitate children exposed to extreme ideologies of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).</p> <p>In <b>UKRR</b>, the official narrative for the “rehabilitation centres” is to engage in ideological ‘re-education’, ‘de-nazification’, or to transfer Ukrainian children under Russian guardianship.</p>

## ***ANALYSIS***

Thus, in both **NES** and **UKRR**, the centres aim to align the children with an ideology that fits with the narrative of the governing authority. In the case of **NES**, it is about moving the children away from what is an extremist ideology, whilst in **UKRR**, it is about moving the children to believe in Russian-centric ideologies.

This stark difference is due to the distinct ideological and geopolitical contexts in which these centres operate. On the one hand, AANES' focus on countering extremist ideology aligns with its broader goals of promoting stability and countering extremism within its territory. On the other hand, Russia's emphasis on ideological 're-education', often framed as 'de-Nazification' of Ukrainian children, reflects the geopolitical tensions between the two countries. Ultimately, the Russian government holds strategic interests in influencing perceptions within territories it controls or seeks to control, and ensuring ideological alignment with state narratives.

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### **Geographical Location**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, the “rehabilitation centres” are situated in regions that are affected by conflict or geopolitical tensions.
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In <b>Northeast Syria (NES)</b>, the centres are situated in territories controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), distinct from areas controlled by the Syrian Armed Forces of Bashar al-Assad. Additionally, these centres are strictly confined within Syrian borders and do not extend beyond them.</p> <p>In <b>Ukraine/Russia (UKRR)</b>, the centres are present both within Russia itself and within territories under Russian control or influence, including regions located within Ukraine such as Crimea.</p>

## ***ANALYSIS***

The placement of these centres in regions affected by conflict or geopolitical tensions could be due to several factors such as the proximity to areas affected by conflict and the target population, and government control. In **NES**, the rehabilitation centres are close to where the fighting was happening, so that children that have been exposed to ISIS ideologies are most likely to be found here and give them access. In **UKRR**,

the location of the centres is generally close to the border, so that it is easier to place them in the centres. This stark difference reflects the regional geopolitical contexts of where the “rehabilitation centres” are located. Whilst in NES the “rehabilitation centres” are situated in the context of the Syrian conflict, Kurdish autonomy, and the defeat of ISIS, those in UKRR are situated in the context of Russo-Ukrainian tensions, annexation, and territorial control.

### Capacity of Centres

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, it is probable that the actual number of children held in these centres exceeds the figures presented in this study. Additionally, in both cases, the exact capacity of these centres remains unclear.
<b>Differences</b>	<p>In the two identified rehabilitation centres in <b>NES</b>, and at the time of data collection, approximately 300 underage boys were being held. 203 of these boys are being held at Al-Houri rehabilitation centre, whilst 97 of these boys are being held at Orkesh rehabilitation centre. It is estimated that a further 1,000 children are being held in prisons and other “rehabilitation centres” yet to be specifically identified, which are mostly for adults (which poses additional issues).</p> <p>In <b>UKRR</b>, the exact number of children currently held in “rehabilitation centres” is uncertain. A conservative estimate suggests that approximately 6,000 children have passed through these centres. However, the number of children forcibly displaced or deported presents a different picture. According to the National Information Bureau of Ukraine, as of February of 2024, 19,546 children have been deported or forcibly displaced, although this figure solely represents those on which the bureau has information. In contrast, Russia’s Commissioner for Children’s Rights claims that 700,000 Ukrainian children have crossed the border or been evacuated from Ukraine into Russia since the full-scale invasion began in 2022.</p>

### **ANALYSIS**

There are several reasons for why this may be the case. Firstly, access to these centres is restricted, resulting in limited transparency regarding their operations. Thus, INGOs may not be able to verify the information they receive, leading to an inaccurate representation of the issue. Secondly, reporting practices vary between

organisations and authorities, leading to inconsistencies in figures presented. Additionally, some children may be unofficially detained or not officially registered, further complicating international monitoring.

The disparity in reported numbers versus actual number of children held may stem from several factors. Firstly, in **NES**, there is greater accessibility to “rehabilitation centres”, despite this access still being limited to only two centres. This access makes it fundamentally easier to verify the number of children currently being held. Additionally, the focus in NES is not to quickly move children through the centres, and the reluctance of third countries to repatriate their citizens, may contribute to limited capacities of centres. Conversely, in **UKRR**, the ultimate objective is to ‘integrate’ these children into Russian society. Thus, a higher volume of children is ‘passed’ through the system.

**EXPERT ASSESSMENT**

Although the interview was conducted with Mr. Drevon, Senior Analyst of the ICG, he was unable to confirm the exact total number of children detained across Northeast Syria, as well as the number of children detained in rehabilitation centres. Therefore, we must rely on the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)’s report which was published March 2024, even though the numbers are still speculative. Regarding the two centres Al-Houri and Orkesh, a local Syrian researcher confirmed their capacity during the interview: Al-Houri has a capacity of 250-300, and Orkesh has a capacity of 150. Noteworthy is that the Orkesh facility is designed to rehabilitate only foreign national boys; another local Syrian researcher also confirmed this fact. Based on these facilities’ capacity, only a maximum of 450 individuals can go through rehabilitation programs in the centres. This fact indicates that some hundreds of boys are being held in other detention facilities including prisons and rehabilitation centres that have not yet been identified. Furthermore, there is no concrete evidence of the implementation of a specific program; instead, these centres are designed to detain boys primarily to prevent them from potentially joining radical groups as they get older.

**Management and Control of the Centres**

<b>Similarities</b>	In both cases, the oversight and management of the “rehabilitation centres” involve the participation and support of high-ranking officials.
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## Differences

In **NES**, the “rehabilitation centres” are overseen and managed by AANES officials and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which serves as the official military wing of the AANES. These centres are also backed by the US-led military coalition.

In **UKRR**, oversight and management of “rehabilitation centres” are managed by various entities ranging from federal-level authorities to regional officials. These centres are centrally imposed and authorised by Russia’s national government, with official backing from President Putin and the Commissioner for Children’s Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova. Tatyana Moskalkova, Russia’s Commissioner for Human Rights, plays a crucial role in the development of specific camp programs.

## ANALYSIS

The involvement of high-ranking officials in the oversight may be influenced by factors such as political significance, resource allocation, legitimacy and authority, and policy influence. This shows that the use of such centres is part of a political strategy and their use is institutionalised in the political system. The differences in oversight and management of the “rehabilitation centres” in NES and UKRR can be attributed to the distinct political and governance structures in each region. In **NES**, the “rehabilitation centres” are situated in the de facto autonomous region of AANES. Under Kurdish governance, and not in alignment with Bashar al-Assad, the current President of Syria, the governance structure reflects the autonomous nature of governance in the region. In **UKRR**, however, the “rehabilitation centres” are situated in Russian controlled territory, and with national authorisation, reflect the centralised, top-down, nature of governance in the country.

## EXPERT ASSESSMENT

Mr. Drevon, Senior Analyst at the ICG, has verified that the AANES has taken on the responsibility for operating rehabilitation centres. Despite the backing of the US-led coalition, management roles for rehabilitation centres are delegated to the AANES without direct involvement from US forces. He added that the presence of US forces within the AANES serves as a powerful symbol of authority and may carry significant influence. In this regard, Mr. Drevon did not have specific information regarding Al-Houri and Orkesh rehabilitation centres.

## Conclusion

The research question originally posed was “Detention of Children in Times of Conflict: Are Rehabilitation Centres Used as an Ideological Instrument and as such Further Violate their Rights?”. The literature review, and subsequent comparative analysis demonstrate that rehabilitation centres are indeed being used as an ideological instrument to further violate the rights of children. Already illegal in nature, with the detention, abduction, and transfer of children often being arbitrary and unjustified, these rehabilitation centres are used as an instrument to move children away from their past ideologies, religions, and cultures, to narratives and beliefs that fit in with the overarching aims or goals of the governing authorities in the two respective contexts.

In the case of **Northeast Syria (NES)**, rehabilitation centres are used to “de-radicalize” boys who are perceived as future threats due to their association with ISIS ideology. Following thorough desk research and expert interviews, three significant issues have come to light in the **NES** case. First of all, the ISIS ideology has distorted the perception of children. Boys are often seen as ‘future threats’ to regional and national security rather than victims of armed conflict resulting from counter-terrorism measures against ISIS violent extremism. This is linked to gender roles within ISIS ideology, leading to the targeting and transfer of male adolescents to rehabilitation centres. Secondly, a coercive approach is taken in the transfer of children. Boys are forcibly separated from their mothers and families without transparent consent and explanations from Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) authorities. The transfer decisions lack proper judicial processes and legal representation, and instead, an ideological assumption that ‘boys could be the next generation of ISIS fighters’ is emphasised. Lastly, children are caught in an indefinite detention cycle. Rehabilitation programs have no clear criteria for when a boy is considered ‘rehabilitated’ and no plan for their future, often leading to imprisonment upon reaching 18 years old, unless repatriated by their country of origin. There is also no chance to reunite with their families or mothers once being taken out from detention camps or rehabilitation facilities.

In the case of **Ukraine/Russia (UKRR)**, the centres are being used to “denazify” and “russify” Ukrainian children, by promoting Russian centric education and integration programmes. This fits in with Russia’s nationalist sentiments and historical narratives for the full-scale invasion into Ukraine, which aims to promote one nation, language, and culture. Though the methods and measures vary between contexts, it is clear that rehabilitation centres are ‘vessels’ for governing authorities to advance their own aspirations, ambitions, and objectives through children. This process involves promoting Russian-centric education, pro-Russia propaganda, and coercing Ukrainian children into accepting Russian citizenship. This erasure

of national, cultural, and religious identity is a severe violation of children's rights. Ukrainian children are subjected to forced transfers without legal consent from their parents. As in **NES**, the transfer process is arbitrary, lacks proper judicial oversight, and children lack access to proper legal representation and judicial proceedings. The detention is often indefinite, with no clear end in sight, leading to prolonged separation from their families and communities.

To conclude, the actions in both **NES** and **UKRR** are in clear violation of international legal standards and children's rights. The arbitrary detention, forced separation from families, and ideological indoctrination without proper legal procedures and representation are severe breaches of international law. The lack of accountability from the governing authorities further exacerbates the situation, leaving children in a state of indefinite detention. This research highlights the urgency of repatriation and reintegration of children to their countries of origin. This a process that would involve collaboration between international organisations, NGOs, and the respective governments to ensure children's rights are upheld and they are reunited with their families. Moreover, there is a need to strengthen legal frameworks and ensure proper judicial oversight in the detention processes, which includes providing legal representation for children and ensuring their rights to appeal and due process are upheld. The international community must hold governing authorities accountable for the violations of children's rights. This involves enforcing international legal standards and ensuring that actions taken by authorities in conflict zones are subject to scrutiny and accountability. Rehabilitation centres, while intended to provide care and support, are being misused as ideological instruments, causing further harm to vulnerable children. Immediate and effective measures are required to protect these children, uphold their rights, and ensure their safe and dignified return to their families and communities.