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Through Their Eyes: Contextualized Analysis of Drawings by Former ISIS Child Soldiers in Iraq

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Abstract

This article presents a contextualized interpretation of drawings created by former child soldiers of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The drawings were generated as part of a collaborative storytelling project in Northern Iraq in 2019 that aimed at identifying the psychosocial needs of these militarized children. The analysis focuses on two distinct groups: Arab-Sunni and Yezidi boys, each representing different pathways into and experiences within ISIS, leading to varied forms of social stigmatization. The findings reveal significant differences in how violence, agency, and social attributions are represented in the narratives and drawings of the two groups. The study underscores the importance of collaborative meaning-making in representing marginalized groups and highlights the potential to combine drawings with other qualitative methods to minimize the risk of over-interpretation. This approach provides nuanced insights into the children's struggle for agency and interpretative ownership in the face of powerful social narratives. This article contributes to the broader discourse on child soldiers and the use of visual methodologies in conflict-affected areas.

Keywords

child soldiers; collaborative stories; collective violence; drawings; ISIS; participatory research; trauma

1. Introduction

While children's drawings have been studied in the social sciences for over a century (Walker, 2007), their use as a systematic data collection method in qualitative social research has gained significant traction only

in the past two decades (Kekeritz & Kubandt, 2022; Leavy, 2018). This trend can be attributed to the development and academic institutionalization of participatory research approaches, which seek to employ innovative methods tailored to the needs of groups often marginalized by conventional research designs (Brown et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2017).

In research involving children and youth in (post-)conflict and war zones, drawings have been assigned various functions. As age-sensitive and playful methods, drawings enable children and young people to express their unique worldviews, providing them with a voice that does not rely on sophisticated narratives (Martikainen & Hakokönäs, 2023). Drawings also offer insights into emotional states and open aspects of experience that may defy verbalization, such as traumatic events; in this sense, drawings are also used in clinical art-based therapy as a window into experienced violence (Goldner et al., 2021; Malchiodi, 1998). Furthermore, they serve as media of agency and witnessing in the face of injustice and violence (Bober, 2011). Tolia-Kelly (2007) emphasized the importance of visual methods like drawings, noting that they create "a space for embodied, multilingual, marginalized experiences to be expressed in visual form."

To mitigate the risk of over-interpretation, drawings are often combined with other methods. Literat (2013) advocated for combining participatory drawing with other research techniques, suggesting strategies like reflective discussions, in which children explain their visual choices. Jabbar and Betawi (2019), for example, used such a "draw-and-tell" approach with refugee children in Jordan, combining drawings with interviews. Authors of other studies, such as Veronese et al. (2018), have used a "write-and-draw" technique, and Green and Denov (2019) explored combining drawings with other artistic methods like mask-making.

In line with this tradition, we have integrated drawings into research designs primarily based on interviews or projective essays in previous qualitative projects. For example, in the Afghan Youth Project, which looked at the experiences of over 220 young people in Afghanistan between 2016 and 2018 and how they dealt with violence, we combined interviews and projective essays with drawings using both "draw-and-tell" and "write-and-draw" techniques (Langer et al., 2021). These combined approaches have proven effective in data collection but highlighted the need to contextualize drawings with accompanying interviews and essays to avoid misinterpretation. We view this as essential to account for the complex, often ambivalent experiences of the children involved.

This article aims to contribute to the growing body of nonclinical social research involving children that utilizes drawings within combined methodological approaches. In the research project we discuss, the psychosocial needs of children abused as soldiers by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Northern Iraq between 2018 and 2019 are examined (Langer & Ahmad, 2019). For this project, we developed a collaborative storytelling approach that combined a group-based generation of fictional child soldier stories with drawings, offering the children an opportunity to enrich and expand the narratively developed stories. The children received only general instructions on how to use the drawings: They were to supplement the story wherever and however they wished. This approach raises intriguing questions about the points in the story where a drawing is created, how it relates to the narrative, what the drawings depict (or omit), and what is expressed visually that might be missing from the text. Consequently, our analysis of the drawings is systematically contextualized within the framework of the collaborative stories that surround them.

The starting point for the analyses presented in this article is tentative and preliminary findings from our previous analysis of the narratively developed stories, which we have briefly outlined elsewhere (Langer & Ahmad, 2024). These findings suggest a clear distinction between the two groups of Arab-Sunni and Yezidi children in their depiction of violence and the attribution of agency to the protagonists and dealing with social attributions toward them. Analyzing the drawings leads us to the guiding question: How are violence, agency, and social attributions (specifically in groups) represented and negotiated in the drawings?

In the following sections, we outline the research project (Section 2), discuss the methodology (Section 3), and present our contextualized analysis of the drawings (Section 4). We conclude by discussing the insights gained from this research and the value of incorporating drawings into multimethod projects with children in (post-)conflict areas and war zones (Section 5).

2. The Research Project

In 2014, ISIS gained global prominence by conquering and controlling a territory in Iraq and Syria roughly the size of Portugal or the state of Maine, stretching from the Mediterranean coast to the south of Baghdad, and proclaiming itself a caliphate (Gerges, 2016). The genocide of the Yezidi community in Sinjar and the reign of terror in Mosul marked tragic climaxes of ISIS's grave human rights violations (Cheterian, 2019). Less well known, however, is the group's extensive abuse of thousands of children in combat and combat-related support roles, commonly referred to as child soldiers. Among the various definitions of "child soldier" proposed and institutionalized in internationally binding conventions, the one formulated in the Paris Principles is the most widely recognized. It defines a child soldier as:

> Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been 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. (UNICEF, 2007, p. 7)

This definition underscores important distinctions: the diverse pathways into armed groups (ranging from voluntary recruitment to forceful abduction); the various types of armed groups (from governmental military institutions to paramilitary or terror organizations); the diversity of the children involved (with differences in age and gender, for example); and the broad range of roles and functions within the armed group, which may include combat roles but also extend to other military-related purposes, such as explicitly mentioned sexualized violence.

In the context of ISIS, we differentiate between three groups of child soldiers, each defined by distinct pathways into ISIS, socialization processes, tasks, and experiences: Arab-Sunni children, Yezidi children, and children of foreign fighters. In our research project, we focused specifically on male children from the first two groups. This focus aligned with the mandate of our funding agency, an international NGO, intending the research to contribute to sustainable improvements in the psychosocial care of children living in Northern Iraq. In contrast, the children of foreign fighters were supposed to be promptly returned to their home countries by other international organizations (Nyamutata, 2020).

The two groups we studied were subject to different political, societal, and judicial responses as well as varying levels of support. Although former ISIS child soldiers were generally highly stigmatized, this stigma was particularly pronounced for boys of Arab-Sunni background. While Yezidi boys were kidnapped, forcibly converted, and indoctrinated, the involvement of Arab-Sunni children is more complex. Some appeared to join ISIS voluntarily—though the concept of voluntariness is fraught under such circumstances—while others were recruited under false pretenses and exploited as child soldiers. Consequently, Yezidi boys were more often perceived as traumatized victims, while Arab-Sunni boys were more likely to be seen as perpetrators. Yezidi boys were given opportunities to reintegrate into their communities in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, though discussing their experiences with ISIS remained taboo. In contrast, Arab-Sunni boys faced significant social stigma and discrimination, often resulting in their detention in juvenile centers and later in remote IDP camps with minimal facilities.

For example, in a quantitative study, Kizilhan and Noll-Hussong (2018) highlighted the high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among former ISIS child soldiers, with a focus on Yazidi children. Horgan et al. (2017) presented a theoretical model of radicalization that effectively depicted the situation in Syria and, to some extent, possible pathways for Arab-Sunni boys in Iraq. Anaie (2018) explored the ambivalent concept of the child soldier, oscillating between the roles of victim and perpetrator, from a legal perspective. However, qualitative studies that included both groups as well as participatory studies that engaged directly with the children rather than merely studying them were not available. Our qualitative project (Langer & Ahmad, 2019) therefore aimed at identifying the psychosocial needs of former Yezidi and Arab-Sunni ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq. To achieve this, it was essential to examine the lived experiences of these militarized children during their time with ISIS as well as the impact of the stigmatizing social perceptions that shaped their lives—an endeavor that necessitated a participatory approach to ensure that the children themselves had a voice, countering the powerful attribution processes that often dominated their narratives.

3. The Collaborative Storytelling Approach

To identify the psychosocial needs of former ISIS child soldiers and address their lived experiences, we employed a multimethodological approach comprising several key elements: a systematic review of existing literature, explorative fieldwork in the region (including formal and informal interviews with experts), actor and service mapping of relevant organizations, and a participatory method to engage directly with the children. Additionally, we initiated “round table” discussions for organizations working with former child soldiers, serving both as capacity-building efforts and reflective spaces for critical discussion.

We have detailed the development of our participatory approach elsewhere (Langer & Ahmad, 2024). A central challenge was adhering to the “do no harm” principle, given the likely traumatic experiences of the children—ranging from violent recruitment to military training and possibly combat. Our methodology had to be trauma-sensitive and minimize the risk of retraumatization, stigmatization, and danger to life and limb, especially given the insecure environments of juvenile prisons and IDP camps where the children resided.

Building on the tradition of participatory research using storytelling (e.g., Caxaj, 2015; Hydén, 2017; Mahoney, 2007), we developed the collaborative storytelling approach. This method involved small groups of former ISIS-affiliated boys collaboratively creating a *fictional* life story of an ISIS child soldier. The process, facilitated by local field researchers, unfolded over several weeks in early 2019. Structured into six chronological chapters,

the storytelling was guided by questions designed to explore changes in personal, social, and political contexts, and the children's experiences of agency, loss, and trauma. The children were invited to supplement their stories with drawings at any point, using pencils and crayons provided. We refrained from giving specific instructions for the drawings, allowing us to observe which story elements the children chose to depict visually and how these influenced the narrative.

This approach addresses ethical challenges by creating a collective fictional space in which children can indirectly express personal experiences, thereby avoiding the potential dangers of individual attribution of narrated actions and further stigmatization. Engaging playfully in the creation of a fictional story employs an "as if" mode, a technique also used in psychotherapeutic approaches to reduce the risk of retraumatization (Krüger, 2024). Simultaneously, from the perspective of the psychosocial approach of sequential traumatization (Keilson & Sarphatie, 1992), it is crucial to open a space for the articulation, negotiation, and recognition of potentially traumatic experiences. This process helps the children distance themselves from their own traumatic memories, making these experiences accessible and integrating them in a meaningful way.

In terms of theory, the study is grounded in the concept of collaborative meaning-making, which emphasizes the co-construction of understanding and interpretation through interactive and shared processes (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). This approach highlights the importance of dialogue and mutual engagement in creating meaningful narratives, particularly within contexts of trauma and conflict. By facilitating collaborative storytelling and drawing activities, this approach enables former ISIS child soldiers to collaboratively construct and articulate their experiences, fostering a deeper and shared comprehension of their psychosocial realities.

The data collection process was integrated into the ongoing work of NGOs, where our local field researchers were already providing psychosocial services to children, including former child soldiers. This prior involvement gave the researchers access to the relevant locations and established a certain level of trust with the children. Participation in the collaborative storytelling project was voluntary and open to all interested children. From the outset, the activity was clearly presented as a participatory research project; the process and objectives were explained, and it was emphasized that participants could withdraw at any time. Between February and April 2019, we collected five stories from small groups of former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq. These stories, gathered in juvenile detention centers and IDP camps, reflect the diverse backgrounds and current situations of the children. The stories are available online in their original Arabic form and in English translation (Ahmad et al., 2019). For this article, we focus on two stories representing Sunni-Arab and Yezidi boys, the main groups of ISIS child soldiers in Iraq.

While we have previously conducted tentative analyses of the narrative stories (Langer & Ahmad, 2024), in this article, we present the first in-depth analysis of the accompanying drawings. It is crucial to understand that neither the written stories nor the drawings should be viewed as expressions of individual subjective experiences. Instead, they are collectively generated, fictional stories that incorporate and process individual lived experiences within a shared group context. The drawings, created alongside narrative storytelling, must be analyzed within this framework. They serve as interpretations of the narrative, highlighting specific elements, adding new dimensions, or at times, deviating from the text. Our analysis explores how the drawings relate to the narrative, what they emphasize or omit, and how this relationship shapes our overall understanding of the collaborative stories.

The methodological approach was inspired by studies in which researchers analyzed drawings in conjunction with storytelling in qualitative research projects (Aerila et al., 2023; Colás Álvarez, 2017; Hills et al., 2008; Pirtle & Maker, 2012). We reconstruct the story conveyed by the drawings through content analysis and systematically compare these findings with the narrative developed in the text.

4. Struggling for Interpretative Ownership

In the following, we analyze two selected stories representing the groups of Arab-Sunni and Yazidi boys. The stories are analyzed in turn (Sections 4.1 and 4.2), by first outlining the narrative story, then analyzing the story told with the drawings, and contextualizing it in relation to the narrative story to work out the specific pictorial interpretation elements of the story through emphasis, omissions, and deviations. The individual analyses are brought together in a comparative discussion (Section 4.3).

The following analyses are based on observations that emerged as preliminary secondary findings when analyzing the children's psychosocial needs. A tentative analysis of the storytelling texts indicated that the stories of the two groups differed in terms of the representation of violence, agency, and social attributions. We explore these aspects in the drawings and look at how the findings relate to the texts and what meaning is produced in the interplay of text and drawings.

4.1. The Odd Times

The story *The Odd Times* facilitated by Nazdar Saleh was developed by a group of four Arab-Sunni boys who were either from Mosul or areas close to Mosul aged between 14 and 18 years old in a rather remote IDP camp in the Dohuk governorate in Northern Iraq. The story consists of a total of six chapters and is the only story to have a two-line prologue dedicating the story to all children who have lost their innocence to war.

4.1.1. The Storytelling Text

The story covers a period of 7 years. The narrative begins with a broad view of the city of Mosul, highlighting its socioeconomic and security challenges. The focus narrows to a specific neighborhood and eventually to Khadr's conservative family, describing Khadr as a playful but troubled child fascinated by violence. Chapter 2 covers the period when ISIS takes over Mosul. It describes how Khadr is drawn to ISIS through propaganda and the lure of power and material gain, eventually leading him to join the group despite his family's shock. Chapter 3 focuses on Khadr's life within ISIS, vaguely describing his growing involvement in fighting and religious activities. However, as the Iraqi army advances, Khadr begins to doubt his choices, especially after witnessing the brutal actions of ISIS. Chapter 4 covers the period as the Iraqi army closes in and Khadr, terrified and desperate, injures himself to escape ISIS. His family hides him, but during their escape, his brother is killed, leaving the family devastated. Chapter 5 tells how Khadr is turned over to the Peshmerga by his father to avoid harsher punishment. He is tried, imprisoned, and later released but struggles with remorse and the loss of his brother and has difficulty reintegrating into society. The final chapter focuses on Khadr's future. He tries to find a trade to support himself, but his past with ISIS haunts him, and he fears being pursued by the Iraqi army. Despite his challenges, he hopes for a better future for himself and his family.

4.1.2. The Drawings

What story are the drawings telling? In total, the group produced six drawings. Khadr's life is portrayed at five distinct points: twice before joining ISIS, once during his involvement, once during his imprisonment, and finally, in the present day, with no depiction of his future.

The first drawing (Figure 1) shows Khadr as a young boy from a side perspective. He is holding a rucksack with both hands. He is wearing a short-sleeved shirt tucked into his trousers. In the drawing, he looks at the viewer, and a smile is implied. We would like to note here that the form and stylistic design strongly suggest that this drawing was drawn by the facilitator on behalf of the children.

Figure 1. Drawing of Khadr as a schoolboy (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 12).

The second drawing (Figure 2) is a detailed color location map of the Mosul neighborhood where Khadr grew up. The labeled facilities represent central areas of an orderly and normal social life in the clear depiction based on a checkered pattern: private houses, the public space of the market, mosques as religious areas, sports facilities as leisure arenas, a waterworks as an administrative symbol.

In "Khadr before ISIS, when he was 11 years old," as it says in the Arabic caption of the third drawing (Figure 3), the story's protagonist is depicted as a young boy wearing blue jeans and a red T-shirt, alone and largely frontally, with his posture and line of vision slightly to the left. The body appears to be slightly off balance and tilted backwards. In contrast with the first drawing, his gaze is more serious. The hands hang down the sides of the body, slightly away from the body, the palms are open, pointing downwards at an angle.

In the fourth drawing (Figure 4), Khadr is again presented from the front. Compared with the previous drawings, Khadr's clothing has changed significantly. The hair is fuller and longer than in the previous drawings, hanging down at the sides over the ears. His body is covered by a full-body dress with a long shirt ending below his knees and wider pants. The body and clothing are drawn in pencil and dominantly dashed in gray again. He has a gun belt over his shoulder and the rifle is only partly visible, as it is covered mostly by his back. His shoes and the back of the gun are painted the same color, light orange. The arms hang down at the sides of the body with open palms pointing slightly away from the body. The expression on his face appears serious as he looks directly at the viewer.

Figure 2. Drawing of Khadr's neighborhood in Mosul (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 13).

Figure 3. Drawing of Khadr aged 11 (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 14).

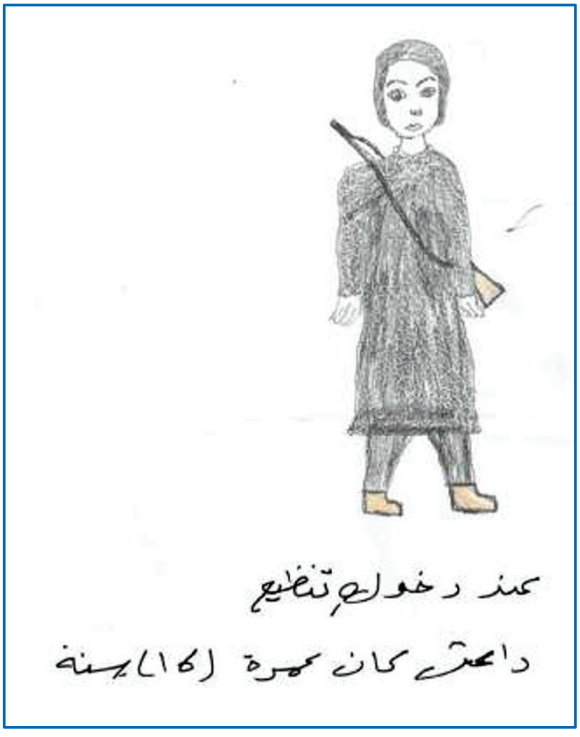

Figure 4. Drawing of Khadr aged 16 (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 17).

In the fifth drawing (Figure 5), Khadr is again drawn from the front. For the first and only time, he is not drawn alone. He is wearing an orange jumpsuit that obviously represents prison clothing, with handcuffs that fix his hands in front of his body and shorter, yet not styled hair, and a slightly larger man with a red cap, which could be a uniformed soldier or policeman, appears to his left side, holding him by the upper left arm. Khadr's eyes are fixed on the ground. The caption identifies Khadr as a 17-year-old who was taken by the army.

Figure 5. Drawing of Khadr aged 19 in an arrest-related situation (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 19).

The sixth and final drawing (Figure 6) shows Khadr standing alone again. He is again wearing a T-shirt and pants—a green T-shirt and black pants. Khadr is again drawn alone, with both hands on his hips, looking directly at the viewer. The inscription on the drawing reads: "Khadr when he got out of prison, he was 18 years old."

Figure 6. Drawing of Khadr aged 18 after release from prison (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 21).

The series of drawings chronologically documents Khadr's life and personal development over 7 years. It begins with the depiction of his hometown of Mosul, him as a schoolboy, then at the age of 11, progresses to depict him as a 16-year-old child soldier within ISIS, continues through his imprisonment at 17, and concludes with his time in an IDP camp at the age of 18. The narrative conveyed by the drawings does not feature any actions by the protagonist, almost like becoming without doing anything.

4.1.3. Comparative Analysis

Upon examining both the narrative and the accompanying drawings, it becomes evident that, while the written account provides details and context, the drawings are notably devoid of contextual elements, with the sole exception being the depiction of his neighborhood in Mosul. A local and temporal context is set with the map at the beginning, which depicts an orderly normality of life before ISIS as a still image. The drawings then consistently portray Khadr in isolated, static, and passive poses, devoid of any action. Except for a single drawing in which he is shown during his imprisonment, Khadr is always depicted alone, without any surrounding figures or dynamic elements. Explicit social or communal contexts are markedly absent in the illustrations; Khadr is not shown interacting with or accompanied by his family, former friends, or any individuals associated with ISIS, the prison, or the camp. Context is, however, implied by the backpack (school), the gun (military), and the handcuffs with uniformed people (prison). A transition between the areas thus designated cannot be reconstructed as a story based on the images. It simply happens as if Khadr himself has no agency.

Although the text offers some insights into his life before joining ISIS, particularly his familial and social connections, these aspects remain absent in the visual representations. Similarly, while the narrative provides detailed descriptions of his childhood environment in Mosul, it lacks specific details about Khadr's experiences and the various locations he inhabited after joining ISIS, focusing instead solely on his physical, outward appearance at different stages over the 7-year period without providing any contextual information.

Khadr's affinity for violence narrated in the text is minimally depicted in the drawings, as it is only suggested in one illustration, which portrays Khadr as an ISIS child soldier (Figure 4), where a rifle is partially visible. Beyond this, the narrative offers also only a vague reference to Khadr's affinity to violence and toy weapons and, after joining ISIS, an increasing interest in fighting during his time with ISIS, without providing any concrete details about what fighting entailed in that context. The drawings themselves are devoid of any depiction of Khadr engaging in or being involved in acts of violence. The narrative's sole reference to loss and death pertains to the immediate personal tragedy of his brother's death during the family's flight, a memory that continues to haunt Khadr. However, this significant event is not represented in the accompanying drawings. What is also missing is a future vision of Khadr's life. The last drawing is the one of Khadr after his release from prison. Any drawings regarding the future are not part of the collaboratively generated story.

4.2. The Boy Nuri

The story "The Boy Nuri," facilitated by Musaab Arezi, was developed by a group of four Yezidi boys aged 12 to 14 years old, originally from Kocho, at the Qadia IDP camp near Dohuk in Northern Iraq. This story, slightly shorter than *The Odd Times*, includes one additional chapter titled "The Boy Nuri," placed before the chapter that, according to the manual, should address the time before ISIS.

4.2.1. The Storytelling Text

The protagonist Nuri is introduced in the first chapter as a 17-year-old Yezidi boy—small, thin, but energetic and sociable. The narrative quickly shifts back to Nuri's hometown Kocho, a village near Sinjar, where he lived a peaceful life with his family before the ISIS invasion. His family included his parents, an older sister, and two younger brothers. This tranquility is shattered when ISIS invades the village in the third chapter, forcing Nuri and his family to surrender their possessions under a false promise of protection. Nuri is then separated from his family and taken to Mosul, where he is sold to ISIS leader Abu Mujahid.

Initially, Abu Mujahid is harsh on Nuri, who struggles with Arabic and Islam, which he is forced to adopt. Despite his fear and sadness, Nuri undergoes Islamic indoctrination and weapons training, gradually becoming proficient in using firearms. Over time, Nuri becomes stronger and more skilled, even accompanying Abu Mujahid on missions, including executions. After Abu Mujahid's death, Nuri is sold to other ISIS members and eventually handed over to the People's Defense Units (YPG), who return him to his uncle and cousin after a ransom is paid.

In the Qadia'a camp, where Nuri now lives with his uncle and younger brother, he struggles with the aftermath of his experiences. He has forgotten his native Kurdish language, is haunted by memories of ISIS, and suffers from nightmares and a fear of the dark. Despite these challenges, Nuri attends school and tries to rebuild his life, though the absence of his parents and sister remains a painful burden. Nuri's greatest wish, as revealed in the final chapter, is to reunite with his family and return to his home village of Kocho. He dreams of becoming a military pilot and starting a family, but these aspirations are overshadowed by the uncertainty surrounding his parents' fate and the lasting scars of his past.

4.2.2. The Drawings

The story includes five drawings: one illustrating life before ISIS, two showing scenes during Nuri's time with ISIS, and two related to his departure from ISIS and his future aspirations. The chapters covering Nuri's entry into ISIS and his current life at the camp are not illustrated.

The first drawing (Figure 7) depicts Nuri's family home with mountains and clouds in the background. His family is shown close together in a garden, with Nuri's father approaching with his vehicle. The figures are drawn as simple stick figures, with gender distinctions made through dress styles. The idyllic scene reflects the narrative's portrayal of peaceful pre-ISIS life but omits personal aspects of Nuri's character.

The second drawing (Figure 8) sharply contrasts with the first, showing Nuri shooting a dog under the supervision of two tall, bearded men. The scene is detailed, with the ground in the front painted in red, a house on fire in the background, and a vehicle carrying the ISIS flag moving away from the house on a reddish hill. This depiction aligns with the narrative's emphasis on Nuri's forced participation in violence but lacks the emotional complexity of the text, which details Nuri's fear and initial reluctance.

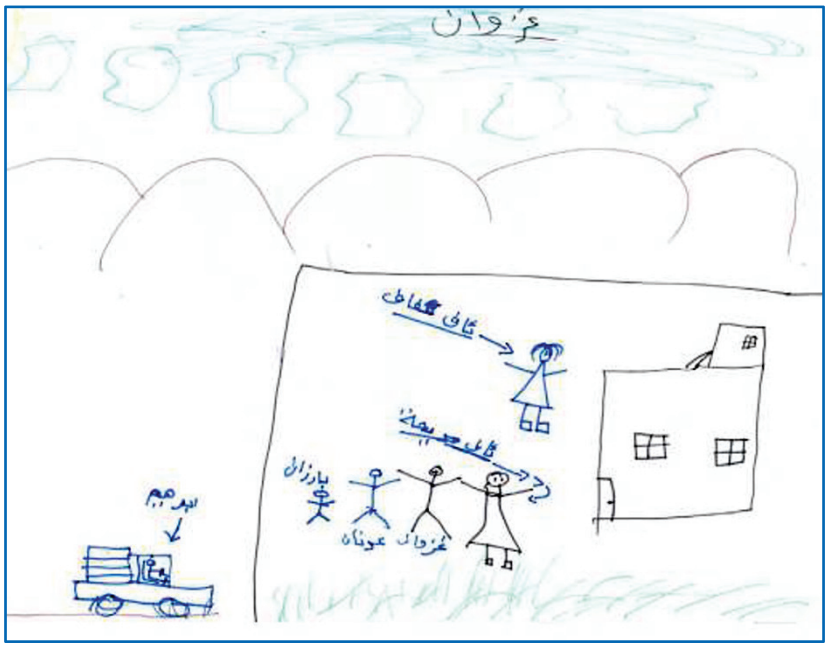

Figure 7. Drawing of Nuri with his family at home (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 25).

Figure 8. Drawing of Nuri shooting an animal (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 27).

The third drawing (Figure 9) continues the theme of violence, showing Nuri actively engaged in military operations. The scene includes a tank, an off-road vehicle, and various weapons, all meticulously detailed. This portrayal contrasts with the text, where Nuri's growing expertise is mentioned but with less emphasis on pride or agency, highlighting a tension between the text's nuanced depiction and the drawing's more straightforward portrayal.

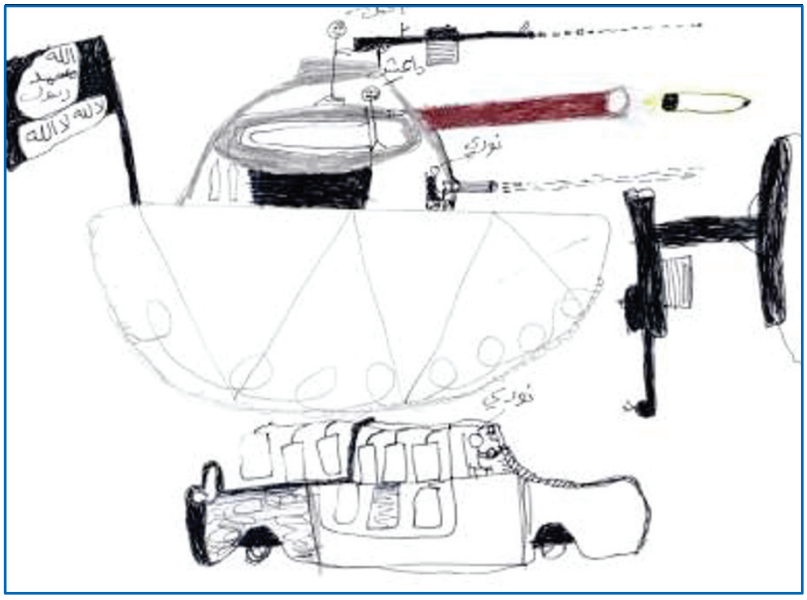

Figure 9. Drawing of Nuri riding ISIS combat vehicles and firing weapons (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 28).

The fourth drawing (Figure 10, left) illustrates Nuri's return to his family, showing a handover by YPG members. The scene is framed by mountains and a sky like earlier drawings, indicating an ambivalent scene of transition in the crossover of family- and war-related motifs. The context of Nuri's struggles in the camp, however, is absent from the visuals. The final drawing (Figure 10, right) depicts a wedding, representing Nuri's future hopes. The scene is more static than previous drawings, with abstract stick figures and bright decorations, contrasting with the dynamic action depicted earlier.

Figure 10. Drawings of Nuri getting back to his family and at his wedding (Ahmad et al., 2019, pp. 29, 31).

4.2.3. Contextualized Analysis

The interplay between the narrative and the drawings in "The Boy Nuri" highlights key aspects of the story while downplaying others, creating a complex and meaningful message. The first and last drawings frame Nuri's life before and after ISIS, standing in sharp contrast with the explicit scenes of violence in the context of ISIS and emphasizing peaceful family scenes that subtly underscore the loss of Nuri's family—a theme that gains prominence through the text.

As the story shifts to Nuri's traumatic experiences, a notable divergence between the text and drawings emerges. The drawings skip significant events, such as the ISIS invasion and Nuri's emotional devastation, creating a dissonance with the narrative. Familiar motifs, like the father's truck and the family home, are transformed in the drawings to represent violent destruction, yet the emotional and psychological struggles found in the text are missing.

The drawings portray Nuri as an increasingly powerful figure within ISIS, emphasizing his military skills and agency. This contrasts with the text, which presents a more nuanced view of Nuri's experiences, acknowledging his skills while also highlighting his fear, regret, and disillusionment. The visuals offer a more heroic depiction, downplaying the narrative's exploration of Nuri's inner conflict.

A significant omission in the drawings is the depiction of life in the IDP camp and Nuri's struggles to adjust. The text delves into his emotional turmoil and difficulties with reintegration, but these aspects are not reflected in the visuals. Instead, the drawings culminate in an idealized wedding scene—a future hope briefly mentioned in the text but presented in a static and almost romanticized manner.

In conclusion, while the text and drawings of "The Boy Nuri" are largely consistent in their portrayal of Nuri's journey, the drawings emphasize themes of agency, violence, and empowerment to a degree that the text does not. The narrative's more nuanced exploration of Nuri's fears, regrets, and trauma is downplayed in the visuals, which favor a more straightforward, almost heroic interpretation. This divergence creates tension between the story's depiction of a difficult reality and the drawings' more palatable conclusion.

4.3. Discussion

It is interesting to note that the drawings of both groups show very few similarities, suggesting little shared experience among ISIS child soldiers. Both groups depict a chronological development closely aligned with the narratives of their respective stories, consistent with the method that envisioned the drawings as a complementary element. One commonality is that both groups depict the environment where the protagonists grew up, but there are notable differences: In *The Odd Times*, the Arab-Sunni group presents an abstract map of Mosul, Khadr's childhood area, while in "The Boy Nuri," the focus is on the family house and Nuri's nuclear family. Additionally, the Yezidi group's drawings include contextual details, such as the landscape and socioeconomic circumstances, as seen in the depiction of Nuri's father's off-road vehicle, offering a rather intimate portrayal.

Without delving into aesthetic details, significant differences in the drawings between the two groups are evident. First, while both narratives illustrate the characters' lives chronologically, they differ significantly in the stages depicted. Khadr's life is portrayed at five distinct points: twice before joining ISIS, once during his

involvement, once during his imprisonment, and finally in the present day, with no depiction of his future. In contrast, Nuri's life is shown in four stages: before joining ISIS, during his time with the group, in a military context with the Peshmerga, and finally, an image reflecting his aspirations for the future, omitting his current situation. The Arab-Sunni boys' group emphasizes Khadr's phases beyond ISIS, while the Yezidi boys focus more on their time within the group.

Secondly, a striking difference lies in the depiction of violence. Nuri's story explicitly shows violence, with Nuri himself involved in violent acts, such as shooting a dog as part of ISIS's socialization strategy and operating a tank. In contrast, the drawings of Khadr almost entirely omit violence; he is depicted passively, with a gun on his back that he never uses and handcuffs as symbols of violence inflicted on him by others. This passivity is consistent throughout Khadr's story, with no mention of his involvement in violent acts, whereas Nuri's story details his gradual involvement in and eventual enjoyment of violence, with the individuals who introduced him to violence being explicitly named and depicted.

Thirdly, the social contexts differ significantly. Khadr is depicted almost entirely alone, moving from childhood to ISIS soldier, to his present situation post-imprisonment, with only one other figure, a uniformed officer, appearing when he is arrested. The absence of a future vision for Khadr is notable. His final image shows him standing alone post-release, devoid of contextual information. This lack of context and Khadr's passivity can be interpreted as a strategy to downplay or obscure the shameful guilt associated with his ISIS affiliation, with the death of his brother as a subsequent event. This solitude contrasts sharply with Nuri, who is never depicted alone; he is shown with his nuclear family, ISIS comrades, and later with his family and wedding guests. The characters in Nuri's story, though simply drawn, exhibit continuity, with collective groups appearing interchangeable in the drawings. This contrasts with the narrative, which describes Nuri's painful socialization as a child soldier following his violent abduction and indoctrination into ISIS. The final, almost utopian, wedding image, where guests sit orderly and the bridal couple remains inactive, seems unrealistic, further emphasized by the story's portrayal of the wedding as an unattainable dream given the destruction of Nuri's home and the loss of family members.

How do we interpret these significant differences? Considering that Khadr's story was created by former ISIS child soldiers from an Arab-Sunni background, while Nuri's was developed by Yezidi youth, the differences can be linked to public discourses surrounding former ISIS child soldiers in the region during the time the stories were created. Arab-Sunni boys were perceived and treated as having voluntarily joined ISIS, aligning them with perpetrators, while Yezidi boys were seen as victims of trauma whose violent actions were often overlooked (Omarkhali, 2016). The drawings present opposing pictures: The group perceived as perpetrators omits violence and active complicity, while the Yezidi boys explicitly depict violence and exhibit a sense of pride in their involvement in combat. Interpreting the drawings alongside the collaborative stories reveals stark differences in articulating the experiences of being an ISIS child soldier, shaped by powerful social perceptions. The message in Khadr's story seems to reject the attribution of violence and perpetration, framing his narrative as the tragic deviation of an innocent boy, as indicated by the initial dedication: "To every child who has lived through the tragedy of war and had his innocence taken away" (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 12). This can be seen as a denial of collective action and guilt.

In contrast, the message in the Yezidi youth's story is more complex. It rejects the public narrative of pure victimhood and challenges the taboo within the Yezidi community about discussing the crimes committed during ISIS's rule. The portrayal of violence can be seen as an attempt to break this taboo and reclaim narrative

control within their community, with the emphasis on collective belonging depicted in the drawings. However, the interpretation of the wedding at the end remains contradictory: It could symbolize a celebration of life and continuity in response to the Yazidi genocide by ISIS, or it could be viewed as a romanticized, unrealistic portrayal of a future that cannot exist as imagined, considering the prior violence. This complex portrayal reflects the intertwined realities of victimhood and perpetration within the Yazidi community and highlights the difficulty for Arab-Sunni children in envisioning a future, given their precarious political situation and fear of authority.

5. Conclusion

What can we learn from these drawings about collective interpretations of the experience of being an ISIS child soldier? What did we learn methodologically about how drawings can be used in qualitative research in war-related contexts? Our analysis has highlighted group-specific differences in the representation of violence, the roles in the exercise and experience of violence among former ISIS child soldiers, and their responses to powerful social ascriptions. The groups are acutely aware of the public perceptions that society holds about them and have constructed narratives that counter these perceptions. The stories reflect a struggle for interpretative sovereignty over their own experiences, articulating moments that challenge the dominant public discourse.

For Arab-Sunni boys, this involves rejecting the highly stigmatizing and legally consequential labeling as perpetrators by portraying their protagonist as a nonagentic, passive victim of the violent conditions of war—a condition that is simultaneously rendered invisible. On the other hand, the Yazidi boys highlight perpetrator elements (sometimes with a sense of pride) that are particularly taboo in their communities, thus complicating their social perception as purely traumatized victims. This is illustrated in the final wedding scene, which problematizes the notion of their reintegration into the community as free from ambivalence. Despite employing different strategies, both groups aim to assert sovereignty over the interpretation of their lived experiences. The drawings emphasize the dominant narrative that unfolds in the text and, through their omissions when compared with the text, reveal the challenges in conveying this narrative convincingly.

Methodologically, the analysis of the drawings allows for a more nuanced understanding of the collaborative stories and sheds light on the groups' struggle to present their narratives against powerful social ascriptions. We consider the integration of drawings with other qualitative methods, such as collaborative storytelling, to be particularly valuable, as it reduces the risk of over-interpretation and adds depth to complex analyses, especially when contradictions and breaks in the narratives become apparent. The drawings guide the analytical process, helping to elucidate the ambivalences inherent in the researched phenomenon and providing insights into the children's struggle for testimony and interpretative ownership within the context of powerful social (and academic) discourses about them.

Collaborative stories can also be used beyond research in educational settings when working with children who have had similar experiences. They create a space for the legitimate representation of difficult experiences in a child-friendly manner. Given that (not only) children experience and process violence in war and conflict contexts as members of specific social groups, it is essential to focus on the negotiation and transmission of the collective meaning of this experience of violence. We see collaborative storytelling as a promising methodological approach for investigating this.

However, to achieve more precise analyses of the drawings, it would have been necessary to document the process of creating the stories in more detail. For example, recording the weekly sessions could have provided additional insights, although we deliberately refrained from doing so due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter in insecure settings. The potential of collaborative drawings for art-based psychotherapy with children and young people could also be explored. Further contextualization of our findings with other collaborative stories is still pending. Additionally, comparing our data with findings from other research projects on ISIS-affiliated children (e.g., Abdussalam, 2024; Güleç, 2021) could extend the scope of our analyses and provide valuable insights for future research.

A follow-up project could address a significant gap in our study by including not only boys but also girls, thereby developing a gender perspective that is central to understanding crisis and conflict contexts beyond the group-specific focus of this study.

Ultimately, we hope that, by introducing the method of collaborative storytelling, we have contributed an innovative approach to qualitative research with children, one that will continue to be tested and refined in future contexts. Moreover, we aimed to shed light on the experiences of former child soldiers and their struggle for agency, portraying them as reflective actors and providing professionals with critical insights into how to improve their psychosocial situation and social participation.

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Conflict of Interests

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