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UK's Approach to the Protection of Children in Conflict Zone: A Legal Analysis of International Human Rights

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the United Kingdom's approach to the protection of children in conflict zones through the framework of international human rights law (IHRL). While the protection of children affected by armed conflict has traditionally been addressed within international humanitarian law, this analysis emphasizes the concurrent and complementary application of IHRL, which imposes binding obligations on the UK in both domestic and extraterritorial contexts. The article evaluates the UK's compliance with its obligations under key international instruments, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and the European Convention on Human Rights. The analysis focuses on the principle of the best interests of the child as a cornerstone of international human rights law and assesses its application within the UK's counter-terrorism, nationality, and foreign policy frameworks. Particular attention is given to the UK's response to children affected by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, including issues surrounding repatriation, deprivation of citizenship, and access to protection and rehabilitation. The article explores the extraterritorial reach of international human rights obligations, drawing on relevant jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights to evaluate whether the UK exercises jurisdiction over children located in foreign conflict zones. It argues that, despite the UK's formal commitment to international child protection norms, its practice reflects a security-driven approach that risks undermining children's fundamental rights. The article concludes that greater alignment with international human rights law is required to ensure that children affected by armed conflict are treated primarily as rights-holders and victims, rather than as objects of security policy.

Key Words: Children, Rehabilitation, Protection Human Rights, Fundamental Rights, Conflict Zone, War, UDHR, CRC, OPAC

Introduction

Children affected by armed conflict represent one of the most vulnerable populations in international law. The United Kingdom, as a state party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC, 2000), and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, 1950), has formal obligations to protect, rehabilitate, and reintegrate children exposed to hostilities. These instruments establish that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all decisions affecting children, including those associated with conflict zones abroad (CRC

Committee, 2019; Bartholet, 2025). Despite these formal commitments, the UK's policies in response to children affected by the Syria and Iraq conflicts have exposed significant tensions between legal obligations and practical implementation. National security concerns, including counter-terrorism measures, have often resulted in restrictive approaches to repatriation, prolonged detention, and citizenship deprivation, leaving children in precarious and unsafe conditions (Elliott, 2023; Khan, 2025). Such security-driven frameworks risk undermining children's fundamental rights to protection, family life, education, and rehabilitation, highlighting a gap between the state's normative commitments and operational realities (Hernandez, 2023; Young, 2024).

Rehabilitation and reintegration mechanisms are critical to restoring the rights and wellbeing of conflict-affected children. International norms emphasize psychosocial support, education, and community reintegration, particularly for children formerly associated with armed groups (Flores, 2023; Patel, 2025). However, security imperatives frequently override these priorities, creating barriers to access and leaving children vulnerable to statelessness, trauma, and social marginalization (Zhang, 2025; Baines, 2025). This paper examines the UK's legal and policy approach to children in conflict zones, analyzing the tension between international human rights obligations and security-driven measures. It explores issues of jurisdiction, repatriation, citizenship deprivation, and the adequacy of protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration frameworks, providing a critical evaluation of the state's adherence to international child protection norms.

Methodology:

This research adopts a doctrinal legal methodology, analyzing primary sources including the CRC, OPAC, and ECHR alongside UK legislation, case law, and official policy documents. It is supplemented by secondary sources such as scholarly commentary, CRC, Committee reports, and human rights literature to assess legal obligations and implementation gaps concerning children in conflict. Comparative analysis of extraterritorial jurisdiction, counter-terrorism measures, and child protection practices further contextualizes the UK's obligations, while a critical evaluation identifies tensions between formal commitments and practical implementation, highlighting areas for reform and policy improvement.

The scope and content of the UK's international human rights obligations

The United Kingdom's obligations toward children affected by armed conflict are grounded in a multifaceted body of international human rights law that includes the CRC, OPAC, and ECHR. Together, they establish substantive and procedural standards that shape how the UK must respect, protect, and fulfil the rights of children in conflict-related situations.

The CRC is the foundational instrument for children's rights globally and obliges States Parties to uphold civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights "without discrimination of any kind" (UNCRC, 1989). Articles 3 and 6 impose dual obligations: to prioritize the child's best interests and to ensure the child's right to life, survival, and development. Article 38 further requires states to respect relevant international humanitarian law provisions in armed conflict contexts. Legal scholars have emphasized that these obligations are binding and non-derogable (Smith & Johnson, 2024; Patel, 2025), requiring states like the UK to integrate child-rights standards across policy domains including defense, national security, and foreign policy.

OPAC, adopted in 2000, strengthens protections by prohibiting compulsory recruitment under 18 and obliging states to prevent the recruitment and use of children in hostilities. OPAC also requires states to provide rehabilitation and reintegration to children formerly associated with armed forces or groups (Brown & Lee, 2025; Flores, 2023). The Committee on the Rights of the Child has reaffirmed that children associated with armed groups should be treated primarily as

victims, not criminals (CRC Committee, 2017), a principle that challenges securitized approaches to counter-terrorism.

The ECHR, while not child-specific, imposes enforceable human rights standards on the UK through the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Articles 2, 3, and 8 are particularly relevant in the context of children at risk of harm, including life-threatening conditions abroad. The ECtHR's evolving jurisprudence on extraterritorial jurisdiction demonstrates that states may incur human rights obligations beyond their borders when they exercise effective control over individuals (Harris, 2025; Walker, 2024). Scholars argue that this principle should apply to children held in conflict-affected territories where the UK has direct or indirect influence (Nguyen & Murphy, 2025).

A key area of contention is the extraterritorial reach of human rights obligations. Under ECHR case law, jurisdiction may extend where a state agent exercises authority abroad (Alston, 2024). This has implications for the UK's policies toward children in Syria and Iraq, particularly where British nationality or effective engagement exists (Carter & Singh, 2025). The UN Human Rights Committee has underscored that extraterritorial obligations arise when a state's actions foreseeably affect human rights outcomes (UNHRC, 2022). The UK's counter-terrorism framework, including deprivation of citizenship powers, has been criticized for undermining children's rights under the CRC and ECHR (Khan, 2025; O'Donnell, 2024). For example, the removal of citizenship from parents can have foreseeable, adverse effects on associated children's rights to identity, nationality, and family life (Elliott, 2023). Legal scholars emphasize that human rights obligations require not only non-interference but proactive measures to protect vulnerable children (Martinez, 2024; Baines, 2025). International human rights law also demands that children be provided access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and psychosocial support obligations the UK must discharge even in conflict-related contexts. The CRC has repeatedly highlighted implementation gaps and called on states to align counter-terrorism measures with child-rights standards (CRC Committee, 2019).

The legal significance and practical application

The "best interests of the child" principle is a foundational norm in international human rights law that guides how States respond to situations affecting children's rights. Originating in Article 3 CRC requires that "in all actions concerning children... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (UNCRC, 1989). This principle has both substantive content defining what outcomes should be pursued for children and procedural dimensions, requiring structured decision-making frameworks that meaningfully evaluate and weigh children's interests in governmental policies and practices (Bartholet, 2025; Bhabha, 2024).

In the context of children affected by conflict zones, particularly those linked to the UK through nationality or family ties, the principle becomes legally significant because it obliges UK authorities to consider how decisions regarding repatriation, citizenship deprivation, family reunification, and access to protection impact children's fundamental rights. The UK is bound by the CRC as well as its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC), both of which require states to adopt all appropriate measures to protect children from the physical and psychological harms of armed conflict (Lynch & Oakley, 2024). Under international human rights interpretation, best interests is not simply a policy preference but a binding legal requirement that must be given substantive weight in decision-making (Narbona, 2025). Jurisprudence and commentary underscore that states must establish transparent, child-centered processes to identify, assess, and determine children's best interests before adopting measures that affect their rights and wellbeing (Hoffmann, 2023; Patel, 2025). This includes evaluating risks to the child's physical safety, emotional development, access to education and

health care, family unity, and opportunities for social reintegration (Schmidt, 2024; White, 2025). In UK practice, however, the application of the best interest's principle in conflict-related decision-making has been inconsistent. Policy responses to children in Syria and Iraq, including those held in camps or detention facilities, have often prioritized national security concerns over child-centered considerations. Legal scholars argue that UK decision-making processes have insufficiently incorporated systematic assessments of children's best interests, resulting in decisions that leave children in prolonged hardship without adequate protection, care, or prospects for rehabilitation (Carter & Singh, 2025; Murphy, 2024).

The legal significance of best interests also lies in its procedural requirements. International guidance such as General Comment No. 14 of the CRC Committee mandates that states develop formal mechanisms to assess children's best interests, including participation rights, age-appropriate consultation, and documented reasoning (CRC Committee, 2013). These procedural safeguards ensure that decisions are not arbitrary but based on evidence and reflect the individual child's circumstances. UK practices have been critiqued for failing to implement such structured assessments consistently, particularly in asylum, immigration, and national security contexts where discretion is exercised without transparent child-centered criteria (Elliott, 2023; O'Donnell, 2024). Moreover, the principle has been invoked in legal challenges against UK policy decisions. Litigation concerning nationality deprivation and non-repatriation has highlighted that when decisions materially affect a child's rights such as access to family life or protection from inhuman treatment best interests must be integrated meaningfully into judicial review (Khan, 2025; Zhang, 2025). Case law indicates an evolving recognition that best interests' assessments are not optional but legally required where children's rights are at stake (Young, 2024; Lyons, 2025). However, the weight afforded to best interests in UK decision-making remains contested. Academics argue that security-oriented approaches, such as broad citizenship deprivation powers, often curtail substantive consideration of child welfare, diminishing the principle's normative force (Baines, 2025; Hernandez, 2023). In contrast, pro-rights scholars emphasize that full operationalization of the principle would require enhanced child-rights training for officials, independent oversight mechanisms, and statutory tools that priorities child welfare in all relevant decisions (Nguyen & Murphy, 2025; Walker, 2024).

The impact of counter-terrorism: Conflicts between Security and Human Rights

Counter-terrorism policies developed in response to perceived national security threats have significant implications for the protection of children, particularly when such measures conflict with internationally recognized human rights obligations. The United Kingdom's approach to counter-terrorism, especially in the context of children affected by overseas armed conflict, illustrates the tension between security imperatives and child-centered human rights protections. While states are obliged to safeguard national security, international law simultaneously requires that responses respect, protect, and fulfil children's rights as outlined under instruments such as CRC, OPAC, and ECHR (UNCRC, 1989; CRC Committee, 2017).

Security-driven policies such as deprivation of citizenship, exclusion from state protection, and refusal to facilitate repatriation have disproportionately impacted children associated with armed groups abroad. These measures often priorities perceived security risks over children's rights to life, family unity, rehabilitation, and reintegration (Elliott, 2023; Khan, 2025). Research indicates that such approaches can result in prolonged detention in hazardous environments, limited access to healthcare and education, and the fragmentation of family structures (Carter & Singh, 2025; O'Donnell, 2024). Moreover, the operationalization of counter-terrorism laws frequently lacks structured assessments of children's best interests despite international guidance emphasizing that this principle must be a primary consideration in all decisions

affecting children (Bartholet, 2025; Narbona, 2025). In practice, the absence of transparent, child-centered processes contributes to inconsistent outcomes and overlooked rights violations (Hernandez, 2023; Murphy, 2024). Human rights scholars argue that security-first frameworks risk normalizing punitive responses to children, even where international norms view them primarily as victims requiring protection and support (Baines, 2025; Flores, 2023). Further complicating the landscape is the tension between immigration control measures and child protection obligations. Age assessments, detention practices, and limited family reunification options can undermine children's fundamental rights when counter-terrorism concerns dominate policy priorities (Schmidt, 2024; Young, 2024). To mitigate these conflicts, experts recommend integrating child-rights impact assessments into counter-terrorism law and policy formulation, promoting procedural safeguards, and ensuring independent oversight (Nguyen & Murphy, 2025; White, 2025). Only through such reforms can states reconcile the demands of security with their human rights obligations to protect vulnerable children.

The extraterritorial reach of international human rights law and UK jurisdiction over children in foreign conflict zones

The extraterritorial application of international human rights law (IHRL) is central to assessing whether the United Kingdom bears legal responsibility toward children located in foreign conflict zones. While human rights treaties were traditionally conceived as territorially bounded, contemporary jurisprudence has increasingly recognized that states may incur obligations beyond their borders where they exercise jurisdiction over individuals or situations. This development is particularly significant for children affected by armed conflict abroad who have links to the UK through nationality, parentage, or state action. Under international human rights law, jurisdiction is not strictly territorial but functional. Article 2(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) require states to secure rights to individuals "within their jurisdiction." The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has interpreted jurisdiction to arise where a state exercises effective control over territory or authority and control over individuals, even outside national borders (*Al-Skeini v United Kingdom*, 2011). This jurisprudence has broadened the scope of state responsibility and has direct relevance for assessing UK obligations toward children in conflict-affected regions such as Syria and Iraq.

In the context of children located in foreign detention camps or conflict zones, the question is whether UK actions or omissions amount to the exercise of jurisdiction. While the UK has often denied jurisdiction in such cases, international legal scholars argue that jurisdiction may arise where a state exercises decisive influence over a child's legal status, including nationality, access to consular assistance, or the ability to leave a conflict zone (Milanovic, 2011; Marks, 2024). Decisions refusing repatriation or depriving parents of citizenship can have direct, foreseeable, and severe consequences for children's fundamental rights, including their rights to life, family unity, and protection from inhuman or degrading treatment. UN treaty bodies have adopted an expansive interpretation of extraterritorial obligations. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has affirmed that states may bear responsibility for violations of children's rights where their conduct has a direct and foreseeable impact on children outside their territory (CRC Committee, 2019). Similarly, the UN Human Rights Committee has confirmed that jurisdiction exists where state power or control is exercised over individuals' rights, even in the absence of physical custody (Human Rights Committee, 2018). These interpretations challenge narrow territorial readings adopted by some states, including the UK.

The extraterritorial reach of IHRL is particularly compelling in cases involving children, given their heightened vulnerability and the reinforced protections afforded CRC. International law requires

that children's best interests be a primary consideration in all actions affecting them, regardless of geographic location. Scholars argue that denying jurisdiction in circumstances where children face serious harm risks hollowing out the protective purpose of international human rights law (Bhabha, 2014; Nolan, 2023).

The UK's approach to children affected by the Syria and Iraq conflicts: Repatriation, Protection, and Rehabilitation

The protracted conflicts in Syria and Iraq have generated significant humanitarian crises, including the displacement, detention, or statelessness of thousands of children, some of whom have familial or national ties to the United Kingdom. How the UK addresses the needs of these children through repatriation, protection, and rehabilitation policies has raised complex legal and ethical questions, particularly where counter-terrorism strategies intersect with international human rights obligations. The United Kingdom has faced international criticism for its restrictive stance on repatriating children from camps and detention facilities in northeastern Syria and Iraq. Despite repeated evidence of dire conditions such as disease, malnutrition, and violence the UK has often resisted large-scale repatriation, citing security concerns and the challenges of reintegration (Carter & Singh, 2025; Elliott, 2023). This approach has been challenged by human rights advocates who argue that the state's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, 1950) require proactive steps to return and protect children at risk. The CRC Committee has underscored the need for states to prioritize children's wellbeing over political considerations (CRC Committee, 2019).

Protection of children in these contexts raises both legal and practical questions. In theory, children with British nationality or parental linkage are entitled to state protection, including consular assistance, access to healthcare, and legal avenues for family reunification (Murphy, 2024; O'Donnell, 2024). In practice, however, the UK's frameworks have frequently fallen short. Age assessment procedures, family separation, and the protracted nature of decision-making have caused children to remain in hazardous environments for extended periods, undermining their rights to safety, education, and psychosocial development (Schmidt, 2024; Young, 2024). Critics argue that these delays not only violate legal norms but also compound trauma experienced by children (Hernandez, 2023).

Rehabilitation and reintegration efforts are further areas of concern. International norms including the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC, 2000) emphasize that children formerly associated with armed groups should be treated as victims, with access to tailored rehabilitation programs that address physical, psychological, and social needs (Flores, 2023; White, 2025). The UK has supported some non-governmental and international efforts to deliver such programs, but many contend that the state has not instituted a cohesive, child-centered strategy that systematically facilitates reintegration upon return (Baines, 2025; Patel, 2025). Rehabilitation gaps are especially problematic where parental caregivers are absent or deemed security risks, leaving children without family support or stable care arrangements.

A recurring theme in legal scholarship is the tension between security considerations and the best interests of the child. Security-driven policies such as citizenship deprivation, exclusion orders, and stringent border controls have often taken precedence over human rights obligations, despite clear legal mandates under the UNCRC and ECHR to protect vulnerable children (Khan, 2025; Nguyen & Murphy, 2025; Walker, 2024). Critics note that an overly narrow focus on counter-terrorism can undermine trust, hinder long-term reintegration, and ultimately increase insecurity (Mills, 2024).

The human rights implications of deprivation of citizenship and nationality-related measures for children

Deprivation of citizenship and nationality-related measures carry significant human rights implications for children, particularly when implemented within counter-terrorism and national security frameworks. Under international human rights law, the right to a nationality is fundamental and closely linked to other rights, including identity, family life, education, and protection from statelessness (UNCRC, 1989; UDHR, 1948). When states, including the United Kingdom, revoke or fail to recognize citizenship on grounds related to alleged terrorism links, the resulting legal and practical effects on children can be profound (Hernandez, 2023; Zhang, 2025). Children affected by citizenship deprivation may become stateless, lose access to essential services, and face obstacles to their rights to education, healthcare, and freedom of movement (Zhang, 2025; Hernandez, 2023). Statelessness exacerbates vulnerability, undermining children's social inclusion and legal protection. International jurisprudence and UN treaty body guidance emphasize that citizenship deprivation must not render individuals stateless, and states are prohibited from adopting measures that disproportionately impact children's rights (Human Rights Committee, 2018; CRC Committee, 2019). Moreover, nationality-stripping often exacerbates family separation, undermining the right to respect for family life protected under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, 1950; Young, 2024). Scholars argue that when a child's primary legal identity is severed without meaningful due process and best interests' assessment, the child's core human rights are jeopardized (Baines, 2025; Narbona, 2025). International bodies, including UNHCR, stress that rights associated with nationality must be safeguarded, with particular attention to the interests and welfare of affected children (UNHCR, 2014; Walker, 2024).

Access to protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration mechanisms for children affected by armed conflict, and the risks of a security-driven approach

Children affected by armed conflict are among the most vulnerable populations under international law. Access to comprehensive protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration mechanisms is integral to safeguarding their rights, restoring their wellbeing, and enabling their long-term development. International human rights law and related frameworks particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC, 2000) mandate that states take all appropriate measures to protect children from the physical, psychological, and social harms of armed conflict. Protection mechanisms encompass immediate measures that prevent harm and ensure safety, including evacuation from active conflict zones, access to healthcare and mental health services, and protection from exploitation and violence (CRC Committee, 2013; Flores, 2023). For children in detention camps or displacement facilities, access to safe shelter, nutritious food, clean water, and education forms the basic threshold of protection (Schmidt, 2024; Young, 2024). Effective protection is grounded in the CRC's best interest's principle, which requires that all actions concerning children's priorities their welfare above competing state interests.

Rehabilitation and reintegration are linguistically and operationally distinct but complementary processes that facilitate recovery and social inclusion. Rehabilitation focuses on addressing trauma, physical injury, and psychological distress resulting from exposure to violence (Bartholet, 2025; Baines, 2025). Reintegration refers to the social, educational, and economic processes that allow children to re-enter their communities with dignity and opportunities for meaningful participation in society (Patel, 2025; Ziegler, 2022). Both processes require long-term, child-centered programs involving family reunification, community support, and tailored

education and vocational training. Despite clear legal obligations, security-driven approaches to counter-terrorism and national security can undermine children's access to these mechanisms. When states prioritize security considerations especially in contexts involving alleged association with armed groups policies often shift toward containment, exclusion, and punitive measures rather than protection and healing. For example, restrictions on repatriation, citizenship deprivation, and prolonged detention can leave children stranded in dangerous environments without access to essential services or meaningful rehabilitation support (Elliott, 2023; Khan, 2025). Such approaches risk violating the CRC's non-discrimination and best interests' principles, as well as protections under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, 1950).

Security-oriented frameworks frequently lack structured best interests' assessments and fail to incorporate child rights impact analyses, resulting in ad hoc decision-making that overlooks children's unique needs (Narbona, 2025; Hernandez, 2023). The imposition of restrictive measures without transparent, child-centered reasoning erodes trust, exacerbates trauma, and may hinder long-term reintegration outcomes (Mills, 2024; O'Donnell, 2024). Moreover, when rehabilitation programs are contingent on cooperation with security agencies or behavioral conformity tests, children may be treated as threats rather than victims requiring protection (Nguyen & Murphy, 2025; White, 2025). International bodies and legal scholars call for child-specific guidelines that prioritize protection and reintegration over securitization. This includes embedding best interests' assessments at all stages of decision-making, ensuring access to independent legal representation, and developing culturally sensitive rehabilitation frameworks that are insulated from security imperatives (UNHCR, 2014; Walker, 2024). Only by aligning policy with international human rights obligations can states uphold children's dignity, restore rights infringed by conflict, and support resilient futures.

The tension between the UK's formal commitment to international child protection norms and gaps in practical implementation

The United Kingdom formally upholds a range of international child protection obligations, including those enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC, 2000), and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, 1950). These instruments establish the state's duty to protect children from exploitation, violence, and conflict-related harm, and to prioritize their best interests in all relevant actions (CRC Committee, 2019). The UK has ratified these treaties and incorporated aspects into domestic law, signaling a commitment to robust child protection standards (White, 2025). However, practical implementation often falls short of these formal commitments. Cases involving children associated with armed conflict abroad illustrate a significant gap between legal obligations and operational outcomes. While international law mandates repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration, the UK has frequently adopted restrictive policies, citing national security concerns (Elliott, 2023; Khan, 2025). These measures can leave children in unsafe conditions, including detention camps in Syria and Iraq, without adequate access to healthcare, education, or psychosocial support (Schmidt, 2024; Young, 2024). Moreover, the best interest's principle is inconsistently applied. Security-driven decision-making often prioritizes risk mitigation over child welfare, undermining core UNCRC obligations (Bartholet, 2025; Narbona, 2025). Procedural delays, inadequate assessment frameworks, and limited family reunification options exacerbate the dissonance between formal legal commitments and lived experiences (Murphy, 2024; Baines, 2025). Scholars argue that these gaps risk systemic violations of children's rights, particularly for those affected by conflict, statelessness, or deprivation of citizenship (Hernandez, 2023; Zhang, 2025).

Finally the UK maintains a strong formal framework for child protection, operational shortcomings exacerbated by security imperatives reveal a persistent tension between international commitments and practical implementation. Addressing this gap requires embedding child-centered impact assessments, transparent procedures, and rehabilitation-focused policies to ensure that the rights of all children are realized in practice (Nguyen & Murphy, 2025; Walker, 2024).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The United Kingdom's international human rights obligations toward children affected by armed conflict are extensive, multifaceted, and legally binding, grounded in instruments such as CRC, OPEC, ECHR, OPAC. These frameworks collectively mandate that the UK prioritizes the best interests of the child, protects children from physical and psychological harm, and ensures access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and psychosocial support, even in extraterritorial or conflict-affected contexts. The CRC and OPAC emphasize the primacy of rehabilitation and reintegration, treating children associated with armed forces as victims rather than offenders, while the ECHR imposes enforceable human rights standards, including life, family, and protection from inhuman treatment, extending in certain circumstances beyond the UK's borders.

Despite these comprehensive obligations, UK practice demonstrates persistent gaps between formal commitments and practical implementation. Security-driven policies, particularly citizenship deprivation and restrictive repatriation measures, have frequently undermined children's rights, leaving them in prolonged hazardous conditions without adequate protection, family contact, or rehabilitation opportunities. Procedural mechanisms to assess and integrate the best interests of the child remain inconsistent, often subordinated to national security considerations. The extraterritorial reach of human rights law underscores that UK responsibilities do not end at national borders, particularly where children's rights are foreseeably impacted by state action or omission. Bridging the gap between legal obligations and operational realities requires child-centered policy reforms, including systematic best interest assessments, independent oversight, and rehabilitation-focused programs insulated from security imperatives. Only by aligning counter-terrorism and foreign policy with international human rights norms the UK can ensure that children affected by armed conflict are treated as rights-holders, protected from harm, and provided with meaningful opportunities for recovery, reintegration, and long-term wellbeing. Ultimately, the scope of the UK's obligations is not merely aspirational; it is a binding framework that demands proactive, consistent, and rights-focused action in practice.

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