



Cubs in the Lions' Den:
Indoctrination and
Recruitment of Children
Within Islamic State Territory

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Executive Summary

- Over the course of its 'Caliphate' project (2014–2017), the Islamic State group (IS) sought to indoctrinate, recruit and operationalise children to both populate its 'state' and swell its army. In order to design effective initiatives to rehabilitate and reintegrate children born and/or raised under IS rule, the motivating factors behind their initial association with the group must be explored.
- Unlike foreign minors radicalised to travel (or forcibly brought) to Iraq and Syria, localised recruitment of children within IS territory cannot be separated into delineated or sequential stages of ideological enticement and training. Instead, IS created a holistic and immersive strategy to radicalise minors, combining formal and informal, direct and indirect, cooperative and coercive, and individual and systematic methods of simultaneous outreach and indoctrination.
- Informed by official and unofficial IS propaganda, this merged radicalisation stage of IS' initial interaction and indoctrination of children is characterised by six concurrent and interrelated sub-categories or 'pathways of influence'.

Pathways of Influence

- **Kidnapping and forced conscription:** As part of its process of territorial expansion, IS kidnapped thousands of children from orphanages, schools and family homes. It is estimated that children under 14 account for over a third of the 6,800 Yazidis abducted in Sinjar in 2014, with a further 800–900 reported to have been kidnapped from Mosul.
- **Desensitisation to violence:** IS' widespread publicity and enactment of brutality within its territory served to 'normalise' children's exposure to violence and death. Children were encouraged to watch public stonings, amputations and beheadings, serving to stem natural feelings of disgust or fear. Such emotional 'reprogramming' culminates in children's acceptance of violence as a 'natural' way of life, and facilitates the progression for children to conduct violence themselves as combatants, torturers and executioners.
- **'Positive' governance:** In the context of on-going conflict and widespread deprivation, IS proved itself as effective governors, reportedly reducing crime and providing public goods and services. For children, IS exploited Syria's plummeting rates of literacy and school attendance. IS successfully transformed the classrooms of its 1,350 primary and secondary schools into recruitment arenas, delivering its restricted ideological curriculum to over 100,000 male and female students.

- **Social factors:** Through isolation from countervailing influences and information, IS sought to foster an ideological echo chamber among children. Symbols of group membership – including uniforms, weapons and gifts – played on local children's financial motivations for enlistment and fuelled peer pressure to conform to and join the privileged 'in-group'. Combining rewards of status and camaraderie, the group exploited children's desire for a sense of purpose and belonging. Through social bonding, physical adventure and ideological purification, with roles for even the youngest recruits, IS sent a clear message that it valued Syria and Iraq's children.
- **Loss/replacement of positive role model(s):** With a civilian death toll of over half a million Syrians (with 4,166 civilian fatalities in 2018 alone), IS responded to children's desire for vengeance, family income or simply a new role model to follow. For the 'cubs' (boys), trusted figures of fathers, businessmen and community leaders were replaced with hypermasculine fighters flaunting wealth, status and an outlet for adventure and aggression.
- **Trusted adult influencers:** Although many children reportedly enlisted 'voluntarily', the family unit remains a critical influencer for recruitment. Privately, IS relied on and encouraged parents to integrate ideological indoctrination into the 'normal' parental upbringing of children. Publicly, the trust afforded to teachers and educators reduced children's critical analysis of information and instruction. Trusted figures 'normalise' the process and create a false safe spaces, removing barriers to children's acceptance of IS' one-dimensional ideology.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- IS successfully identified the social, economic and ideological needs of children within its territory, delivering tangible opportunities for young recruits to engage and build a future for themselves and their community. Thus counter-efforts also need to be physically supported, demonstrating and delivering on commitments to rebuild communities and improve living conditions. Without tangible long-term effects and outlets for children's activism, radical ideas and governance structures will continue to hold influence.
- IS' governance practices provided an effective draw for adult and child recruits; yet, not only can weaknesses be exposed, but positive lessons can be drawn for future efforts to stabilise and govern the region. Examples include IS' app-based educational tools, overcoming issues of school closures or shortages in teaching staff. Such measures can be imitated to provide a cost-effective system of positive engagement and education of children in liberated areas.

- Efforts to provide a counter-point to IS communications can use the group's own actions as evidence of narrative hypocrisy and exploitation of children. Display of IS' hyper-violence, to which children have already become traumatised and desensitised, must be avoided. Instead, hypocrisies such as use of children as human shields for cowardly adult militants or practices of kidnapping and forced conscription inherited from Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime can expose the harsh reality of IS' actions.
- In addition to positive messages, children also need positive influencers and role models to follow. Rather than the short-term privileges of income and status, trusted adults and peers need to highlight the long-term impacts of association with the group, including stigmatisation, prosecution and statelessness. Alternative identities and life paths will allow children to earn the respect of their communities and enable them to play an active role in rebuilding their communities in a post-IS era.

1 Introduction

Despite provisions in international law that seek to protect and prevent the radicalisation and enlistment of children into armed conflict, the recruitment of minors for various strategic and ideological advantages continues. More than 8 million Syrian children have been affected, both psychologically and physically, by the violence and destruction of the on-going civil war. An estimated 2.5 million children have been forced to flee their homes as internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees since 2011.¹ Yet, those children and their families who have chosen or been forced to remain within Syria face an additional threat from the competing jihadist insurgent organisations seeking to control territory and the civilians living therein. The Islamic State group (IS), which is the case study for this research, is by no means the only jihadist terrorist organisation operating in Syria and neighbouring Iraq to enlist children into its ranks. As Mahmoud notes, 'Most Iraqi Shia militias aligned with the government recruit children, while in Syria the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Islamic Front, Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and Ahrar al-Sham conscript children in their ranks'.² IS has, however, been the most prolific and public recruiter of minors. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has documented approximately 1,100 Syrian children under 16 who have joined IS, recording 52 battle deaths, including eight as suicide bombers. In a study of IS propaganda eulogising children and adolescents between January 2015 and January 2016, this death toll expanded to 89 minors.³

Increasing scholarly attention has focused on IS' institutionalised 'cubs' military training camps and the exploitation of child soldiers in open combat and suicide operations. There has been little research, however, that concentrates on how children first come to be included into IS' proto-state system and the pathways of influence for their initial indoctrination. After the fall of IS' physical caliphate, governments and civil society now face the reality of trying to rehabilitate and reintegrate hundreds of radicalised and militarised children. In order to design and implement approaches to undermine the appeal and recruitment mechanisms of IS, greater insight is needed into the *initial* stages of the enticement and indoctrination of children. This study seeks to address this research gap, drawing on official IS propaganda and an emerging body of literature focusing on children in IS. The paper proposes six 'pathways of influence': kidnapping and forced enlistment; desensitisation to violence; 'positive' governance; social factors; loss/replacement of positive role model(s); and trusted adult influencers.⁴

1 UNICEF USA, 'Syrian Children Under Siege', 2017

2 Sara Mahmood, "Cubs of the Caliphate": The Islamic State's Focus on Children', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis (CTTA)*, 8:10 (2016), 9–10.

3 Mia Bloom, John Horgan, and Charlie Winter, 'Depictions of Children and Youth in the Islamic State's Martyrdom Propaganda, 2015–2016', *CTC Sentinel*, 9:2 (2016), 29–32.

4 The huge amount of IS propaganda featuring and/or aimed at children allows for researchers to gain an insight into multiple areas of IS indoctrination and enlistment strategies. However, it would be naïve to take IS propaganda as the complete picture of children's radicalisation and roles within IS and the veracity of its content must be treated with caution. Other studies have used smaller data samples from interviews with IS children, families and relevant non-governmental organisations as the empirical basis for research; for example, see Asaad Almoammad, *ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment*, (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, February 2018)

2 Why children?

In 1999, Taylor and Horgan predicted that the future direction of state and non-state violence would involve the deliberate victimisation of children, as an indicator and result of an increased willingness to escalate the overall climate of fear and severity of violence.⁵ Benotman and Malik reinforce this observation, arguing that, while in previous conflict theatres children 'were used *in spite* of their youth, they are increasingly being used *because of* their youth'.⁶ The reasons for this are both tactical and ideological. For operational purposes, child soldiers are physically able to carry arms and light weapons, such as grenades and small missiles, and are less likely to be searched at checkpoints and other securitised targets, thereby facilitating attacks in otherwise inaccessible locations. Ideologically, children are 'fast to commit, demonstrate loyalty fairly quickly, and are easy to indoctrinate, because they have fewer preformed conceptions and beliefs that recruiters would need to reverse or alter'.⁷ These impressionable 'clean slates' are therefore highly lethal and malleable subjects. Furthermore, unlike adult converts who carry countervailing worldviews and corrupting influences and experiences from their 'previous life', children indoctrinated or even born into an extremist milieu constitute a 'pure' embodiment of a group's ideology.⁸ Children, therefore, are valued not only for the immediate benefits of an expanded pool of radical recruits, but also as guardians of the group's ideology to future generations.

Children in IS' self-declared 'caliphate' can be separated into several distinct categories: children of foreign fighters; children of local fighters and civilians; abandoned minors, orphans or abductees forced to enrol; and 'voluntary' recruits. Apart from IS propaganda depicting both foreign and local children engaged in military training and education, it is difficult to ascertain the distribution of their roles within the organisation due to limitations on access. Children are needed to swell the organisation's ranks; a primary function for these young members is on the frontlines. In an extensive study of children and adolescents featured in IS propaganda from 2015 to 2016, Bloom et al. observed a significant acceleration in the mobilisation of minors in military functions, with the number of documented child suicide operations tripling within the year. The researchers attribute this trend to the amplified pressure for IS to defend its territory militarily and adapt tactically to project strength and maintain a climate of fear among the enemy.⁹ The subversive use of child combatants and 'martyrs' is key to achieving these aims. Yet, this also highlights the reality that IS is not simply recruiting child soldiers to replace deficiencies in manpower from their adult forces, but instead is seeking to enlist minors on account of their specialised narrative effect – the use of 'innocent' children to defend the 'caliphate' against the

5 Max Taylor and John Horgan, 'Future Developments of Political Terrorism in Europe', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 11:2 (1999), 83–93.

6 Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*, (London: Quilliam Foundation, March 2016), 14, original emphasis.

7 *Ibid.*, 27.

8 NCTV and AVID, *The Children of ISIS: The Indoctrination of Minors in ISIS-Held Territory*, (The Hague: National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) and General Intelligence and Security Service (AVID), Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, Government of the Netherlands, 26 April 2017), 5

9 Bloom et al., 'Depictions of Children and Youth', 31.

monstrous crusader armies. Children in IS propaganda videos are shown to compete for the 'honour' to fight and die for their 'caliphate' and religion. Teenage 'knights' even smile calmly at the camera before driving towards their targets in armoured vehicles rigged with explosives.¹⁰ Thus IS succeeds in marketing a David and Goliath story in which enemy forces are manipulated into the uncomfortable position of fighting against children.

On the other hand, IS is not simply a rebel group for hire, but an aspiring *state*, thereby requiring compliant and committed civilians as well as soldiers. 'The group's ambitions, reflected in its battle cry *baqiya wa tatamadad* ("lasting and expanding"), go beyond territorial control and political power and extend to the notion of engineering a new society with distinct social and cultural mores'.¹¹ In order to secure its future stability, IS does not only see children as expendable cannon fodder, but an 'investment' in the next incarnation of the group.¹² In addition to military training, therefore, 'cubs' are enrolled in religious, linguistic and academic courses, ensuring permanent behavioural change and life-long commitment to the group's ideology. It is this ideological element that sets apart terrorist indoctrination of children from the traditional enlistment of minors in purely military roles as 'child soldiers'.

10 Islamic State, 'Knights of the Departments – Wilāyat Nīnawā', *Jihadology*, 24 January 2017

11 Benedetta Berti and Axel Osete, "'Generation War': Syria's Children Caught between Internal Conflict and the Rise of the Islamic State', *Strategic Assessment*, 18:2 (2015), 49.

12 Kara Anderson, "*Cubs of the Caliphate: The Systematic Recruitment, Training, and Use of Children in the Islamic State*", (Herzliya: International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, January 2016), 6; Colleen McCue et al., 'The Islamic State Long Game: A Tripartite Analysis of Youth Radicalization and Indoctrination', *CTC Sentinel*, 10:8 (2017), 24.

3 Models of radicalisation and recruitment of minors

The need for children to become *long-term* supporters and espousers of IS' radical worldview and belief system has also altered the means of their recruitment. Singer, who has extensively documented child militarisation in *Children at War*, describes three key phases of children's involvement in armed conflict: selection, mental preparation (indoctrination) and action.¹³ Horgan et al. take this further, emphasising a gradual process of both formal and informal learning and engagement with the organisation. They instead propose six stages of child recruitment: seduction (initial exposure to ideas and personnel); schooling (routine, direct exposure and intensive indoctrination); selection (institutionalised grooming for military and other roles); subjugation (physical and psychological training and brutalisation to deepen commitment and loyalty); specialisation (fostering expertise in specialised training); and stationing (role assignment, deployment and recruitment of new members).¹⁴ The reversal of Singer's model so that indoctrination techniques precede selection is a critical development, particularly in the case of IS. In order to ensure long-term in-group security and reduce the likelihood of defection or betrayal, it is vital for terrorist organisations such as IS to build trust, fulfil emotional needs and isolate potential recruits from countervailing influences. Shifting individuals' moral viewpoint prior to enlistment is essential to ensure selection of more willing, and therefore more committed and loyal members.

To examine children's initial encounters with IS and the motivating and facilitating factors of their enlistment, this study is only concerned with the first two stages of Horgan et al.'s model: seduction and schooling. Arguably, however, the separation of these two modes of indoctrination does not reflect the reality of IS outreach and radicalisation of children *within* its territory. IS combines formal and informal, direct and indirect, cooperative and coercive, and individual and systematic methods of outreach to create a holistic and immersive strategy to radicalise minors. Researchers have identified a number of IS methods to initially target, influence and recruit children, including kidnapping, public promotion events, enticement and gifts, and influence of other IS supporters.¹⁵ Benotman and Malik, however, also include the controversial issue of children's radicalisation and 'voluntary' involvement in IS systems and activities. They highlight the various 'push' factors driving minors to seek out and actively join IS in order to 'escape difficulties at home or at school, often as a result of insecurity, boredom, and war-induced poverty. The concurrent pull factors can be the promise of food, the chance to fight for an ideology, acquire an income, seek social credit, obtain protection, and

¹³ Peter W. Singer, *Children at War*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 127–28.

¹⁴ John G. Horgan et al., 'From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40:7 (2017), 651–58.

¹⁵ Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, *The Cubs of the Caliphate: How the Islamic State Attracts, Coerces and Indoctrinates Children to Its Cause*, (Baghdad, 2016), 4; Horgan et al., 'From Cubs to Lions', 652.

to find entertainment'.¹⁶ Thus, while acknowledging the difficulties in ascertaining individuals' motives for joining extremist groups, this study seeks to examine plausible pathways of IS' influence on minors – direct and indirect; voluntary and coercive – under a merged stage of 'initial contact'. Encapsulating Horgan et al.'s first two stages of 'seduction' and 'schooling', this paper presents six sub-categories under the merged 'initial contact' stage: kidnapping and forced enlistment; desensitisation to violence; 'positive' governance; social factors; loss/replacement of positive role model(s); trusted adult influencers.

Though the paper will proceed to examine each category in turn, it is important to note that radicalisation and recruitment of adults or children cannot be attributed to single, isolated events or factors, but is most often the product of combined influences and pressures leading to adoption of extremist beliefs and/or active enlistment.

¹⁶ Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*, 14–15.

4 Pathways of influence

Kidnapping and forced conscription

Similar to traditional recruitment techniques for child soldiers, IS has repeatedly removed and enlisted children by force from their family homes, refugee camps and orphanages. The most prominent and devastating example of this tactic was IS' genocide of Yazidis on Mount Sinjar in August 2014. The United Nations and Kurdish officials have estimated that a total of 400,000 Yazidis were living in Sinjar at the time of the attack. An extensive retrospective survey of those killed and kidnapped has calculated an approximate 9,900 deceased and 6,800 abducted, with children under 14 constituting 33.7% of those kidnapped.¹⁷ Though it is impossible to determine the fate of each child captured by IS, there is general consensus that the roles assigned to the children are gender-specific, with girls sold or 'gifted' to fighters as sex slaves, and boys trained as frontline combatants or suicide operatives.¹⁸ However, IS' forced recruitment of children has not been limited to minority populations. In January 2016, a joint report by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) confirmed a total of 800–900 children aged between 9 and 15 of having been kidnapped from Mosul,¹⁹ with other sources reporting abductions of minors from orphanages, family homes, schools and playgrounds.²⁰

Though IS' use of force does not allow families and communities to resist the abduction, enlistment and enslavement of children, the group's targeting of the most innocent and vulnerable members of the community risks discrediting the caliphate's image as the ideal model of Islamic society. In fact, it is important to note IS' inheritance of this tactic from Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, which in the late 1970s formed the *Futuwwah* (Youth Vanguard) movement, and in the mid-1990s established extensive military training camps for children and the special *Ashbal Saddam* (Saddam's Lion Cubs) unit.²¹ Efforts to reduce support for IS – and other jihadist organisations that forcibly enlist children – can be strengthened by highlighting the hypocrisy of IS' tactics and violations of human rights that transform children from the hopes of the future to the current spoils of war.

Desensitisation to violence

Through each stage of IS' strategy to indoctrinate and train children as jihadi warriors, the group sought to normalise the exploitation of children and their exposure to violence and death. Whereas most audiences would be perturbed by images of child soldiers and executioners, IS promotes these roles as a great 'honour' and

17 Valeria Cetorelli et al., 'Mortality and Kidnapping Estimates for the Yazidi Population in the Area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A Retrospective Household Survey', *PLOS Medicine*, 14:5 (2017), 7–8.

18 Diana Magnay, 'Yazidi Children Turned into Suicide Bombers by Isis', *Channel 4 News*, 27 February 2017

19 UNAMI and OHCHR, *Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq: 1 May – 31 October 2015* (Baghdad, January 2016), 14

20 Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, *The Cubs of the Caliphate*, 7–8.

21 Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*, 25.



IS child soldier waving flag in training march (2016)

responsibility for which children should aspire and even compete. Benotman and Malik observed that the 'largest amount of Islamic State media featuring children relates to violence, comprising either of children directly participating in violence, or being exposed and normalised to violence'.²² This normalisation is achieved through the constant exposure to IS' gruesome propaganda, while bearing witness to (or even directly carrying out) acts of violence.

To complement its structured indoctrination courses in its schools and military training camps, IS ensures that violence becomes integrated into the everyday life of its 'citizens'. Eliminating the need for Internet access to view its propaganda, in late July 2014 IS established 'media points' in towns and cities across Iraq and Syria, and its other *wilayat* (provinces) overseas. Broadcasting to audiences of both children and adults, large screens show indoctrination videos featuring blood-soaked battle scenes and executions, while IS militants distribute pamphlets to the audience.²³ Indeed, Horgan et al. note that '[i]n almost every photo report or video depicting the implementation of *hudud* punishments — amputations, stonings, or beheadings — children are present in large numbers in surrounding crowds'.²⁴ This direct and indirect exposure to violence serves to numb and desensitise children's natural feelings of fear, disgust or guilt, and instead reinforces IS' message that violence is a necessary and 'normal' way of life.

Whether or not these children are already indoctrinated with IS' ideology prior to witnessing these scenes, simply being in IS territory makes exposure to its message almost unavoidable. By infiltrating

²² Ibid, 8.

²³ Steven Stalinsky and R. Sosnow, 'The Islamic State (ISIS) Establishes "Media Points" In Syria, Iraq, Libya To Indoctrinate Caliphate Citizens And Enhance Its Cyber Activities On The Ground: A One-Year Review', *Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) Cyber & Jihad Lab* (blog), 13 October 2015.

²⁴ Horgan et al., 'From Cubs to Lions', 654.

private and public spaces to broadcast its images and messages, IS seeks to 're-programme' children to disregard normal behaviours, judgements, ethics and values, and instead adopt those that will equip minors to become brutal fighters themselves. Indeed, IS repeatedly used executioners as young as four years old in its videos to heighten the propagandistic value of its brutality and ultra-violence. Groups of boys have starred in chilling videos that show them carrying out shootings and beheadings of IS hostages and prisoners, including the mass execution of over 25 Syrian regime soldiers.²⁵ Children of foreign fighters and migrants to IS territory, such as Isa Dare, who was nicknamed 'Jihadi Junior', stole the spotlight, directly addressing the leaders and citizens of their home countries before carrying out gruesome executions. These videos constitute not only the culmination of IS' indoctrination and training of its child recruits, but also the platform by which the group can spread its message to children worldwide via social media.

Though IS' global appeal lies in its professed solutions to the grievances and frustrations of disenfranchised Muslims, the group also sought to create a local counter-point and outlet of vengeance for the violence and suffering experienced by Sunni Muslims at the hands of either their own government (Syria) or foreign 'crusaders' (Iraq). The lives and experiences of local children are inextricably linked to the bloodshed and devastation of years of war and conflict. A report published in 2013 by the Oxford Research Group documented 11,420 children killed in just the first two and a half years of Syria's civil war,²⁶ and international news reports are flooded with images of innocent victims of regime attacks and coalition air strikes. IS incorporates these images and experiences into its battle cry, legitimising its ideology and actions and calling on adults and children to join the fight against their oppressors. Former underage IS fighters interviewed by Human Rights Watch explained that they enlisted for a 'variety of reasons: after government security forces detained and tortured them; after participating in political protests; alongside male family members or with friends; after their schools closed or they were expelled for political reasons; and simply because they had a desire to go to battle'.²⁷

Constant exposure to images, videos and live acts of violence carried out by both IS and its enemies results in children's desensitisation and normalisation of these atrocities, numbing them to the value of human life. Crucially, children's involvement and active participation in violence serves to prevent their defection from the group, as they would face either disownment from disapproving families or punishment under national and international law. Efforts to de-radicalise and disengage children from violence cannot resort to simply demonstrating or reinforcing evidence of IS savagery. Not only have children been 'educated' in the ideological justifications for IS' every action, but further exposure to violent and traumatic images will only advance the group's goal of normalisation of their worldview and actions.

25 Islamic State, 'Healing the Chests of the Believing People – Wilāyat Hims', *Jihadology*, 4 July 2015

26 Hana Salama and Hamit Dardagan, *Stolen Futures: The Hidden Toll of Child Casualties in Syria*, (Oxford Research Group, 24 November 2013), 3

27 Priyanka Motaparthi, 'Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die': *Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria*, (Human Rights Watch, June 2014), 13

'Positive' governance

It is important to acknowledge that, in the context of the on-going civil war in Syria and the consequent suffering and deprivation of local populations, IS' appeal has been considerably strengthened on account of their governance practices as a fledgling 'state'. Interviews with IS defectors and former civilians praised the reduction in crime, smoking and 'immodesty' under IS rule, stating that '[w]hen they first came, things were good – very good. It really felt like Islam'.²⁸ The group's ideological mission to create their own model of the Islamic caliphate has translated practically into the provision of goods and services, ranging from food and safe water to healthcare and education for its 'citizens', and even provision of traffic officers. IS acknowledges and exploits the propagandistic value of its welfare services, with a reported 31% of its published images and videos showing schools, health services, outreach and state administrative works.²⁹ In addition to marketing the caliphate and encouraging international supporters to make *hijra* (migration), the practical benefits of IS' governance provide significant incentives for both adults and minors to support and join the group.



Two deaf-mute IS militants direct traffic in Mosul (2015), demonstrating the group's commitment to service provision

28 Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*, (McLean, VA: Advances Press, 2016)

29 Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*, 18.

The education sector in particular has suffered extensively since the beginning of the Syrian civil war; over a quarter of all schools have been damaged or closed, leading to a plummeting national literacy rate and an estimated 2.8 million children out of education.³⁰ The physical destruction of school buildings, lack of teachers, undocumented refugee children and financial restrictions have resulted in Syria having one of the lowest enrolment rates in the world, falling from 100 to 50 per cent.³¹ As a result, in Syria (and Iraq) today, children lack access to an important supportive and social structure – a vacuum IS has eagerly and successfully exploited. In September 2013, IS' official propaganda outlet, al-Furqan Media, publicised the group's educational project, releasing a new video in its *Messages from the Land of Epic Battles* series, depicting 50 (male) children donning an IS headband and attending a Qur'an lesson.³² In the 97th issue of its Arabic-language newsletter, *An-Naba*, released in May 2017, IS boasted of the reach and sophistication of its educational programme. In an infographic the group claims to have educated 100,423 male and female students in 1,350 IS-controlled primary schools.³³ By re-opening spaces for education (though highly biased) for children inside its territory, IS has marketed itself as a legitimate and responsible governor of its territory, providing free services that appeal to the needs and desires of the local community.

IS has used their 'positive governance' to transform schools into successful recruitment arenas, allowing the group to indoctrinate children directly through its customised textbooks and mobile apps.³⁴ Not only has IS imposed severe restrictions on the dress, conduct, travel and Internet access of its 'citizens', its educational curricula reflect its rejection of, and isolation from, external countervailing influences and information. IS withdrew 'unholy' or contentious topics such as music, art, philosophy, literature, history and geography, and introduced obligatory extremist religious or jihadi education, including lessons in Qur'anic memorisation and recitation; Hadith; *tawhid* (unity of God); *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence); *aqida* (creed); and physical preparedness. Thus, IS have removed subjects that require creativity or critical judgement skills, converting the classroom into an auditorium for the teacher to deliver a sermon rather than a lesson. IS has transformed the pedagogical system into a system of mass-indoctrination, exploiting the void in educational opportunities as a result of conflict and instability, and finding a vulnerable and captive audience in the children flocking to its reopened schools.

There are, however, discrepancies in accounts of the sophistication and availability of IS' education services. First-hand accounts report limited or restricted formats of the curriculum, teachers being charged money to print educational materials, repeated threats to educators who defy the group's strict rules, and uneducated veteran militants appointed as teachers or, in one instance, as IS' Minister for Education.³⁵ Furthermore, since the group's military defeat, the vacuum of the education sector has re-opened, providing a significant opportunity for positive narratives aimed at local children. Rather than simply dismiss the governance models of extremist organisations,

30 Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, *The Cubs of the Caliphate*, 5; Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*, 29.

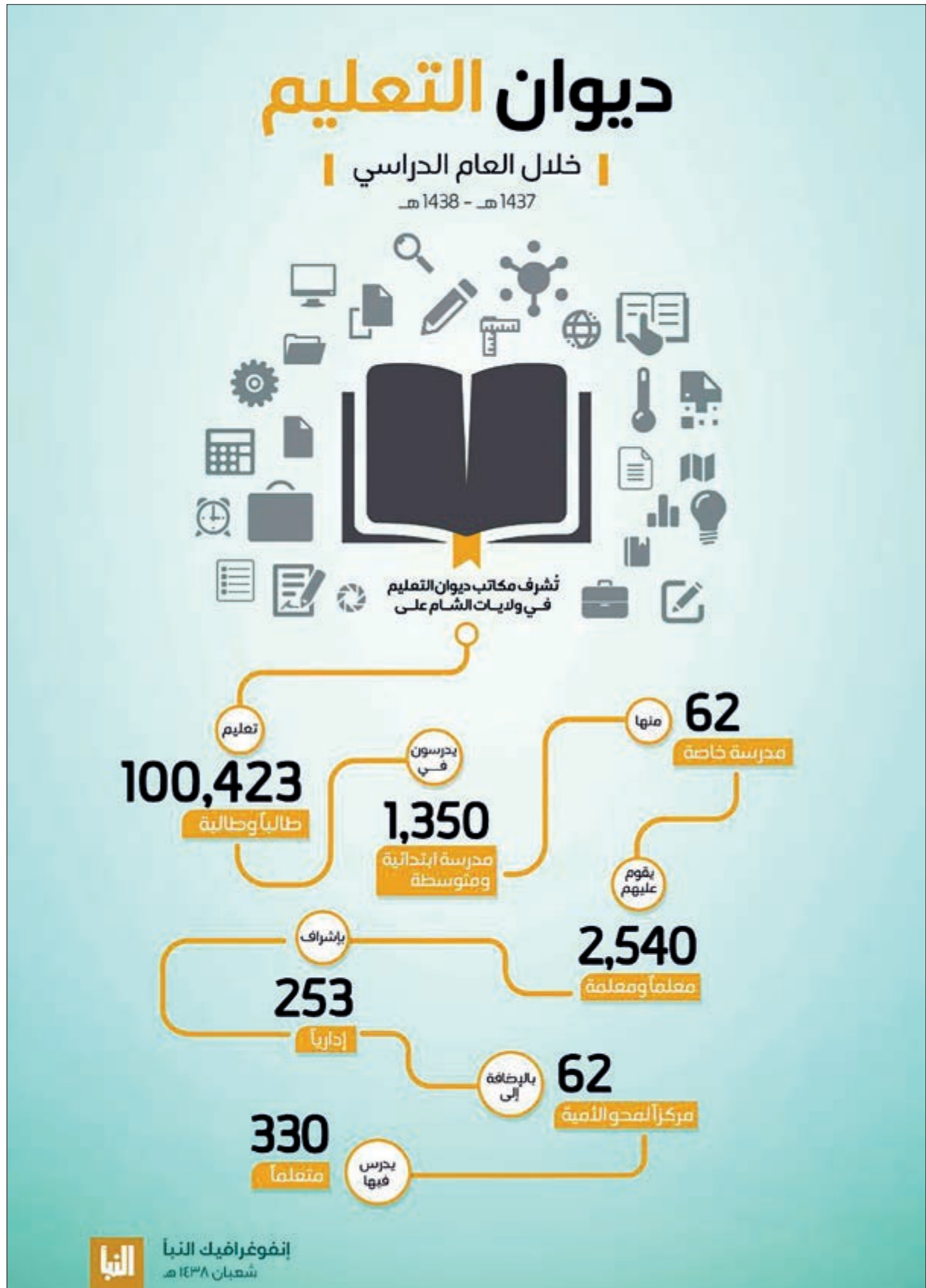
31 Berti and Osete, "Generation War", 47–48.

32 Islamic State, 'Messages from the Land of Epic Battles #5', *Jihadology*, 6 September 2013

33 Islamic State, 'The Ministry of Education: During the Academic Year 2015–2016', *An-Naba*, 4 May 2017

34 Robbie Gramer, 'J Is For Jihad: How The Islamic State Indoctrinates Children With Math, Grammar, Tanks, and Guns', *Foreign Policy*, 16 February 2017; Mark Molloy, 'Islamic State Textbooks Featuring Guns and Tanks "used to Teach Children Maths" in School', *The Telegraph*, 16 February 2017

35 Kinana Qaddour, 'Inside ISIS' Dysfunctional Schools', *Foreign Affairs*, 13 October 2017



IS infographic demonstrating reach and impact of its 'Ministry of Education' in the 2015–2016 academic year

domestic and international efforts to re-establish and reformulate children's education in Syria and Iraq post-IS can learn from the successes of the teaching materials and methods introduced and implemented by the group. These initiatives should seek to exploit and 'piggyback' on the progress made by IS in their establishment of educational resources and platforms, repurposing their 'mobile apps, videos, and other cyber and virtual platforms for pedagogical purposes to help local communities rebuild their lives'.³⁶

More broadly, efforts to curb the disenchantment and radicalisation of children and adolescents in Iraq and Syria and other conflict theatres need to consider the impression and impact of 'positive' and effective non-state actor governance on local populations. Diminished or eroded public services and ineffective law enforcement often lead to 'an associated transfer of the responsibility for enforcement from legal to illegal enforcement networks'.³⁷ Though local citizens may not actively support the ideology, actions, or even the presence of the non-state 'governor', the group's introduction and implementation of functioning services and systems can render them as the 'best of the worst' available options. In the case of the governance vacuum left by IS' brutal rule, groups with only marginally less extreme ideologies and actions can present themselves as the progressive and 'moderate' alternatives to fill this void.³⁸ Therefore, counter-narrative campaigns aimed at reducing radicalisation and support for extremist organisations need to be physically supported, with the commitment and demonstration that communities can be successfully rebuilt and governed without extremist influences. Families need to see improved living conditions in order for radical ideas and actions to lose traction and legitimacy for both adults and children.

Social factors

By gathering and isolating groups of children, IS has sought to build on normal social dynamics – such as peer pressure, competition and 'groupthink' – to create an echo chamber of IS' ideals and worldview between trusted peers. As the children build their own collective confirmation bias, individuals are indoctrinated into the group by informal socialisation, thus normalising the radicalisation process and finding authoritative voices among their own trusted peers. The closure of many primary and secondary schools due to the civil war in Syria and IS' cross-border occupation of territory has led to a vacuum not only in official, structured education, but also in extra-curricula and social activities for children and adolescents. 'By contrast, in IS-controlled areas, school attendance [wa]s compulsory for all children. Home schooling [w]as declared *haram* (forbidden) because IS authorities [we]re unable to monitor and control the child's education'.³⁹

Though teachers provide formal lessons and sermons, IS relied heavily on the children themselves to promote IS' ideology and membership as 'trendsetters' in schools, at home and in the streets. Providing young (male) militants with a uniform and access to luxury goods such as cars, new clothes and weapons, the group markets the Islamic State

³⁶ Jacob Olidort, *Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature, and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State*, (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 2016), 33.

³⁷ McCue et al., 'The Islamic State Long Game', 22.

³⁸ Colin P. Clarke, 'The Moderate Face of Al Qaeda: How the Group Has Rebranded Itself', *Foreign Affairs*, 24 October 2017.

³⁹ Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*, 29.



Teenage boy waves IS flag at da'wa event (2014)

as the source of power and prosperity that is inaccessible to ordinary citizens, particularly to children and adolescents.⁴⁰ In an Interview with Human Rights Watch in 2014, a 17-year-old former IS fighter highlighted that aspirations to conform with peers and profit from IS' successes drove him to enlist 'voluntarily': "When ISIS came to my town...I liked what they [we]re wearing, they were like one herd. They had a lot of weapons. So I spoke to them, and decided to go to their training camp in Kafr Hamra in Aleppo".⁴¹ Thus IS marketed its 'five-star jihad' not only to its adult audiences through official propaganda and social media channels, but also directly to minors on the ground in its areas of operation. IS propaganda highlights the camaraderie and adventure of jihad, depicting children training, marching, eating, praying and socialising together.⁴² Creating 'poster boys' from among the children's trusted peers has multiple advantages to the group's child recruitment strategy. IS can draw on children's jealousy and peer pressure to conform with group beliefs and actions, as well as using popular and influential children as promoters for the group.

As non-state actors seek to expand their territory and govern new areas and communities, 'winning the hearts and minds' of local residents is key to granting a group an initial foothold from which to strengthen its influence and control. To realise their vision of a 'pure' Islamic society, rather than rushing to implement restrictive policies and punishments, IS initially sought to 're-educate' its constituents according to its worldview. In newly occupied territory – where IS could not afford to allocate personnel and financial resources to establishing and maintaining extensive indoctrination apparatuses (such as schools and training camps) – *da'wa* (proselytising) events

40 Anderson, "Cubs of the Caliphate", 12; Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, *The Cubs of the Caliphate*, 6; David H. Gray and Tom Owen Matchin, 'Children: The New Face of Terrorism', *International NGO Journal*, 3:6 (2008), 111.

41 Motaparthy, "Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die", 21

42 Islamic State, 'al-Fārūq Institute for the Cubs – Wilāyat al-Raqqah', *Jihadology*, 22 February 2015



IS militant gives toys, sweets and religious pamphlets to Syrian girl in Tel Abyad, Raqqa province (2015)

served to promote the group's ideology and tangible benefits for its members. IS propaganda demonstrated the group's success in enticing crowds of children through these outreach events. Videos show IS militants hosting Qur'anic recitation competitions and 'funfair' activities, distributing free toys and food, and offering religious and moral guidance.⁴³ Local children were also encouraged to take an active role in IS activities from their initial interactions with the group in order to foster a strong sense of belonging and purpose. Roles and responsibilities included waving an IS flag or banner and even proselytising – a prominent role for indoctrinated children with strong communications skills.⁴⁴ By involving children and families in 'soft' governance and outreach activities, IS painted a positive picture of life under the caliphate and actively demonstrated its commitment to appeal to and empower younger generations to shape their societies.

Though IS' socialisation of children focuses predominantly on immediate gratification with financial and tangible rewards, 'jihadi cool' status, and power, the group also exploits children's desires for a sense of meaning, belonging and purpose. Progressing beyond supporting and propagandistic responsibilities, children (like adults) are drawn to extremist groups by the promise of adventure and 'brotherhood in arms'. IS' ideology thus fills a void of socialisation and deeper meaning, offering solutions for gratification in the present and fulfilment in the afterlife. In situations of conflict where children lack support networks or opportunities for self-improvement, extremist groups promise order and strategy; an outlet for grievances; peer groups and camaraderie; and a 'divine project' worthy of self-sacrifice. For example, IS established '[i]nstitutions such as the Central Cub Scouts of the Caliphate [to] insure [sic] that the military and religious

⁴³ Islamic State, 'Press Coverage of One of the Da'wah Tents in the State of Aleppo #2', *Jihadology*, 11 July 2014

⁴⁴ Islamic State, 'Da'wah Convoy for the Cubs of the Caliphate – Wilāyat Ninawā', *Jihadology*, 20 April 2015; NCTV and AVID, *The Children of ISIS*, 12; Mia Bloom, 'Cubs of the Caliphate: The Children of ISIS', *Foreign Affairs*, 21 July 2015

training [wa]s also combined with a pervasive sense of community, identity, and belonging, thus strengthening the IS grip on the minds of its young recruits'.⁴⁵

IS promoted roles for children as an immersive experience, providing fulfilment through social bonding, physical adventure and ideological purification, ultimately demonstrating that IS valued Syria and Iraq's children in both life and death. Efforts to counter the appeal of extremist propaganda and outreach aimed at minors need to undermine its central messages: children are valued assets and promised a better life. In practice, children are exploited solely for the tactical and ideological benefit of the group. Bloom et al. observed that despite IS' extensive marketing and glorification of its 'cubs' and 'pure' children of the caliphate, the age of child combatants and martyrs is never reported in IS eulogies.⁴⁶ Though children are granted the 'glory' of fighting alongside adults, the loss of both their lives and their childhoods is unacknowledged and undervalued by IS propagandists. Thus campaigns to undermine IS' appeal can use the group's own propaganda and actions as evidence against itself, highlighting hypocrisies and discrepancies in the group's claims. A salient example is video footage recorded from a drone in Mosul published in March 2017, which shows an adult IS fighter using a child as a human shield to deter enemy fire.⁴⁷ Though IS and other extremist groups claim to empower their young recruits, counter-narrative campaigns can draw on evidence that IS' 'holy warriors' are ready and willing to exploit children to defend them in the enemy crosshairs.

Loss/replacement of positive role model(s)

IS' ideology and indoctrination strategy exploits not only the normalisation of devastation and violence suffered at a communal and national level, but also the emotional and economic hardship resulting from the loss of loved ones. At the time of writing, I AM SYRIA, a non-governmental organisation documenting the on-going civil war and resulting refugee crisis, has recorded a total death toll exceeding half a million Syrians, with 4,166 civilian fatalities recorded in 2018 alone.⁴⁸

Due to the predominantly urban location and nature of the conflict, pro-government forces, opposition forces and civilians have all fallen victim to the bombardment of Syria's towns and cities. Fighting- and working-age males constitute the majority of fatalities and casualties, leading to a significant reduction in income for many families. IS has once again sought to fill this void. With its extensive economy based on oil revenues, hostage ransoms and the black market trade of war booty, IS can provide various financial incentives – jobs, income, bribes, gifts - to those it wishes to recruit. In the context of such severe economic deprivation, in which combat has become one of the principle means of employment, the salaries paid by IS (reportedly on average \$200 per month for adult fighters and \$100 for children), as well as 'martyrdom rewards' given to families, serve as a key motivation for enlistment. Indeed, Anderson argues that this payment is even an incentive for 'families to send their children to join ISIS...

45 Berti and Osete, "Generation War", 50.

46 Bloom et al., 'Depictions of Children and Youth'.

47 Kara O'Neill, 'Chilling Footage Shows ISIS Terrorist Using Child as a Human Shield to Walk through Streets in Mosul', *The Mirror*, 30 March 2017.

48 I AM SYRIA, 'Death Tolls', June 2018.



Children follow adult IS militant in prayer in 'cubs' training camp in Raqqa (2015)

child terrorists have rarely been paid such a salary throughout terrorism's history. Especially in war-torn Iraq and Syria, ISIS simply offers a better standard of living for children'.⁴⁹ Though IS only trains male 'cubs' for combat and execution duties, girls are also valued for their integral role in the group's state-building project. Called 'pearls' of the caliphate, girls are considered the guarantors of IS' future, marrying and caring for IS fighters and enabling future generations to be born 'in the shade of the Islamic State'. Thus for families who have lost the main breadwinner or struggle to survive on a minimum income, marriage of daughters and female relatives to IS fighters can provide financial salvation.

Boys not only feel pressure to 'step up' to support their families financially, but the loss of relatives and parents can lead children to seek guidance from alternative support networks, finding other role models in the figures of jihad's so-called 'holy warriors'. In interviews with Human Rights Watch in March 2014, a psychologist counsellor from the Blue Crescent Clinic in Kilis, Turkey, recalled the enlistment motivations of several teenage militants from the Al-Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo. The counsellor said that a 15-year-old reportedly joined the Islamist group 'because his "financial situation was very hard," and that "his dad was dead and he had no family to take care of him"'.⁵⁰ Another of his patients, a 14-year-old, 'joined after government forces arrested and killed his father, and had been injured five months earlier in battle'.⁵¹ The financial and emotional loss experienced by these children has resulted in the boys' searching for support to fill the void – a need that jihadist groups such as IS are eager to meet.

49 Anderson, "Cubs of the Caliphate", 9.

50 Motaparthi, "Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die", 16.

51 Ibid

Researchers have consistently noted IS' use of hypermasculine tropes in its messaging, appealing to boys and men seeking to prove themselves as strong warriors and protectors of their persecuted women and communities.⁵² To appeal to their supporters and constituents, IS has flooded the caliphate's streets and its cinematic propaganda with its idealised courageous and morally-pure fighters, martyrs and leaders. Thus, for vulnerable and impressionable individuals (particularly children) with access to the group's material, and especially for those living under its control, 'the challenge is not only the absence of positive male role models, but rather the presence of inappropriate or poor role models'.⁵³ IS has directly responded to the regional shift in demographics. Where thousands of male civilians have either fled or been killed, IS has reconfigured the image of the average male citizen. Respected and trusted figures of fathers, businessmen and community leaders have been replaced with highly 'fashionable' fighters marching with uniforms, weapons and flags introducing the next big trend: IS' jihad.

The elevated status of IS militants within its territory and the (likely coerced) approval of IS messages and activities by children's trusted friends and relatives creates a 'particularly attractive image to young males and concurrently reinforcing community norms regarding socially desirable behaviour and the preferred life path'.⁵⁴ Yet, it is the concept and selling point of this stable and long-term career path that can be effectively undermined by counter-messaging. IS' 'stylish' jihadi militants may be the stars of this season's glossy publications and photo-shoots, but what about the post-IS season? What children and families may have gained from IS in the short-term (such as income and increased status) has been significantly undermined and reversed in areas since liberated from the group's control. For example, in Ayn Issa refugee camp in northeast Syria, widows and children of IS militants are stigmatised for their connections to the group. A flyer distributed to these IS families reads:

*Your sons of Isis have mistreated and harmed the good and peaceful people of this town. You must leave, you have no place here and our patience has worn thin. Do not be in the way of our bullets that are meant for your disgraced sons. You have nothing but shame and disgrace; our martyrs eternity and glory.*⁵⁵

The short-term 'celebrity' and wealth enjoyed by IS families at the expense of their peers has led to the ostracising and even statelessness of women and children who have been married or born into the caliphate. Efforts to counter radicalisation of minors and undermine messages from jihadist recruiters need to focus on the long-term positive outcomes of alternative life paths. Investing in education can equip otherwise vulnerable children with the knowledge and skills to build immunity against extremist narratives and instead find fulfilling and sustainable employment to support themselves and others. Following the positive career paths of doctors, engineers, activists, lawyers and other community leaders and influencers will not only earn the respect of their communities in the short-term, but will also, importantly, enable them to play an active and influential role in rebuilding and revitalising their communities in a post-conflict era.

52 Ariel I. Ahram, 'Sexual Violence and the Making of ISIS', *Survival*, 57:3 (2015), 57–78.

53 McCue et al., 'The Islamic State Long Game', 23.

54 Ibid, 24

55 Martin Chulov, 'Scorned and Stateless: Children of Isis Fighters Face an Uncertain Future', *The Guardian*, 7 October 2017

Trusted adult influencers

Though many children reportedly enlisted 'voluntarily' and initially interacted with IS independently from their parents and guardians (as explored above), the family unit remains a key influencer for children, introducing and reinforcing extreme ideas and worldviews. Radicalisation through the private and domestic sphere, particularly through family or kinship bonds, obscures efforts to detect and prevent the indoctrination of individuals, particularly children. Tight-knit bonds and familial radicalisation build on feelings of trust and respect to entice the potential recruit, whilst 'normalising' the radicalisation process through its integration in the upbringing and informal education of children in the home. It is therefore important to consider that 'the search for individual motivations may not always be helpful in explaining why persons get involved with terrorism because the motivation may not reside with the individual actors themselves, but in the small extremist milieu from which they hail'.⁵⁶ Similarly, once several influential members of the family unit have committed to the cause, rejection of and distancing from these shared ideas becomes more difficult. 'Defection from the group entails a double betrayal—betraying the cause and betraying one's family'.⁵⁷ Thus, children born into or raised by jihadi families, particularly within IS territory, are vulnerable to pressure to follow the example of trusted relatives and not stray from or betray the family unit's worldview.

The 'normalisation' of children's upbringing within the jihadist milieu has been formally institutionalised under IS' education system. Similar to the exploitation of children's trust and respect by their parents and relations, IS exploits educators' position of authority over their students. In the 'safe' school environment, children are 'more susceptible to internalising views from trusted teachers, without critically analysing the information'.⁵⁸ The climate of fear under IS rule has stifled the ability and willingness for citizens to speak out against the group's actions and ideology, particularly in the case of schoolteachers. In order to ensure children are taught only the group's strict and extreme curriculum, teachers have undergone extensive 're-training' by armed brigades,⁵⁹ and faced direct threats of execution by IS militants for refusing to adhere to its strict regulations.⁶⁰ In such a hostile and highly censored public environment, it is therefore important for families and peers to provide a safe, private space for countering and challenging IS' one-dimensional curriculum.

As part of the self-policing society fostered by IS, teachers also have reason to be wary of recrimination not just from IS militants, but also civilian informants such as students' pro-IS parents and families. Contrary to providing a 'safe haven' from the jihadis' influence, private homes have been transformed into an extension of IS schools, continuing children's 'education' and indoctrination in private time and space. In late 2014, IS released a guidebook

56 Mohammed M. Hafez, 'The Ties That Bind: How Terrorists Exploit Family Bonds', *CTC Sentinel*, 9:2 (2016), 16.

57 Ibid.

58 Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*, 33.

59 Ahmad Khalil, 'A Teacher in Raqqa, Living Under ISIS Rule', *Syria Deeply*, 18 November 2014

60 Michelle Mark, 'Islamic State Executes Mosul Teachers: ISIS Punishes Educators For Protesting Sharia Curriculum', *International Business Times*, 1 July 2016



British IS migrant Grace (Khadija) Dare, Swedish husband 'Abu Bakr' and son Isa (2013)

entitled *Sister's Role in Jihad*, instructing women how to conduct jihad on and off the battlefield.⁶¹ IS mothers are encouraged to:

*raise their children to be brave and loving, courageous and sensitive, and fearing none other than Allah. Raise them as such not only in spirit, but also in terms of physical ability and training. And raise not only sons as such, but daughters as well.*⁶²

Practical instructions to fully immerse children into IS' way of life include telling bedtime stories of celebrated martyrs, preventing them from viewing 'infidel' television, and instead exposing them to IS propaganda and a physical training regime of suitable sports and activities. The timescale for this education is also clear:

'The key is to start instilling these values in them while they are babies. Don't wait until they are seven to start, for it may be too late by then!'⁶³ This immersive upbringing is aimed to provide the strength and skills needed for successful jihadi warriors, as well as the isolation of children from countervailing influences from an early age.

By actively involving parents and teachers in the education and indoctrination of IS children, adults (particularly mothers) are 'empowered' to take command of their child's education in the 'right' way. The role of the mother has been celebrated as the key to building a future jihadi army and populating a 'pure' society, encouraging women to emigrate to IS territory with their children and to continue to give birth to 'jihadi babies' within the caliphate. Yet, once again the positive short-term fulfilment

61 Adam Withnall, 'Isis Booklet Issues Guidelines to Mothers on How to Raise "Jihadi Babies"', *The Independent*, 1 January 2015

62 Islamic State, *Sister's Role in Jihad*, 2014, 6

63 Ibid.



Isa Dare in IS execution video (2016)

of women's goals to contribute to IS' utopian state-building project can be undermined by the harsh reality facing children born and raised in the caliphate. The only proof of parents' marriage and the occurrence and legitimacy of a child's birth is the documents issued by IS. With the group's military defeat and vacant governance apparatuses, children face statelessness on account of unofficial paperwork and the likely absence of fathers either detained or killed in fighting.⁶⁴ Identifying and implementing practical solutions to child statelessness is critical to preventing the continuing cycle of disenfranchisement and radicalisation of children and teenagers. The grievances, isolation and frustration experienced by stateless children as a result of their lack of access to healthcare, education, and employment have been recognised as key drivers of future radicalisation of minors.⁶⁵ Thus statelessness and displacement, combined with IS' immersive strategy of indoctrination and identity (re-)construction from birth, lead to a situation in which a child's only point of reference and self-identification is IS' jihadist caliphate.

⁶⁴ Nadim Houry, 'Children of the Caliphate: What to Do About Kids Born Under ISIS', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 November 2016

⁶⁵ UNHCR, *I Am Here, I Belong: The Urgent Need to End Childhood Statelessness*, (Geneva: UNHCR Division of International Protection, November 2015)

5 Conclusions

Through the seizure, occupation and governance of large swaths of territory across Iraq and Syria, IS has enjoyed unique (and largely unfettered) access to children within its self-declared caliphate, whether as minors accompanying foreign migrants to IS, or those born and raised under its control. IS has sought to position itself as the leader of the global jihad and the vanguard of the global community of Muslims through the establishment of its so-called 'caliphate', and the systematic indoctrination and recruitment of its citizens, both adults and children.

This study has sought to build upon Horgan et al.'s six-stage model of child socialisation into the Islamic State,⁶⁶ focusing primarily on the first two stages: seduction (initial exposure to ideas and personnel) and schooling (routine, direct exposure and intensive indoctrination). This paper argues for the merging of the 'seduction' and 'schooling' stages, and proposes six subcategories of this 'initial contact' stage. These are kidnapping and forced enlistment; desensitisation to violence; 'positive' governance; social factors; loss/replacement of positive role model(s); and trusted adult influencers. This approach more closely reflects the reality of children's radicalisation *within* IS territory. The combination of both direct and indirect contact with the children, individual and systematic methods, and formal and informal mechanisms create a holistic and immersive programme of indoctrination and radicalisation.

The six proposed 'pathways of influence', though separated for the purposes of analysis, should be viewed as interdependent, as children radicalised by IS may have experienced one or more, or even all, of these influencing tools. All of these pathways prey on the insecurities and concerns of children, their parents and peers. Addressing and offering solutions to emotional, societal, economic, political and religious issues, IS built a societal brand in which all members are active agents in the 'caliphate' project. From the cradle to the classroom, IS encourages and 'empowers' parents (particularly mothers) to play active roles in the upbringing and education of their children in the 'right' way to prepare them mentally and physically for jihad. Progressing to children and teenagers, fathers and peers are encouraged to provide alternative seductive role models to entice children's voluntary enlistment and aspirations for fighting. From a young age, children themselves are also encouraged to play an active participatory role in IS' state-building project, taking on practical tasks as standard bearers and proselytisers. The group's message is clear: the *Islamic State* is a whole-family project, allowing all its citizens to contribute to the utopian endeavour and, most importantly, to become active agents in directing their future and fulfilling their 'destiny'.

IS sought to allay the fears and concerns of its citizens and supporters through extensive dissemination of propaganda both online and offline. Publications, images and videos cover issues from food distribution and *zakat* collection to gruesome punishments against

66 Horgan et al., 'From Cubs to Lions'.

residents and captives. Radicalisation of new supporters and further indoctrination of the group's members and residents are the primary purposes of IS' propaganda and publicised actions. Yet, hypocrisies and discrepancies with the reality of life under IS rule can be exploited to undermine and counter the group's appeal.⁶⁷ Examples include the kidnapping and exploitation of children from homes, refugee camps and orphanages; the use of minors as human shields for adult militants; and the constant bombardment of IS territory by coalition airstrikes and attacks by opposing rebel and government forces.

Though IS has been militarily defeated and pushed out of its strongholds in Iraq and Syria, its ideology continues to resonate for both adults and children. Recent academic and policy research has focused on rehabilitation and deradicalisation of returning children of Western foreign migrants or the question of 'adoption' of stateless children of the 'caliphate'. Yet, for Iraqi and Syrian minors, rehabilitation efforts are secondary to immediate threats to their security – including enemy attacks; shortages in food, water, electricity, medical supplies; and infrastructure. Efforts to counter the appeal of extremist state-building groups such as IS need to focus on positive *alternatives*, rather than engage in a battle of worldviews with regard to IS' propaganda and actions. For adults and children already desensitised to violence, repeated exposure to IS atrocities will only serve to harden extremist sentiment and trigger further conflict-related trauma. A more positive and longer-term impact can be found in examples and initiatives of state-building and post-conflict reconstruction in which residents can be directly involved and invested.⁶⁸ Children and others vulnerable to IS' appeal need to be mentally removed from an environment of pain and loss, instead finding empowerment in *positive* narratives, *positive* governance and *positive* role models.

⁶⁷ Examples of negative experiences of IS governance include the views of school teachers and parents on the education system and resources within IS' Syrian territory. See Qaddour, 'Inside ISIS' Dysfunctional Schools'.

⁶⁸ Examples include a group of Iraqi university students helping to rebuild the Central Library of Mosul University. See Ayat Basma, 'In Mosul, Young Volunteers Help Bring City Back to Life', *Reuters*, 27 May 2018

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