



CHILDREN AND DAESH

LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO PROTECT THE FUTURE

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In early August, Daesh supporters on Telegram shared a short video from the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In it, three young adolescent boys, no older than twelve or thirteen years of age, declared their support for Daesh and joked about beheading their enemies. There was nothing unusual about this footage. For years, Daesh and its supporters have explicitly celebrated the fact that it recruits and deploys (particularly male) children on the front lines of its war. The reality is that children have long been one of its recruitment mainstays.

Although in recent years there has been a noticeable decrease in the recruitment and exploitation of children, this issue is still more controversial than ever. This article addresses different aspects of this critically important issue.

Recruitment Pathways

Today, at a time when Daesh's affiliates across West and Central Africa have entered into a new period of ascendancy, with teenage and pre-teen children in many instances leading the charge, the issue of recruitment of minors has once more been brought into sharp refrain. However, the experience of Nigeria and the DRC today should not distract from the experiences of Iraq and Syria a few years ago, which saw Daesh deploying hundreds if not thousands of boys in battle, let alone today, with tens of thousands of children forced to reside in securitised camps on the basis that they are considered to represent a potential Daesh-inspired threat.

When Daesh was at its height in Iraq and Syria, children were recruited via a six-stage process:

1. Seduced by its promises of power and fulfilment.
2. Schooled in its ideology and practices.

3. Selected as viable candidates for participation in its war.
4. Subjugated through hardship geared towards facilitating identity fusion.
5. Acting either as soldiers, propagandists, suicide operatives or outreach teams.
6. Stationed on and off the battlefield.

This process, which was as flexible and spontaneous as it was structured and deliberate, relied on both coercive and persuasive practices. The former manifested in forced enlistment, as communities were subsumed en masse into Daesh's sphere of operations. Consider, for example, the Yazidi boys who were indoctrinated into its rank and file, and their sisters abducted for the purpose of sexual enslavement, while their family members were killed or forced into domestic servitude.

Its persuasive efforts saw Daesh actively appealing to a young audience, framing participation in its project as empowering, fun, meaningful, and, perhaps most importantly, spiritually enriching. This line of effort saw it making entreaties to children through street outreach, often delivered from brightly coloured media kiosks that dotted the cities and towns it controlled when it was at its height.

These days, Daesh no longer has the luxury of drawing on a formalised, openly active recruitment bureaucracy. Moreover, with the possible exception of its affiliates in the Lake Chad Basin and eastern DRC, nor does it have a monopoly (or even partial control) on schooling, let alone other aspects of civilian governance. This means that its recruitment activities have had to change tack, moving away from 'willing' enlistment to instead rely on more 'conventional' coercive methods such as kidnap and intimidation.

Roles and Implications

Participation in Daesh's insurgent project took (and takes) a number of forms. In the main, public and militarised roles are restricted to male children and adolescents. However, a few years ago, girls were also able to be active participants in the group's state-building cause, through predominantly domestic and marital responsibilities.

At its height, boy children were principally deployed as fighters in Daesh's rank and file. In this capacity, they were trained, armed, and deployed in much the same way that adult men were—enlisted as frontline soldiers, suicide bombers and suicide assault operatives, as well as reservists and heavy weapons support. On many occasions too they were forced to serve as executioners, killing 'adversaries' of Daesh on tape with a view to provoking outrage and ire the world over.

In addition, boys were frequently deployed as media operatives armed with ‘battle-cams’—often nothing more than a handheld camcorder or GoPro, enabling them to capture the raw footage that formed the foundation of Daesh’s communications output. As a rule, child media operatives were confined to the battlefield. The more experienced and technically proficient of Daesh’s visual propagandists were reserved for subject matters that were more challenging to make ‘dynamic’—that is, issues like education, taxation, and agriculture.

Teen and pre-teen boys were also trained, on a rarer basis, as preachers and clerics. They would perform da’wa as officials in Daesh’s Mosques and Da’wa Center and occasionally go on to lead prayers in mosques. Positioned as such, they were celebrated as an example of Daesh’s violent reordering of social (and age-hierarchical) norms in the territories it controlled.

Post-Territorial Influence

In both Syria and Iraq, Daesh’s territorial collapse presented a turning point in the group’s methods and tools of recruiting children, as well as new risks to their welfare. With the liberation of Baghuz—Daesh’s final enclave in Syria—in March 2019, thousands of Daesh-affiliated women and children became newly registered occupants of Kurdish-run camps in north-eastern Syria.

As of 2020, an estimated 43,000 children live in Al-Hol camp and over half of the 2,500 residents of Roj camp are minors. They and their families rely on humanitarian aid organisations to provide protection, clothing, nutrition, education, and psychosocial support services, and, throughout their residency at these camps, there have been consistent challenges to implementation and uptake, now exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fears of these camps becoming a ‘mini-caliphate’ or another Daesh ‘province’ are not wholly unfounded. Visiting journalists have reported children hurling stones, wielding sharp metal sword-like blades, and issuing threats to ‘infidels’ and ‘enemies of God.’ Children—especially those ostensibly supportive of Daesh—are symbolic of the group’s ambitions of intergenerational and post-territorial endurance. In July 2019, footage from al-Hol showed a group of (predominantly male) pre-teen children gathered around a makeshift Daesh flag raised from a lamppost. They raise their index fingers while chanting (remaining and going beyond), the first part of Daesh’s slogan ‘remaining and expanding.’ In the foreground, a crowd of women cheer. Many of the children featured

are too young to have attended the group's schools and military training camps, the majority of which closed in 2017, implying their education began in the camp setting.

Aiming to provide a structured learning environment away from the influence Daesh propaganda, UNICEF, and Kurdish authorities in al-Hol have established 25 learning centres in the main section of the camp. However, these institutions still fail to reach the full school-age population, on account of shortages of space, teachers, and resources.

Moreover, since March 2020 all learning centres have closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that these education efforts have instead had to rely on the distribution of books to children for self-study. Home-schooling has been the default for foreign nationals in the 'annexe' section of the camp, wherein agencies have been unable to establish learning centres largely due to women's refusal to send their children to receive a secular education.

Seeking to support the foundations of the survival of the statehood, and in implementation of the second stage of the ideological and intellectual indoctrination and inculcation process adopted by ISIS, women were entrusted with raising the group's future leaders, fighters, and supporters, it would appear that some of them are still engaging in this role. One pamphlet from 2014 advised mothers to read their children bedtime stories of celebrated martyrs; to encourage target practice through archery and play with toy guns; and to educate them in the correct targets for violence. Now, even without specific guidance from Daesh's central leadership, it seems some women in Al-Hol are continuing work to instil its ideals in the unregulated space each tent provides.

Assessing Future Risk

While policymakers acknowledge that Daesh-affiliated children are victims of the crimes of their parents, Gilles de Kerchove, the EU's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, recently labelled the group's junior recruits as a 'ticking time bomb.' That comment was emblematic of a broader sentiment among Western counter-terrorism policymakers today.

Concerned with the potential security risk posed by Daesh-indoctrinated children, states are now wrestling with the political and ethical challenges of repatriating their citizens. Despite repeated calls from Kurdish authorities, aid groups, and researchers, repatriation rates remain proportionately low. By July 2019, only up to 25 per cent of

minors in Syria have returned to their countries of origin (or, in the case of newborn infants, to the country of primary nationality of their parents).

This low rate is in part due to the fact that policies and approaches vary so significantly between individual states. For some—such as Kazakhstan and Tajikistan—proactive collaboration with local authorities has led to the swift identification and return of hundreds of children. For others, such as Saudi Arabia, repatriation has not been facilitated on a large scale, but instead has taken the form of targeted ‘rescue’ missions to recover individuals.

Framing repatriation of young people as a way to recover the most vulnerable segments of Daesh’s population has allowed some otherwise hesitant or unresponsive governments to make political concessions and get some, though not all, children out of the camps. A salient example is Norway, which repatriated just five orphans out of 40 minors in Syria in June 2019, with the remainder contributing to the 114 children from Nordic countries still languishing in Syria as of May this year.

The reality is that long-term containment of children, even if they are considered to be Daesh supporters, within camps is untenable. States’ excuses for inaction have been met with successful jail-breaks and fundraising campaigns to smuggle Daesh-affiliated women and their children out of the camps. In light of this, increasing attention is turning to the question of permanent detention. By March 2019, an estimated 1,100 Daesh-affiliated children were being processed or held by the Iraqi justice system. Charges and prosecutions range from illegal entrance into Iraq to militancy.

Of even greater concern are reports of arbitrary arrest, forced confessions, and torture of juvenile suspects in Iraqi and Kurdish custody. Now, two years later, in what has been termed ‘a conveyor belt of incarceration,’ children (particularly adolescent boys) are reportedly being transferred from camps to secure children’s homes, and then on to adult prisons for expected life sentences without any hope of release.

Conclusions

The continued security-first approach to dealing with the challenges posed by ‘Daesh-affiliated’ minors carries risks of long-term insecurity and a humanitarian crisis. Widespread opposition to the repatriation of foreign nationals has left thousands of children languishing in unsanitary conditions with limited educational or developmental opportunities beyond the ideological instruction provided by a minority of Daesh-supportive women.

Such an environment only serves to further entrench the group's claim that its 'caliphate' is 'remaining.' Moreover, harmful, and unlawful practices of juvenile detention in places like Iraq risk further stigmatisation and psychological trauma, thereby creating additional barriers for rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

The success or failure of actions taken to manage these children will determine whether Daesh's ambitions of intergenerational succession will be fulfilled. In order to prevent further indoctrination and recruitment, and to avoid fuelling the grievances that led to the group's initial rise to power, children's welfare and developmental needs should be prioritised.

In practice, this means removing them from insecure environments that serve as echo-chambers for Daesh's ideology and instead ensuring that they have the right psychological, educational, and social support and tools to turn away from its malign influence.