

ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment

Author: Asaad Almohammad

Research on the engagement of children with the so-called Islamic State (a.k.a. ISIS) relies heavily on the analysis of obtained ISIS documents and ISIS-disseminated propaganda, leaving major elements of the recruitment and deployment process uncovered. Such ambiguities hinder future efforts aimed at dealing with ISIS' child soldiers. As such, an intensive effort to compile data using interviews and naturalistic observations across ISIS-held territories in Syria was made to exhaustively explore the process of child recruitment and deployment by ISIS. Findings suggest that there are two methods of recruitment: predatory and structural. The enlistment, intensity of indoctrination, types of training, and nature of deployment were found to depend, to a high degree, on the type of recruitment (i.e., predatory or structural), and category of children based on their origin (i.e., local, Middle Eastern and North African [MENA], or foreign) and if they are orphans. The data shows that the separation between children and adults' roles/assignments is diminishing. After a thorough exploration of the elements of ISIS' recruitment and deployment process, this paper argues its findings, implications, and limitations.

Introduction

Existing research on ISIS indoctrination and deployment of children is largely extrapolated from obtained ISIS documents and disseminated propaganda.¹ Although previous research efforts have provided invaluable insights into ISIS child soldiering and traumatization, their utilized data was associated with multiple caveats, and thus, left major elements and phases of child recruitment and deployment unexplored. The current paper endeavours to redress the aforementioned gaps by utilizing field work (conducted between May 23 to October 9, 2017), relying on naturalistic observations and gathering interview-based materials. Consistent with the United Nations' definition, in this paper any individual below the age of 18 is considered a child.² However, in accordance with the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court that pertains to child soldiers,³ this paper pays special attention to child soldiers below the age of 15 throughout the field work and data collection.

The empirical evidence suggests two broad methods of recruitment; the first is described as predatory and the latter is structural, which is rooted in ISIS' organizational bureaucracy. ISIS' use of child soldiers appears to be a multi-layered, complex, dynamic, and emergent systematic practice wherein different players carry out pre-determined assignments and cooperate to achieve the terrorist organization's immediate and transgenerational objectives. Depending on the recruitment method, children are recruited and trained according to their perceived capabilities, category (i.e., foreign, MENA, local, and orphans) and prior indoctrination. ISIS' indoctrination and weaponization of children is believed to provide the organization with transgenerational capability (i.e., a cohort of committed, trained, and aggressive future soldiers) that supports its violent jihadi's 'long game.'⁴ That is to say, ISIS' ability to outlast its territorial defeat and ensure its survival.

The aim of this paper is to present a more detailed and nuanced portrait of the recruitment and deployment of children by ISIS. The results presented here may provide academics, policymakers, and practitioners interested in the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) of ISIS child soldiers with a unique opportunity to understand the multiple processes the terrorist organization undertakes in recruiting, enlisting, indoctrinating, training, and deploying child soldiers. Moreover, this paper also endeavours to provide a base for assessing threats and the brutalization of ISIS child soldiers, specifically the children of foreign fighters.

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¹ Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*, London, UK: The Quilliam Foundation (2016); National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) & General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), *The Children of ISIS: The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory*, Joint Report, The Hague: NCTV & AIVD (2017); Mia Bloom, John Horgan, and Charlie Winter, "Depictions of children and youth in the Islamic State's martyrdom propaganda, 2015–2016," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 2 (2016): 29-32; John Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom, and Charlie Winter. "From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 7 (2017): 645-664.

² Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," United Nations, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>.

³ UN General Assembly. "Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (last amended 2010)," (1998). <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3a84.html> [accessed 18 October 2017]

⁴ Colleen McCue, Joseph T. Massengill, Dorothy Milbrandt, John Gaughan, and Meghan Cumpston, "The Islamic State Long Game: A Tripartite Analysis of Youth Radicalization and Indoctrination," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 8 (2017): 21-26.

The Syrian Legacy of Child Indoctrination

In Syria, the groundwork for the violent ideological indoctrination of children predates ISIS and its mother organization, al-Qaida.⁵ During Syria's military occupation of Lebanon, on November 27, 1985, a high school student drove a car carrying 280 kilograms of explosives into the *50 South Lebanon Army's* base, killing at least 20 Israeli and Lebanese forces.⁶ Hamida al-Taher, who carried out the suicide attack, was a Syrian from the city of Raqqa and a member of the Ba'ath Vanguard, the youth wing of Syria's ruling party.⁷ Al-Ba'ath party took responsibility for that attack,⁸ and in her death al-Taher became a national hero. Schools, parks, youth Ba'athist centers, and numerous events were named after her.⁹ Al-Taher's purported 'heroism' is still being used in primary school curriculums to indoctrinate Syrian youth into Ba'athist ideology.

The indoctrination of Syrian children in the pre-civil war context has certainly been noted in the past, but it has gained little if any concerted scholarly interest.¹⁰ Like Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's 'lion cubs' in Iraq,¹¹ the Syrian Ba'athist branch had its version, Ashbal (lion cubs) al-Assad (the last name of Syria's ruling family [the name also translates as lion]).¹² Through the Ba'athist education establishment, al-Assad's lion cubs received political indoctrination and basic combat training. Ba'athist indoctrination and militarization of youth was, in the case of Iraq, and is still, in the case of Syria, embedded in the education system.¹³ Despite this, it is important to note that the militant elements of Syrian schooling experienced a sharp decline in the 2003-2004 school year in an attempt to demonstrate Damascus' commitment to the peace process in the Middle East.¹⁴

Previous research drew on similarities between the Iraqi Ba'athist system, its legacy, and the insurgency in outlining the historical basis for ISIS' use of children.¹⁵ It is argued here that a complete assessment of this basis also demands scrutiny of the Syrian education system and state media. For instance, prior to allowing the use of satellite TV in 1999 and the provision of Internet service in 2003, the Syrian regime had supreme control over mass indoctrination through state media (Channel 1 [Arabic] and 2 [foreign; mostly

⁵ It is noteworthy that previous research explored Ba'athist education establishment in Syria and Iraq. However, the relationship between the system and jihadist terrorism in Syria remains ambiguous. For more on the Ba'athist education establishment in Syria and Iraq see: Kanan Makiya, *Republic of fear: The politics of modern Iraq* (University of California Press, Oakland, CA, 1998); Monika Bolliger, "Writing Syrian History While Propagating Arab Nationalism: Textbooks about Modern Arab History under Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad," *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society* 3, no. 2 (2011): 96-112; Thomas Pierret, "The Syrian Baath Party and Sunni Islam: Conflicts and Connivance," *Middle East Brief* 77 (2014): 1-8; Lisa Weeden, *Ambiguities of domination: Politics, rhetoric, and symbols in contemporary Syria* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁶ Gerhard Von Glahn, *Law among nations: an introduction to public international law* (New York: Macmillan 1992); Yusif Dais, "Translation: [The Butterfly of the south, the martyr 'Hamida al-Tahir']," *ESyria* (November 13, 2008). <http://www.esyria.sy/eraqqa/index.php?p=stories&category=characters&filename=200811132135012>

⁷ Dais, "The Butterfly of the South".

⁸ New York Times. Suicide Bomber Strikes Israeli Post in Lebanon. New York Times (1985).

<http://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/27/world/suicide-bomber-strikes-israeli-post-in-lebanon.html>

⁹ Dais, "The Butterfly of the South".

¹⁰ Boaz Ganor, "Countering State-Sponsored Terrorism," International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) (1998). <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1140/Countering>

¹¹ Peter W. Singer, "Facing Saddam's Child Soldiers," Iraq Memo, The Brookings Institution (14 January 2003). <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2003/01/14iraq-singer>

¹² In the Syrian context, Ashbal is widely used to refer to youth. For instance, the Syrian national football league has two categories, namely, adults and Juniors (the junior teams are locally known as Ashbal or Nashayin).

¹³ Volker Perthes, "Si Vis Stabilitatem, Para Bellum: State Building, National Security, and War Preparation in Syria," in *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*, ed. Steven Heydemann (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 149-73.

¹⁴ Eyal Ziser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the first years in power* (London, UK: IB Tauris, 2007); UPI, "Syria changes rigid school uniforms" (April 29, 2003). <https://www.upi.com/Syria-changes-rigid-school-uniforms/25731051621393/>.

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

in English]) and the establishment's educational system. To obtain a similar level of control over media access and education, ISIS sought to ban satellite TV and closely monitor the use of the Internet in territories it controls. Arguably, ISIS' adaptability allowed the organization to build on the experience gained during the insurgency and existing practices and bureaucracies of the Ba'athist establishment in Syria and Iraq in recruiting children. The existing empirical data supports the aforementioned statement, but ISIS operatives were also found to utilize additional methods to widen the pool of potential child recruits.

Method

Eight data collectors across ISIS-held territories in Syria cooperated with the author and shared data pertaining to child recruitment and deployment on the condition of anonymity.¹⁶ For research purposes, they agreed to collect and share raw data with the author. The actual purposes of the data collection, besides the material utilized in this paper, ranged from providing an NGO concerned with aid worker safety with information to assess security challenges, to compiling information to document abuses and crimes committed by multiple parties involved in the Syrian conflict. The eight data collectors operated undercover. The data collection methods included, but were not limited to, naturalistic observations (e.g., covertly taking pictures and notes, registering numbers of armed children, counting schools, etc.) and interviews (e.g., with child soldiers, recruiters, and individuals familiar with the process).¹⁷ The data includes pictures, audio recordings, and notes on interviews and observations.

This paper carried out its analysis based on the contents of 20 data entries. The data covers the period between May 23 and October 9, 2017. Each entry displays the date and exact time the data was received, the code of the data collector, and the registered data. The entries varied in terms of nature (e.g., text, pictorial, and/or audio), length, and relevance. Two entries were made by the author after carrying out four semi-structured interviews with two children and their legal guardians on May 23 and June 10, 2017. Each child and his guardian were interviewed by the author on the same data.¹⁸ The author carried out two semi-structured interviews with children after receiving informed consent from their legal guardians. The 18 remaining entries were made by eight individuals. Moreover, the eight data collectors carried out 27 unstructured interviews. Their interview transcripts were not separated into different entries but rather embedded in the text of their data entry. For instance, a data entry made on September 27, 2017 included data obtained through an unstructured interview with the mother of two child soldiers, one picture of the recruited children in the training camp, one picture of their recruiter and trainer, notes on the number of children within the same camp, notes taken during three unstructured interviews with three ISIS members. The eight individuals carried out the interviews and collected the data in ISIS-held territories in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, Syria. The researcher started by interviewing the data collectors

¹⁶ During the field work for the current report, the data collectors operated within Syria. They have been collecting data on militant groups in Syria since 2014. In the past, the author recruited and trained the data collectors. Since March 2017, the data collectors have started working for a number of organizations in tracking movements, assessing risk, and document abuses and violations.

¹⁷ The complete data file, submitted to the ICCT, includes pictures, recordings, text of interviews, and notes and registered observations. The publication of the raw material in its entirety, while desirable for its higher level of transparency, may lead to the identification of the data collectors. This could result in violent reprisal against them not only by ISIS operative but also by other parties involved in the conflict.

¹⁸ Two interviews were carried out by the author. The first interview took place on 23/05/2017, and both the child (his name is coded as Thamir in the paper) and his father took part in the interview. The child's digital files (text messages and audio recording between the child and 2 ISIS recruiters) were also collected and used in the analysis. The second interview was conducted on 10/06/2017, and in this interview, information was collected from the child (former detainee and victim of torture) and his legal guardian.

to address the feasibility of obtaining certain information, especially keeping in mind the constraints posed by security and legal considerations. For instance, structured interviews with parents of child soldiers who are supportive of ISIS were deemed to be highly risky and thus, the data collectors were advised against them. All entries were originally written or recorded in Arabic. Prior to drafting this paper, the author personally translated all entries to English.

The data is associated with a number of caveats, including data collectors' biases, gaps in the data, and method-based challenges. Unsurprisingly, all the data collectors hold strong negative opinions of ISIS and associate children involved with ISIS with vulnerability and a lesser degree of agency. While efforts to minimize the inherited bias were made, it was observed in the data entries. To that end, the author interviewed the eight data collectors in an effort to weed out subjective opinions for the recorded data. In two cases, security concerns prevented the author from concluding the interviews. However, these same two individuals provided pictures backing up their entries. Subjective opinions, when identified, were omitted if they were not backed up by supporting material from the data collector. Moreover, the materials obtained during the interviews are also associated with a number of challenges, including the subject's memory of events, and limited insight into the subject's past ideas and experiences. In order to address these challenges, data sources were combined where possible.

The following outlines recruitment and deployment in general. It begins by exploring and discussing the four stages of predatory recruitment, namely: (1) selection of recruit, (2) gaining access, (3) trust development, and (4) ideological pre-schooling and agency development. Then, the research focuses on elements of the structural recruitment, including: schooling, enlistment, pre-training indoctrination, and training and deployment.

Recruitment and Deployment

Children growing up in ISIS-held territories in Syria live in tense and extreme conditions. Many are witnesses or victims of air strikes, bombings and other forms of violence. Experiencing deaths, including those of family members, among other stressful experiences, are the observed facts of life in the so-called caliphate. Children have become accustomed to and, in some cases, even participated in public displays of violence, including punishments and executions. Some are also subjected to extreme forms of torture. In an interview with a child who survived ISIS imprisonment and torture, his parents shared an image they took after their child's release.¹⁹ The round marking on the victim's back seem to corroborate an earlier research description of torture scars made by a device called a *picana*.²⁰

Much has been written on children's engagement and exposure to violence, delving into the trauma and hardships those children have endured.²¹ In outlining additional challenges, research suggests that exposure to and growing up in cultures of violence are

¹⁹ The child reported that ISIS operatives used a *picana* on him. A *Picana* is a wand that produces low current and high voltage electric shocks. The child's accounts confirm an earlier report on the use of this device on detainees held by the ISIS prison system: see Asaad Almohammad, Anne Speckhard, and Ahmet S. Yayla. "The ISIS Prison System: Its Structure, Departmental Affiliations, Processes, Conditions, and Practices of Psychological and Physical Torture," Research Report, ICSVE (2017).

²⁰ Edward Domovitch, Philip B. Berger, Maria J. Wawer, David D. Etlin, and John C. Marshall, "Human torture: Description and sequelae of 104 cases," *Canadian Family Physician* 30 (1984): 827.

²¹ Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*; NCTV and AIVD, *The Children of ISIS*; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom and Winter, "From Cubs to Lions".

tied to desensitizing children to violence acceptance, and even the need for violence as a value-based justice system.²² That research also outlined children's exposure to, involvement with, and socialization into the terrorist organization. In other words, acts of violence may be deemed necessary by children in resolving social and ideological conflicts. Findings of the current paper uncovered a complex and multi-layered processes through which children are recruited, enlisted, trained, and deployed by ISIS.

Predatory Recruitment

Similar to the enacted manipulation and charm employed in some types of sexual offences,²³ ISIS recruiters were observed to employ an extra-familial grooming process over a relatively extended period of time. Extra-familial offenders are those who commit offenses against non-family members. In reconciliation with the literature on grooming,²⁴ extra-familial ISIS-based grooming reflects a predatory type of recruitment through which children are prepared to participate in militant and non-militant operations to advance the terrorist organization's current and transgenerational aims. In this sense,²⁵ successful grooming entails a set of coercive and manipulative actions targeted at both children and their communities so that their recruitment, enlistment, and deployment can be conducted with or without detection or resistance. Building on sexual grooming literature and in reconciliation with the data,²⁶ predatory recruitment includes the selection of a recruit, gaining accesses, developing emotional trust, and ideological pre-schooling and agency development.

Selection of Recruit

Similar to the selection of victims by paedophiles, recruiters may be triggered by ease of access and perceived familial vulnerability (e.g., children living in single family households, those who have less adult supervision or neglectful parents, those who experience domestic abuse, etc.).²⁷ Unlike paedophiles, however, child recruiters in ISIS-held territories are able to operate with impunity. With or without local community support, ISIS uses its resources to provide recruiters with easier access to children through media kiosks and mosque-based qur'anic sessions, to name a few. Contrary to common assertion,²⁸ attending school in ISIS-held territories is not compulsory. The empirical findings suggest that ISIS' schools operate as enlistment and training bases. Additionally, mosques in ISIS-held territories are another vector through which recruiters

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²² McCue, Massengill, Milbrandt, Gaughan, and Cumpston, "The Islamic State Long Game".

²³ Scott Sasse, "Motivation and Routine Activities Theory," *Deviant Behavior* 26, no. 6 (2005): 547–570; Peter B. Wood, James A. Wilson and Daric P. Thorne, "Offending Patterns, Control Balance, and Affective Rewards among Convicted Sex Offenders," *Deviant Behavior* 36, no. 5 (2015): 368–387.

²⁴ Andy Williams, "Child Sexual Victimization: Ethnographic Stories of Stranger and Acquaintance Grooming," *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 21, no. 1 (2015): 28–42; Anne-Marie McAlinden, "'Setting 'em up': Personal, Familial and Institutional Grooming in the Sexual Abuse of Children," *Social & Legal Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006): 339–362; Samantha Craven, Sarah Brown, and Elizabeth Gilchrist, "Sexual Grooming of Children: Review of Literature and Theoretical Considerations," *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 12, no. 3 (2006): 287–299.

²⁵ Carla van Dam, *The Socially Skilled Child Molester: Differentiating the Guilty From the Falsely Accused* (New York: Haworth Press, 2006).

²⁶ McAlinden, "'Setting 'em up'"; Georgia M. Winters and Elizabeth L. Jeglic, "Stages of Sexual Grooming: Recognizing Potentially Predatory Behaviors of Child Molesters," *Deviant Behavior* 38, no. 6 (2017): 724–733; Benoit Leclerc, Jean Proulx, and Eric Beaugregard, "Examining the Modus Operandi of Sexual Offenders Against Children and Its Practical Implications," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 14, no. 1 (2009): 5–12; Kenneth V. Lanning, *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis for Professional Investigating the Sexual Exploitation of Children*, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children 5th ed. (2010).

²⁷ Winters and Jeglic, "Stages of Sexual Grooming"; Loreen N. Olson, Joy L. Daggs, Barbara L. Ellevoid, and Teddy K. K. Rogers, "Entrapping the Innocent: Toward a Theory of Child Sexual Predators' Luring Communication," *Communication Theory* 17, no. 3 (2007): 231–251; David Finkelhor, "Current Information on the Scope and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse," *The Future of Children* 4, no. 2 (1994): 31–53.

²⁸ NCTV & AIVD, *The Children of ISIS*.

gain access to children. Notes received from a data collector on September 7, 2017 indicated:

[I]n the towns of Mayadin, al-Asharah, al-Quryah, al-Tibni, al-Khadrah, al-Bulil, Sbikhan, and Bukrus in Deir ez-Zor... ISIS has intensified its efforts to recruit children in local mosques... Mosques are the single biggest places where children gather. Not all of them attend school.

An interview on September 27, 2017 with the mother of a 12-year-old child from the town of al-Mayadin, Deir ez-Zor, who was enlisted into ISIS highlights the strategic significance of mosques in the selection of recruits:

He frequented a local mosque. Mazen [the child] used to listen to speeches given by a Dawa man [preacher] by the alias Abu al-Faruq. The child and his friend... became close to Abu al-Faruq.

Furthermore, on multiple occasions, familial vulnerability, particularly the loss of both parents, was observed to facilitate children's accessibility to ISIS recruiters. For instance, an interview on September 18, 2017 with a worker at an ISIS' orphanage centre showed that:

ISIS puts the children in orphanage-like centers. The children are provided with basic supplies and intensively indoctrinated.

In the case of orphans, predatory recruitment by ISIS appears to resemble paedophiles' exploitation of children's psychological vulnerabilities.²⁹

In addition to the use of organizational resources to gain access to children, ISIS recruiters appeared to target children who were easily accessible 'targets of opportunity' for them. Data obtained during interviews outlined the role of accessibility in predatory recruitment:

Thamir, 12-year-old boy (13 at the time of the interview), lived with his family... Abu Usama, an ISIS operative who was attached to the cubs of the caliphate, stayed in the apartment on the second floor of the same building.

Abdullah, an 11-year-old boy... used to assist his father who owns a shop in... Raqqa, Syria. Abu Umar, a Tunisian national and an ISIS member, frequented that shop.

As this analysis will show, recruiters were able to provide social support and isolate the two children from their adult family members. Neglect and lack of parental supervision, combined with ISIS' coercive practices to ease the accessibility of children is thought to be pivotal in this stage. For instance, support for the aforementioned statement is provided in notes taken by a data collector on May 30, 2017:

At the age of 13, Ahmad, a resident of... Raqqa... watched videos at kiosks around the city. Ahmad's family talked about the Samsung Galaxy [phone] he got from an

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²⁹ Olson, Daggs, Ellevoid, and Rogers, "Entrapping the Innocent"; Finkelhor, "Current Information on the Scope".

ISIS fighter. Ahmad would come home with food and he always had money on him, his brother recounted. His older brothers tried to prevent him from going out and from meeting with ISIS fighters. His older brother was concerned after he saw a picture of Ahmad surrounded by ISIS fighters while holding an AK47.

To that end, notes received on September 9, 2017 from a data collector suggest coercive and organized behaviour by ISIS recruiters:

ISIS Dawa members gather in the tent/ kiosk. Other members bring children in off the streets or go door-to-door asking for children to gather at a given tent/ kiosk.

It is unclear whether that method reflects a more recent tool to facilitate the accessibility of children to recruiters. To that end, similar to the selection of victims by paedophiles,³⁰ the selection of recruits by ISIS is argued to be the manifestation of a planned, strategic, and opportunistic process.

Gaining Access

Similar to paedophiles' child grooming processes,³¹ ISIS recruiters' behaviours in this phase of grooming aim to increase their ability to isolate the child physically and psychologically. However, ISIS child recruiters hold the power to act with little to no parental or community resistance. Moreover, ISIS' structural and organizational resources provide unique levels of access to potential child recruits. This is especially the case for children in orphanages and those attending schools, mosque-based teaching sessions, and Dawa (preaching) kiosks. In this sense, the recruiters have access similar to, or greater than, that of intra-familial sexual offenders. The data provides numerous instances of support for central ISIS operations that facilitate gaining access to potential child recruits. Moreover, like extra-familial sexual offenders,³² ISIS recruiters were found to prioritize recruitment efforts in areas where potential child recruits would be readily available to them. For instance, details obtained during interviews on May 23, 2017 with a child and his guardian indicate that:

Thamir's father: Abu Usama frequently visited us. That made me agitated. I was afraid to ask him to leave.... He (Abu Usama [the recruiter]) told me that he left his children before immigrating to Syria. Abu Usama started to visit when I was out for work. He asked Thamir's mother to send the children to his house. Thamir and his younger brother would stay at the his [the recruiter] apartment for hours.

Thamir: Abu Usama, for the whole month of Ramadan, had taken me to his apartment... He asked me to come to his place whenever I can. Because of father and mother, I tried to avoid him... Even when I did not want to meet him, he would find me and insist on me staying at his place... Back in Syria, he gave me rides in his car.

Abdullah's mother, during an interview on June 3, 2017, talked about her son when the operative frequently visited her husband's store:

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³⁰ Winters, and Jeglic, "Stages of Sexual Grooming".

³¹ Winters and Jeglic, "Stages of Sexual Grooming"; Olson, Daggs, Ellefvold, and Rogers, "Entrapping the Innocent"; Lanning, *Child Molesters*.

³² Michele Elliott, Kevin Browne, and Jennifer Kilcoyne, "Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: What Offenders Tell Us," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 19, no. 5 (1995): 579–594.

Abu Umar gave Abdullah special attention. He talked to him as though the child was an adult. Abdullah started to visit Abu Umar after he finished working with his father, without the knowledge of his family. Increasingly, Abdullah started to disappear for most of the day.

The following is another example from an interview with the mother of a child soldier on September 27, 2017:

Mazin started to disappear for long times... His father started to surveil his child He saw his child and his child's friend... riding in Abu al-Faruq's (member of ISIS dawa) car after the afternoon prayer. The man [recruiter] took the children to his place.

It is noteworthy that the data also showed that the families across the three cases tried to prevent their children from meeting ISIS recruiters. However, fear of ISIS reprisal and the child increasing attachment to the recruiter hindered their efforts to disengage their children from the recruitment process. Given the nature of this phenomenon, interviews with guardians who are supportive of ISIS were deemed risky. Evidence drawn from interviews and data collectors' notes suggests that children of ISIS sympathizers are often enrolled in ISIS schools, making recruit selection and gaining access to child recruits very easy for recruiters. That said, the enacted behaviours used by recruiters to gain access to child recruits are thought to facilitate the recruitment of children from less sympathetic backgrounds as well.

Trust Development

The predatory recruitment strategies employed by ISIS can be conceptualized according to Olson et al.'s model of deceptive trust development employed by child molesters.³³ Under the specific purview of ISIS' predatory recruitment of children, the concept of deceptive trust development is defined as the recruiter's ability to nurture ties and relationships with a potential child recruit. These relationships can be the result of central strategies (through media, schools, and mosques), family support to the terrorist organization, and/or the co-option and/or coercion of unwilling families. ISIS recruiters are also observed to utilize and enact covert techniques and behaviours similar to that of extra-familial paedophiles (see previous sections on the selection of recruits and gaining access).

Building on the literature of grooming,³⁴ this phase is argued to be the central element of ISIS' predatory recruitment because it is marked by increased feelings of cooperation, trust, and attachment between the child and the recruiter. In this stage, the recruiter builds a personal relationship with the child by portraying interest in and providing social support to them, and showering the potential recruit with attention, gifts, food, and money. Findings from interviews showed that recruiters were able to gain the trust of their child recruits and turned one of them against his family at this stage. The following is an example from interviews on May 23, 2017:

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³³ Olson, Daggs, Ellevold, and Rogers, "Entrapping the Innocent".

³⁴ Jamie-lee Mooney and Suzanne Ost, "Group Localised Grooming: What Is It and What Challenges Does It Pose for Society and Law?" *Child and Family Law Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2013): 1–20; Anna C. Salter, *Transforming Trauma: A Guide to Understanding and Treating Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1995); van Dam, *The Socially Skilled Child Molester*; McAlinden, "Setting 'em up", 339–362.

Thamir's father: Abu Usama's relationship with Thamir grew stronger. Thamir and his brother started to take every meal at the operative's apartment. They often came back home with toys.

Thamir: He [Abu Usama, the recruiter] always brought good food. He also let me play with toys. He was good to me.

An interview on June 3, 2017 with the brother of a child soldier presented additional information:

Abu Umar gave Abdullah special attention. He talked to him as though the child was an adult. Abu Umar also made jokes and managed to make the child attached to him. Abdullah would anticipate meeting Abu Umar with excitement. The child grew attached to that ISIS member. Abdullah started to visit Abu Umar after he finished working with his father, without the knowledge of his family.

Contents from an interview on September 27, 2017 with the mother of a child soldier outlined a case in which the child threatened his father prior to enlisting into ISIS:

Mazin... and his friend... became close to Abu al-Faruq [the recruiter]. The father argued with his child and forbade him from seeing Abu al-Faruq. The child told his father that he would continue seeing that man and asserted that it was not his father's business... The mother recounted... that her son threatened his father.

An interview on May 30, 2017 with the brother of a child soldier outlined another instance of increased trust and attachment towards the recruiter:

Ahmad would come home with food and he always had money on him... His older brother tried to prevent him from going out and from meeting with ISIS fighters. The fighter who gave Ahmad the smartphone visited the family and asked for the 13-year-old boy. Out of fear, Ahmad was allowed to go out again. Ahmad increasingly frequented an ISIS base, where the older fighter was stationed. Ahmad talked to his concerned family about how well he was treated.

The recruiters' behaviours and techniques throughout these three stages may create trust, friendship, and attachment, and ultimately make the potential recruit feel special. ISIS recruiters establish personal bonds with potential recruits by providing children who are frequently deprived from schooling and even forced into child labour with a support system. Obtaining the trust of potential recruits is posited to allow the recruiters to elicit children into strengthening their identification, attachment, and loyalties to the achievement of ISIS' immediate and transgenerational aims.

Ideological Pre-Schooling and Agency

The data outlined a number of practices that ISIS recruiters had enacted following initial grooming but just prior to the actual enlistment of children into the organization's ranks.

Just like the process of desensitizing children to touch by paedophiles,³⁵ ISIS recruiters were observed to subject child recruits to ideological materials and acts of violence. For example, details from an interview on June 3, 2017 indicate that:

Increasingly, Abdullah started to disappear for most of the day. When his parents questioned him, the child told his parents that Abu Umar was taking him to attend sharia lectures.

An interview on May 30, 2017 provided additional material:

Ahmad told his family that the fighter took him to kiosks around the city to watch videos. Also, the fighter took him to places where ISIS members delivered speeches and carried out executions.

ISIS is clearly invested in its media operation in its controlled territories. Recruiters' practices of motivating or coercing potential child recruits to consume such material may gradually increase their desensitization to violence. It is noteworthy that aspects of the process of identity formation in children make them particularly susceptible to ISIS' indoctrination.³⁶ As an adaptive terrorist organization, ISIS seems to be aware of the impact of its central campaign in recruiting children. In the process of predatory recruitment, ISIS child recruiters may be directed or personally choose to use certain forms of media in order to facilitate the recruit's indoctrination (e.g., lectures at kiosks, public executions, speeches in public spaces or mosques, etc.). Material from an unstructured interview received on September 7, 2017 and carried out by a data collector with an ISIS member, who is involved in preaching to and the enlistment of children, outlined a Pavlovian-like practice:

After screening some propaganda videos or speeches, the children are engaged in competitions. The idea is that those who were engaged would be able to recount content from the speeches/propaganda. ISIS would reward those engaged. Over time children would be more incentivized to pay attention to those speeches/propaganda. Abu Jawad, an ISIS member who is involved in the aforementioned campaign explained... and justified, "because children are pure, they will follow al-Haq [truth]."

Notes from the same data collector and within the same data entry showed that:

ISIS also attracts children through jihadi songs. Jihadi songs are played in kiosks/tents. Sometimes children would be stopped to recite a song. Children are rewarded when they participate in such activities.

³⁵ Leclerc, Proulx, and Beaugard, "Examining the Modus Operandi of Sexual Offenders"; McAlinden, "Setting 'em up"; John R. Christiansen and Reed H. Blake, "The Grooming Process in Father-Daughter Incest," in *The Incest Perpetrator: A Family Member No One Wants to Treat*, ed. Anne L. Horton, Barry L. Johnson, Lynn M. Roundy and Doran Williams (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1990): 88-98; Lucy Berliner and Jon R. Conte, "The Process of Victimization: The Victims' Perspective," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 14, no. 1 (1990): 29-40.

³⁶ Adel Assal and Edwin Farrell, "Attempts to Make Meaning of Terror: Family, Play, and School in Time of Civil War," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1992): 275-90; Seth J. Schwartz, Curtis S. Dunkel, and Alan S. Waterman, "Terrorism: An identity theory perspective," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 6 (2009): 537-559.

This enacted process is argued to aim to replace/create a frame of reference and a value system. The externally-motivated consumption and retention of extremist material by those children may create a basis for conscious and unconscious informational, emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural consequences.³⁷ Such outcomes are thought to align with those normalized by ISIS.³⁸

Indications of ISIS recruiters' manipulation by providing their potential recruits with a sense of efficacy and agency are observed throughout the data entries. Child agency in cultures of violence, particularly in highly volatile times of state formation, is thought to be largely influenced by the process of their identity formation.³⁹ Given children's vulnerability during this process, they may be receptive to their social context, including extremist narratives.⁴⁰ Children's political agency is tied to the general realities and conditions of their daily lives.⁴¹ Children growing up in ISIS-held territories could perceive parental and community-based *learned helplessness*. This concept is similar to lacking a sense of efficacy and having little perceived agency.⁴²

To that end, extrapolating on Bandura's assessment of self-efficacy in cognitive development,⁴³ child efficacy, in the context of this research, reflects the potential recruit's belief that he obtains the capability to exercise control over his life and others by pursuing ISIS' theological, political, and social aims, be they immediate or transgenerational objectives. ISIS child recruiters engage potential recruits in behaviours that provide such children with a higher sense of agency, through nurturing the susceptible potential recruits' perceived efficacy. This stage involves low-risk assignments and creating situations wherein the potential recruit could experience higher levels of efficacy. Here is an instance drawn from an interview on May 23, 2017:

Thamir [disengaged from ISIS]: Back in Syria, he gave me rides in his car. In the car, he allowed me to hold his gun and rifle. Sometime when we walk in the market he would ask me to hold the rifle as we walked. When asked about if there is anything that he liked/enjoyed in ISIS-held territories that he cannot do anymore, Thamir's answer was: I love holding guns, walking in the market with a rifle, and standing on checkpoints.

Details from an interview on May 30, 2017 provide another example:

Ahmad was instructed by this ISIS emni [member of the terrorist organization's security forces] to spy on people using the Internet in cyber cafes in Raqqa. Ahmad told his family about his assignment. His brother recalled that Ahmad was proud that ISIS was detaining people he informed on. The brother added that they tried to convince him to stop but that they couldn't.

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³⁷ Asaad H. Almohammad, "Toward a Theory of Political Emotion Causation," *SAGE Open* 6, no. 3 (2016): 1-23.

³⁸ McCue, Massengill, Milbrandt, Gaughan, and Cumpston, "The Islamic State Long Game".

³⁹ J. Christopher Bernat, "Children and the Politics of Violence in Haitian Context: Statist violence, scarcity and street child agency in Port-au-Prince," *Critique of Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (1999): 121-138.

⁴⁰ Liesbeth Van der Heide and Jip Geenen, "Children of the Caliphate: Young IS Returnees and the Reintegration Challenge," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 10 (2017).

⁴¹ Samuel Martinez, "Indifference within Indignation: Anthropology, Human Rights, and the Haitian Bracero," *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 1 (1996): 17-25.

⁴² Martin E.P Seligman, *Helplessness: On depression, development, and death* (New York: WH Freeman/Times Books/Henry Holt & Co, 1975).

⁴³ Albert Bandura, "Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning," *Educational Psychologist* 28, no. 2 (1993).

Such a process is evident both in those who proceeded to enlist in ISIS' ranks and those who disengaged from further recruitment processes. Though, the aforementioned practice could also be a test of loyalty. For instance, the above interview showed that a member of the terrorist organization's security forces tasked a child with a respectively low-risk assignment (spying on civilians in cyber cafes). That assignment may allow the recruiter to assess the child's commitment. Except for the case of one child, disengagement after this stage of recruitment does not seem to be optional.

It is noteworthy that, based on evidence retrieved from a disengaged child's phone (coded as Thamir in this study) during an interview on May 23, 2017, ISIS' efforts to retain potential recruits who had gone through the predatory recruitment process is pursued with persistence and intensity. The child in question reported that he received dozens of audio recordings to this. Most were deleted, but some revealing text conversations and two recordings were retrieved. The audio recordings were from two recruiters:

Abu Usama [main recruiter]: 'How are you Thamir? Well? In good health? Lak [slang for listen] between you and me, MAN COME BACK wallah, come back brother. You understand! Don't let Abu Thamir [the child's father] hear you and delete the recording and don't let your mother feel... Come back my brother, come back. I swear to god that it is heaven here. You understand! Come back, please your god, Glory to Him... You understand! As for this life, it won't do you any good. You understand or not? You understand! If you pleased your parents and get your god angry with you...That is a problem with god, glory to him, the exalted. I swear to god it is a problem. Come back here, live with your brothers and become a jihadi for the sake of god. So that you [please/satisfy/gratify] god of the universe. And so that god gets your parents appeased too. You understood! Come back, return without telling anybody. You understood me my brother. Come back I swear to god I missed you man. COME BACK MY BROTHER! Come back and we would make you Kabsa [chicken rice meal] god willing. And we celebrate your return!'

Haji Abu Mustafa [an ISIS member and a friend of the main recruiter]:

'Assalamualaikum! How are you Haji [slang for brother/man]? Your news [slang for what have you been up to]? Thamir, with you Haji Abu Mustafa, your brother in Islam. I [wanted/loved] to give you some advice for the sake of god, glory to him, the exalted. Haji see, this whole life, I mean, it doesn't stop at silly things in Turkey. That you recognize the purpose of my talk is. It is that you are in Turkey, in the land of tyrants. You leave the land of tyrants and you come back to the land of Islam. For the sake of god, anybody who would leave the land of Islam, whoever that person may be, to go to the land of tyrants. I swear to god Haji, I don't know what to tell you! Don't think about your parent and your father and mother, appease your god. Appease your god Haji! If you appease your god, you will see what you'll get. Everything! Money, dimes, whatever you desire. Women, power! Nothing would stop you Haji.'

The text messages were also revealing. The main recruiter appeared to be invested in isolating the child from his family. The recruiter made promises of a better life, offered money, sparing the boy from child labor, and buying him toys. It is important to indicate that it is unclear whether such a practice is pursued with similar intensity for all escapees of the predatory recruitment process. However, in the case of successful recruitment, once the process of predatory recruitment is concluded, children enlist and receive intensive sharia-based indoctrination. As discussed above, predatory recruitment

encompasses four grooming stages: (1) selection of recruit, (2) gaining access, (3) trust development, and (4) ideological pre-schooling and agency development.

Structural Recruitment

ISIS positions itself as a state with bureaucracies and governance systems. Having such control in its assumed territories allows the organization to cannibalize existing bureaucratic and political systems and re-frame them to support its theological, political, and social aims. ISIS uses these existing institutions to create and disseminate information through its media and education directorates.⁴⁴ Regarding operations that aim to recruit children, ISIS was found to employ media operations (through media kiosks, tents, speeches, publications, use of children in executions, etc.) that are tailored to attract children to join its ranks⁴⁵. Former school curriculums were also replaced with strict religious Salafist teachings, physical training, and combat-based education.⁴⁶ As mentioned earlier, locals seem to be aware that sending their children to ISIS schools would guarantee their recruitment. In the previous sections it was outlined that attending such schools is not compulsory. It is believed that given locals' awareness of the danger ISIS schooling poses on their children and ISIS adaptability, processes of predatory recruitment was used to increase their child recruits.

Previous research outlined and uncovered some of ISIS' educational material and analysed its use of media operations to indoctrinate, recruit, and deploy children.⁴⁷ However, given the nature of the data utilized in previous research, certain aspects of the underlying recruitment structure were not clarified. In an effort to add clarity to the discussion of ISIS recruitment techniques and institutions, the following section employs empirical data to disaggregate certain issues that were previously not covered in detail.

Schooling

Data obtained in mid-September of 2017 suggests that ISIS, to a certain level, has abandoned the use of existing school facilities in territories it controls in Deir ez-Zor, Syria:

As for existing schools' buildings and facilities, most are being used as storage and operational bases given that all of them have a basement.

One possible explanation for this change could be the perceived reluctance of allied forces to attack schools and other such facilities. Despite the observed abandonment of certain existing schooling facilities, ISIS has not abandoned its educational efforts, due to the instrumental role education plays in the indoctrination and recruitment of children by the organization. Notes taken by a data collector in mid-September 2017 indicate an increase in the number of schools, but not necessarily in the number of students:

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⁴⁴ Harleen Gambhir, "The Virtual Caliphate: ISIS's Information Warfare," Institute for the Study of War (2016); Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*; NCTV and AIVD, *The Children of ISIS*; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom and Winter, "From Cubs to Lions".

⁴⁵ Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter, "From Cubs to Lions".

⁴⁶ Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*; NCTV and AIVD, *The Children of ISIS*.

⁴⁷ Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*; NCTV and AIVD, *The Children of ISIS*; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom and Winter, "From Cubs to Lions".

There are large numbers of ISIS-based schools that children attend. These schools are based in houses that ISIS rents from locals or claimed for the group after their owners fled them.

ISIS appears to divide students into four groups, namely: locals (Syrians), Middle Eastern and North Africans (MENA), foreign, and orphans. Schools vary in terms of their pedagogical methods (religious and combat-based) and physical training. However, certain commonalities in these pedagogical institutions were clear: based on interview materials received on September 18, 2017, in all of the observed schools, two books emerged as central in indoctrinating the children:

The two books that are intensely taught at those schools are Learn the Order of your Religion (تعلم أمر دينك) and the Book of Monotheism and Doctrine (التوحيد و الفقه كتاب).

[Through] learn the order of your religion... children are taught the meaning of No God but God, al-Wala (the loyalty) and al-Bara (the disavowal), the Takfir (one who is a Muslim is declared impure) of tagut (tyrant).

These themes were observed and analysed in research focusing on ISIS propaganda and counter narratives.⁴⁸ This suggests considerable similarity between the values that ISIS propagates to adults and those it asserts in its indoctrination of children.

Children of foreign fighters (both MENA and foreign) are only separated so that children for whom Arabic is not their mother tongue receive the required linguistic education. The two categories are collapsed into one after foreign children master the language. That said, the data also shows that children of senior local operatives are allowed into schools that host this particular subset of children. Likely this is because the selection process for teachers at the schools hosting MENA and foreigners is typically more stringent than the process for hiring teachers at schools for local children. Notes obtained from a data collector in mid-September 2017 showed that:

[T]eachers... undergo a tougher vetting process. Only those who prove their loyalty to ISIS are approved.

On the other hand, registering at the ISIS directorate of education and taking the so-called *Istitabah* (redemption) course qualifies teachers to work at ISIS schools. According to details from an interview in mid-September 2017, schools for MENA and foreign children are significantly more intense in terms of physical and combat training:

Those above the age of 10 start to receive physical and militant training and courses, including the use of handguns, AK47, and how to maintain them. Special attention is given to execution and nurturing hate for those ISIS considers to be infidels.

The fourth category of school hosts orphans. These children are called *Ashbal al-Khair* (the lion cubs [youth] of benevolence/good). This group includes children of escapees

⁴⁸ J.M Berger, "Countering Islamic State Messaging Through "Linkage-Based" Analysis," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 2 (2017).

(local, MENA, and foreign), children whose fathers were killed fighting for ISIS, and orphans without guardians (without any immediate or distant family member to care for them). The methods ISIS employs in orphanages are similar to that of the Taliban in Pakistan;⁴⁹ children were manipulated with depictions of heaven that portray a stark contrast to the children's harsh realities. Across the towns of Ishara, Busirah, and Mayadin, Deir ez-Zor, these children were groomed and trained to carry out suicide attacks, according to interview materials obtained in mid-September 2017:

A common theme of focus within those centers is the emphasis on revenge and meeting parents in heaven... The most intensive training this group of children undertakes is the use and installment of different types of IEDs.

Data (pictures, data collectors' notes, and unstructured interviews) obtained in early October of 2017 uncovered one of those centres: *Usama al-Mwahid's Camp*. The data suggests an increased reliance on suicide bombers who trained at this school/camp. One of the trainees (pictured below) who had been in the camp for a year as of October 2017, after his father's death, became an instructor of IED manufacturing at the age of 15.

It seems that orphans receive the most intense indoctrination and expedited deployment compared to the three other categories. It is also clear that ISIS is more protective of the identities of children of MENA and foreign fighters. Based on notes taken by a data collector on September 11, 2017, the data on training camps suggest that ISIS may be anticipating children's return to their parents' home countries:

Abu Jumaa, a Saudi ISIS operative, was heard explaining the reasoning behind separating foreign fighters' children from their local counterparts: foreign fighters' children are shown that they are special to the Dawla (ISIS) and their role is big here and in the lands of infidels (areas and countries outside ISIS-held territories).

It is unclear whether that statement was based on inside knowledge or the operative's personal opinion. If it was the former, ISIS may be preparing those children to carry out operations (e.g., recruitment, suicide attacks, etc.) in their parents' home countries, should those children return. ISIS' caliphate is on the verge of collapse and it is highly possible that the organization will be forced back into operating as an insurgency. In that scenario, and in line with the Dutch intelligence assessment,⁵⁰ threats posed by this category of children should be examined with extreme care. It must be stressed that, unlike the local children, orphans, MENA, and foreign fighters' children have no choice but to enlist into ISIS ranks (for more see the following sections). With negative and inappropriate role models (e.g., parents or older siblings who took them to Syria) and ISIS's coercive enlistment, these children are foremost victims.

Enlistment

ISIS, as a terrorist organization, is one that should be viewed as a bureaucracy in which different directorates cooperate with agility to achieve sets of immediate and future objectives. The data provided abundant evidence wherein the directorates of enlistment, education, emni (ISIS security and intelligence), media, and mosques

⁴⁹ Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers Global Report* (London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008).

⁵⁰ NCTV & AIVD, *The Children of ISIS*.

collaborate in order to facilitate the enlistment of children. Data from an unstructured interview in early October 2017 provides support for the aforementioned statement:

ISIS [gets/motivates/coerces (unclear how)] children below the age of 10 in the city of al-Mayadin to attend lessons in local mosques. The directorate of mosques is in charge of this task. The operative in charge... directs the recruitment of those children.... Regular militant members who are attached to cubs of the caliphate visit those mosques and engage children in competitions. The facilitator between the militant members, Dawa men, and mosques is known as Abu Shima. He also handles the operations in media kiosks.

Data recorded in early September 2017 indicates the central involvement of the directorate of enlistment:

Before moving them to training camps, children are gathered in mosques where they sign enlistment forms. The enlistment forms get taken to the enlistment office where they are approved by the enlistment emir of the caliphate cubs, an operative by the alias Abu Talha al-Magribi. No recommendation from an ISIS member is required anymore, a deviation from previous practice.

In addition to easing the process of enlistment, the data shows that the emni are also getting involved in enlisting child recruits, based on an unstructured interview on September 25, 2017:

[A]n emni (security) center in the city of Mayadin enlisted children from the age of 11 to 17 into ISIS ranks. This type of enlistment occurs without the knowledge of the children's guardians... Within the emni office, where the children enlist, there is an investigative unit. This unit questions children when they enlist without their family's concession... to compile evidence against the families of those children... Children also get questioned on their motivation regarding the enlistment and training.

It is noteworthy that the forcible conscription of children into ISIS ranks starts with the enlistment stage. For instance, according to an interview on October 9, 2017, widows of foreign fighters are coerced to enlist their children even if they lack the will to send them to training camps themselves:

For widows of foreign fighters, sending their children to such camps is not optional. Every wife of a deceased foreign fighter has to register her children to be trained in such camps. Every child who reaches the age of ten, whose father died, ISIS would take him to the camp; forcibly if they have to.

According to an interview on September 11, 2017, even if the father (foreign fighter) of the child is alive, the enlistment of his male children is mandatory:

Every foreign fighter is obliged to enlist his son(s) and send them to the training camp.

Multiple accounts from different data collectors indicate that the forcible conscription of children of foreign fighters is directed by the al-Hisbah (ISIS morality police).

Particularly, an operative by the alias, not kunya (kunya means family name), Abu al-Magirah al-Tunisi (picture below) was reported to be directing an operation to forcibly enlist foreign fighters' children, based on notes taken by two data collectors in mid-September, and two interviews on September 11 and 23, 2017:

The operative in charge of motivating or forcing this portion of foreign fighters' children into the training camp is a man by the alias Abu al-Magirah al-Tunisi.

He was also involved in a scheme to coerce local children to enlist into ISIS ranks:

An operative from the directorate of al-Hisbah by the alias Abu al-Magirah al-Tunisi... led a campaign that was devoted to arresting children and coercing them to enlist and join the cubs of the caliphate.

It is possible that al-Hisbah's power to enforce ISIS' strict sharia interpretations allow it to imprison children, providing the entity with the ability to isolate and force them into ISIS ranks. Empirical research on ISIS' prison system provides support for the previous argument.⁵¹

The available data, from an interview on September 25, 2017, also revealed that there is a category of children who express their desire to carry out suicide missions at the time of their enlistment:

There is a segment of the children who enlist for engimasi operations [suicide attacks that entail infiltrating rival forces to cause maximum damage].

It is unclear what motivates these children to make such an extreme commitment to ISIS. However, the prolonged exposure to a culture of violence, ISIS' structural indoctrination campaign, and the increased probability of experiencing predatory forms of recruitment may influence or elicit such decisions.

Whatever the motivations behind the enlistment, all cases and data entries employed in this study indicate that once children reach the enlistment stage, they are likely to receive their training and get deployed. The media showed a number of cases in which children disengaged from taking roles in ISIS' ranks even after their training. However, in each of these cases, the child was smuggled by their parents to areas beyond ISIS control.

Pre-training Indoctrination

This paper shows that at least one segment of children enlist into ISIS ranks without attending ISIS schools: those enlisted after being targeted with predatory recruitment. Regardless of the specific reasons why children enlist, they are all obligated to attend courses at the so-called sharia camps (i.e., pre-training indoctrination). During this phase, children undertake physical training and receive some combat-based education. Based on notes taken by five data collectors in early June 2017, ISIS shortened this indoctrination and divided it into the following phases:

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⁵¹ Almoammad, Speckhard, and Yayla, "The ISIS Prison System".

An expedited course is in place to train children in a period of less than 40 days. Every applicant must undergo a sharia course for no less than 10 days.

The sharia course is concluded by examining the knowledge of children. Those who can read and write take a written test; those who cannot, take an oral test. After the exam, the children are given two days to rest. Some go back to their families; some stay at the ISIS facilities... After two days, children gather in their enlistment places, the mosques where they registered. Then the children are taken to training camps.

Those children receive intensive indoctrination and subjugations through similar methods and materials used in ISIS schools, mosques, and kiosks, combined with physical endurance training (see the previous sections and previous research).⁵² After the two-day break, children are expected to start their combat training. If they are not willing to do so, coercive methods are employed, according to interview material obtained in mid-September 2017:

[T]here have been a number of arrests of parents and older siblings when the children did not return to their place of enlistment... Even when children changed their own minds, their parent(s)/siblings were arrested and children were taken. Most of the children were not coerced into attending sharia courses. However, after finishing the course, on at least seven occasions, children were coerced to go to training camps.

Training and Deployment

Existing research outlined the intensity of this phase in terms of mental and physical brutalization, endured hardships, advanced indoctrination, strengthening solidarity, commitment, loyalty and discipline, increased desensitization to violence, and combat-based skills development.⁵³ The empirical findings suggest that training intensity, duration, and subject matter varied across the different categories of recruited children. Even after shortening the training period, this phase remains highly systematic, with commonalities existing between the different camps in terms of the manner in which they train recruits. The following description from an interview in mid-September 2017 of the training stages at *Bin Ladin's Camp* in the town of Thahra, Deir ez-Zor is perhaps reflective of the general practice:

The first course aims to train children on... assembling, de-assembling, and maintaining AK47... for a week. Then, children participate in target practice... [T]alented shooters are spotted and selected for precision training... Those who do well during the precision training are chosen to go for further training as snipers... [T]he next training is on using grenades. This course lasts for three days... [A] collection of courses is administered. During this 15-day period, children undergo intense strength and endurance training. Children are also taught and trained on engagement in the battlefield. Those selected to be snipers get instructions specific to their roles.

⁵² Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*; NCTV and AIVD, *The Children of ISIS*; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom and Winter, "From Cubs to Lions".

⁵³ Ibid

Children are instructed to go for 2 to 3 days without food as they continue their training... some children couldn't put up with or endure this training. Those children would be reevaluated and may have to start the training from the beginning. During the fourth phase children are trained on using explosive belts and different types of [improvised explosive devices, IEDs]. During this period, children are trained on how to connect cables and how and when to hit the switch. For children who fall behind during their various courses (sharia, guns and rifles, and physical training) ISIS prepares them to be suicide bombers. There is a hall within the camp wherein children are persuaded to commit such missions. Themes that are taught in that hall include how heaven will be for those who carry martyrdom operations... These children are called Ingimasiin [translates to infiltrators].

This report suggests that ISIS has a core curriculum that is used in the training of children regardless of their background, but that a child's post-training role assignment within the organization depends on the specific talents and capabilities a child demonstrates during training. The children who are perceived to be the least talented are those most commonly co-opted or coerced into carrying out suicide attacks, but it is noteworthy that camps that are designated for training more talented children, like *Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's camp*, are also increasingly grooming children for suicide missions, according to an interview in mid-September 2017:

The camp is the most intense in terms of desensitizing the children to violence, jihad and the concept of heaven. Speeches, lectures, propaganda videos, direct exposure and participation in violent acts, including executions, are central to the training in this camp. Large numbers of children from this camp end up carrying out suicide attacks using [suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, SVBIED]. [T]here is a waiting list given the large number of children who desire to commit suicide missions... No matter how long it takes, those on suicide mission list cannot meet their families. ISIS video records those who register for suicide missions expressing their desire to carry out such attacks... Children who commit suicide attacks either do it through a suicide belt/vest or a SVBIED.

It is possible that ISIS has increased its reliance on child suicide bombers due to mounting pressure from U.S.-backed forces. Such reliance may present a tactical advantage, should ISIS retreat to its insurgency form. The level of desperation and depravity ISIS has reached can be observed from the case of an eight-year-old (see picture) who received training at the aforementioned camp, based on notes taken by a data collector in mid-September 2017:

He threatened to kill the enemies of al-Dawla (ISIS) using his explosive belt. He also calls himself explosive belts specialist.

As indicated in a recent media report,⁵⁴ the ISIS bureaucracy and its extensive paper trail has been instrumental in uncovering its war crimes. In the context of this paper, an operative by the alias Abu Qaswara al-Muhajir (picture below), who is in charge of keeping records on child recruits, confirmed that ISIS maintains a list of future suicide bombers, during an interview in late September 2017:

⁵⁴ Jomana Karadsheh and Chris Jackson, "Fighting to bring ISIS to justice for war crimes against Yazidis," CNN (October 11, 2017). <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/11/middleeast/isis-yazidi-war-crimes-tribunal-investigation/index.html>.

Those children get videotaped. In the videos, the children give a pre-attack statement. Other children get stationed in emni roles (spying) while they wait for their turns.

Consistent with previous research findings,⁵⁵ ISIS was found to deploy children to handle adult-like roles. Notes taken by a data collector on September 23, 2017 indicated that children have been tasked with spying, manning checkpoints, carrying out suicide missions, recruiting, and combat-based roles, in addition to being deployed as enforcers in al-Hisba, trainers, and handlers of administrative functions:

[A]]-Hisbah is using more children in its operations. Children wearing ISIS military uniforms are increasingly patrolling the streets and operating as morality police. Children were seen arresting adults who did not go to the nearest mosque after calls for prayers. Those children were also seen carrying out punishments against those adults.

There are children, within the [Abu Usama al-Mwahid Camp], who are being trained to carryout recruitment, training, and administrative functions for ISIS in the future.

This trend may be associated with ISIS' rapid loss of territory and manpower, but it is also important to consider ISIS' transgenerational ambitions: these children are viewed as the next generation of stronger, better fighters. In order to achieve this transgenerational objective, the training to deployment time period has dramatically decreased. The shortening of this process also seems to stem, at least to some degree, from ISIS' increased adaptability and efficiency in training child soldiers. While the data indicated the presence of regular training camps where children's specialization and role assignment are determined according to their performance during the different training phases, it also uncovered that there are a number of specialized training camps. For instance, an interview on September 22, 2017:

This unit is called Sad Bin Waqas... They are trained to be stationed with the state's security (emni). They either function as spies or in manning ISIS' checkpoints. There are around 50 of them.

There is another unit of children below the age of 15, also affiliated with the cubs of the caliphate. Those children register from the get-go to carry out suicide missions... This unit is kept in that school where they undergo a constant, continuous, and intense manipulation through videos, audio recordings, and speeches. These children are bribed with food, gifts, and promises of pleasures they cannot imagine in 'heaven.' This unit is called al-Adiat...

The following is another example drawn from an interview on September 25, 2017:

There is a segment of the children who enlist for engimasi operations... The common method used by this portion of the children is explosive belts. However, there is also an operative by the alias Abu Akrimah who oversees the training of children on the use of SVBIED. These children receive driving lessons.

⁵⁵ Bloom, Horgan, and Winter, "Depictions of Children and Youth"; Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*; NCTV and AIVD, *The Children of ISIS*; Horgan, Taylor, Bloom and Winter, "From Cubs to Lions".

Taken together, the examined data suggests that children arrived at the training camp having been indoctrinated and trained at varying levels. Those who attended ISIS schools were more likely to receive advanced training. Generally, combat training lasted for around a month. During this period, children not only received physical and combat-based training, but they were also constantly brutalized (mentally and physically, for instance through increased exposure to witnessed violence and going for three days without food or water) and systematically manipulated through programmatic methods of indoctrination. Additionally, ISIS was found to run a number of specialized camps, most of which were in place to train children on manufacturing and using different types of IEDs. There is evidence of the deployment and assignment of children into adult-like functions, including enforcement, intelligence, combat, and administrative roles.

Conclusion

The current report utilized empirical data to discern the process of recruitment and deployment of children by ISIS. Constrained by methods and the nature of the data used, past research left a wide range of practices pertaining to the engagement of children with ISIS uncovered. This paper endeavoured to address this gap by carrying out field-work based data collection. The analysis unveiled a combination of structural and predatory recruitment practices aimed at enlisting children into ISIS. The former is a central and organized system that utilizes the various resources and experience found in the organization's education, media, mosques, emni, and enlistment directorates. The latter reflects methodical and procedural operations that resemble some forms of sexual predation. This process encompasses four stages of child recruitment: selection of recruits, gaining access, trust development, and ideological pre-schooling and agency development. Past research covered many aspects of these structural recruitment processes. However, even for this form of recruitment, previous efforts left major aspects of the overall process insufficiently defined.

The current research extrapolated on endeavours focused on child sexual grooming literature and findings from scholarly work on ISIS' recruitment of children. It must be stressed that the structural and predatory forms of recruitment are not mutually exclusive: the empirical findings suggest that the two practices intersect, and that ISIS operatives engaged in predatory recruitment utilized resources made available to the more bureaucratic and central child recruitment infrastructure. The data also indicated an organizational agility that involved the use of intradepartmental cooperation to increase the enlistment of children.

Attending ISIS schools is not mandatory and there is evidence of locals viewing such establishments as enlistment and indoctrination hubs that guarantee the recruitment and deployment of their children. This research suggests that this aspect make the predatory recruitment more potent in enlisting local children. When a child gets recruited, he gets enlisted. The findings indicate that this complex phase revolves around cooperation between different ISIS directorates in order to effectively motivate, co-opt, or coerce children to enlist. Those who have not attended ISIS schools take a short ISIS-based indoctrination course. ISIS was found to expedite the indoctrination and training periods to guarantee a swift deployment. This paper suggests that this move is influenced by mounting pressure from allied forces and a concurrent desire to maximize organizational efficiency in recruiting, training, and deploying children.

Depending on the form of recruitment, the child's background (local, orphans, MENA, and foreign), and whether the child attends ISIS schools, post enlistment indoctrination,

training, and deployment were found to vary. In particular, orphans and the children of MENA and foreign fighters experience more forcible conscription into ISIS, and their schooling and training are separate from that of local recruits. Moreover, children of senior ISIS operatives attend the same schools, indoctrination, and training of children of foreign and MENA fighters. The recruitment and deployment of these children are part of ISIS central operations. The data suggests that the indoctrination and training of foreign and MENA children is more intense. Findings of this paper suggest that orphans are mainly recruited, trained and deployed to carry out suicide missions.

In addition to training children to carry out suicide attacks, ISIS was found to be increasing its efforts to train children to take on adult-like roles, including but not limited to, administrative functions, enforcement roles, IED manufacturing, recruitment, and training. ISIS may be engaging in these techniques to compensate for the loss of manpower it is currently experiencing, but ISIS' immediate and transgenerational ambitions may also explain this trend. Whatever the justification may be, these findings should alert policy makers and practitioners involved in DDR of ISIS child recruits.

The data only provides a snapshot of the recruitment and deployment process (from May 23 to October 9, 2017). Additionally, it is likely that some children join the ranks of ISIS for different reasons (e.g., providing for their families, revenge, etc.). The current paper and the utilized data left those elements uncovered. That said, observers noted hesitation on the part of western European countries in facilitating the return of foreign fighters' children. For instance, a foreign policy report suggest that such an attitude could be in of sourcing the problem to housing counties, such as Iraq.⁵⁶ Neither Iraq nor the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), is equipped to deal with local and foreign child soldiers. Moreover, abuses and recruitment of children in the SDF has been documented in the past.

With ISIS' total territorial defeat in Raqqa and the likely fall of Deir ez-Zor, this paper provides a comprehensive picture of the realities of the recruitment and deployment process of ISIS child soldiers. Therefore, the findings of this research are believed to allow future programs to build on previous research to tackle the issue of child returnees of foreign fighters and local ISIS child soldiers,⁵⁷ should specialized practitioners and organizations be commissioned to carry out the much-needed process of DDR. As such, it should be stressed that although that foreign, MENA, and orphan children endured intense physical and psychological brutalization, the threat they may pose to their parent(s') home countries should not be taken lightly.

⁵⁶ Belkis Wille, "ISIS's Other Victims," *Foreign Policy* (October 9, 2017). <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/09/isiss-other-victims/>.

⁵⁷ Liesbeth Van der Heide and Jip Geenen, "Children of the Caliphate: Young IS Returnees and the Reintegration Challenge," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 10 (2017); Benotman and Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*.

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About the Author

Asaad Almohammad

Asaad Almohammad, Ph.D. is a former Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) where he studied dynamics of ISIS recruitment, leadership, operations and the fight against ISIS. He is Syrian research fellow and novelist. He completed his doctorate in Political Psychology and Marketing. His academic work addressed how psycho-political factors alter implicit and explicit emotional responses and to what levels these responses are predictive of political behaviour. He has also spent several years coordinating and working on projects across ISIS-held territories. To date he has addressed a number of financial, operational, and militant activities of the terrorist organization. He is also interested in political branding, campaigns and propaganda, post-conflict reconciliation, and de-radicalisation. In his spare time Asaad closely follows political affairs, especially humanitarian crises and electoral campaigns. He is especially interested in immigration issues.

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Asaad Almohammad

February 2018

How to cite: Almohammad, Asaad. "ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training and Deployment." The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague 8, no. 14 (2018).

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Contact ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague
Zeestraat 100
2518 AD The Hague
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)70 763 0050

E info@icct.nl