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Cubs of the Caliphate

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In the context of war, children are often thought of as innocent, lacking agency and victims of others' decisions. In the public discourse on children, especially boys (under age 10) and male youth (aged 11 to 15), associated with the Islamic State, this has slightly changed and been replaced with notions of fear and violence. While not entirely unique for the Islamic State, this change in perception and framing is arguably the product of the centrality of boys and male youth in the group's performative propaganda output. As part of the Islamic State's utopian state building project, children and youth were, from its very inception, central actors. For the Islamic State, boys and male youth, or cubs (*ashbal*), were seen as its present and future, a critical component to ensure its resilience and continuation while they also proved useful to project its global threat of terrorism.

This chapter intends to contribute to this ongoing debate by sharing insights on the role of boys and male youth in conflict and especially in the context of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. It covers how the Islamic State recruited, indoctrinated, trained, and employed boys and male youth through various mechanisms and in numerous roles to strengthen its own narrative and resilience. Uncovering the evolving involvement of boys and male youth over time, the chapter also describes which roles they were forced to take on as the caliphate project developed.

While the Islamic State's organizational focus and governance structure involved girls and female youths, referred to as the "pearls of the caliphate", this chapter consciously focuses on boys and male youth till the age of 15, which follows the Islamic State's own typical definition of the transition from childhood to adulthood.[1] This analytical delineation and distinction is important because as Vale argues, "Within IS' ranks, roles afforded to children (and adults) were highly gendered."[2] The motive for this choice is the scarce data available specifically on girls and female youth in the caliphate and to keep the chapter's scope focused and realistic. The occasional mentioning of girls and female youth is thus by no

means intended to provide exhaustive information on their situation but to offer perspective to the situation of boys and male youth.

Analytically, boys and male youth in the ranks of the Islamic State can be divided into three categories: (1) boys and male youth of local Islamic State members, (2) of foreign fighters travelling to join the Islamic State, and (3) from local families opposed to the Islamic State who ending up joining the group. These groupings will be operationalized throughout the chapter whenever possible to ensure precision and nuance in the analysis and conclusion. It is important to state that age has great importance in terms of how meaning of events is created and their later impact on the mind. Age comes with a greater risk of deeper indoctrination and socialization that implies a stronger commitment to ideology and from which it may be harder to rehabilitate.

The chapter begins discussing the broader literature on children in conflict. It then proceeds to document and analyze the life and involvement of boys and male youth that ended up in the Islamic State in the period 2014 till now, but with a main focus on the 2014 to 2019 period when the group controlled vast territory in the Levant. This includes an examination of recruitment, schooling, military training, indoctrination, and children as objects in propaganda. The chapter ends with a brief discussion on agency to help provide a more nuanced understanding of boys and male youth involvement in the Islamic State including as perpetrators of violence. Methodologically, it builds on an examination of primary and secondary literature detailing the conditions for boys and male youth in the Islamic State. This includes the Islamic State's internal documents and its own propaganda on children and youth in general. To complement this data, the authors have conducted a number of virtual interviews with representatives in Syria with direct experience working with children and families living in Islamic State controlled territory.

Existing Research on Children in Violent Conflicts

Until recently, the academic literature on children in violent conflicts (CVC) was sparse and primarily written by and for think-tanks and civil society organizations. Now though, there is a diversity of research from anthropology, law, political science, economics, psychology, and sociology, among other disciplines. This section of the chapter will offer an overview of the existing literature on CVCs and make further note of key debates and knowledge gaps. Notably, most research still focuses on one or a limited number of cases.[3] This means that there is little comparative perspective or generalizability. Moreover, much of the existing literature concerns cases in Africa, Latin America, and South

America, leaving a hole in our understanding of CVCs in Middle Eastern contexts.[4]

This section will begin by explaining some notable differences in defining and conceptualizing CVCs and approaching the study of child soldiers. Next, it will broadly consider the different roles children take on in armed conflict, before exploring in more detail how they are recruited by terrorist and rebel groups. It will then outline what children generally do in terms of tasks and roles in these groups. Finally, this section will discuss what the research says about the mental, social, and physical consequences children face as a result of their involvement, and the efficacy of existing programs to assist CVCs.

First, it is important to note that the definition of a child is far from universal, and is largely constructed by cultural, social, and political contexts. For instance, across sub-Saharan Africa, young people frequently complete a rite of passage into adulthood at approximately fourteen years old.[5] Overall though, the United Nations (UN) *Conventions on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and *Optional Protocol to the UNRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* (2000) both define the age of reaching adulthood as eighteen. In a similar manner, the term "child soldier" is also very fluid, since many children associated with armed groups serve as laborers, spies, cooks, or sex slaves, as well as fighters.[6] As such, we have adopted the broader category of CVCs in this chapter, but may sometimes use "child soldier" interchangeably, referring to any child associated with armed groups.

The existing literature on CVCs can be divided into two broad positions: the caretakers and the free-rangers.[7] Caretakers view children as "vulnerable, innocent, and irrational" actors who require protection and guidance.[8] Critics of this position argue that caretakers eliminate the agency and independence of children. Free-rangers, on the other hand, argue that children are capable of "rational, politically-informed self-understanding," which thus means they have sufficient agency to justify their engagement in violence.[9]

The Role of Children in Armed Conflict

Children take on a wide variety of roles in armed conflict. As discussed above, they can be combatants, laborers, spies, sex slaves, or cooks. In these positions, they frequently take on the "norms and values of their militant environment" and can become more aggressive than their adult counterparts.[10] While they have been associated with armed groups throughout history, anecdotal evidence suggests that the prevalence of children in these settings has increased in the modern age.

In 2004, boys and girls were fighting in almost every major conflict, in both government and opposition forces.[11]

Some scholars argue that this increase can be explained by general and systematic factors.[12] Examples of these factors include the increased proliferation of small weapons, widening inequality in low-income countries, and the abundant supply of children (considering in particular that Africa is the world's youngest continent).[13] In response, other scholars criticize these systemic justifications for failing to acknowledge the individual agency of the children. Instead, they support supply and demand side explanations that focus on trying to understand the significant variation in child soldiers across time and space.

Recruitment of Child Soldiers

In terms of existing research, recruitment methods are the sub-topic with the largest amount and diversity of content. Relating to the caretaker versus free-ranger debate, the research is also in disagreement regarding whether children can engage in "voluntary" recruitment to armed groups. This is in contrast with forced recruitment. Typically, those who argue in favor of the existence of voluntary recruitment are free-rangers who also believe in children's agency and rationality.[14] On the other hand, those in the opposing camp argue that when children are regularly exposed to social and political pressures to engage in violence – such as during an armed conflict – it is impossible to assess the extent to which recruitment can be voluntary.[15] In the case of the Islamic State's use of child soldiers specifically, recruiters want children to *believe* that they possess agency, which again eliminates the possibility of voluntary recruitment.[16] This argument is supported by research done by Siobhan O'Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, who suggests that children do not *opt* into conflict, but rather *grow* into it:

> "Conflict structures the information they see and the choices they make. It pulls and pushes them in many directors. Conflict erodes their relationships. It exacerbates their needs and exposes them to untold risk. Conflict shapes their identity and heightens their need to find meaning in their lives. Ultimately, the forces of conflict narrow the paths available to children."[17]

This issue will be further discussed at the chapter's end. It is also necessary to note that the academic literature on child soldiers broadly agrees that the reasons children join armed groups are multifaceted and complex. It is incorrect to simplify these narratives along a single dimension, such as violent extremism, ideology, or radicalization.[18] In practice, the reasoning can involve ideological

reasons (such as supporting an armed group's mandate), practical reasons (such as physical and food security or survival), and social reasons (peer and family networks), among numerous other factors.[19] The push and pull factors that lead to "voluntary" recruitment will be discussed in more detail below.

Before considering children's perspectives in relation to joining armed groups, there is a more pressing question that needs to be tackled: why do armed groups want to recruit children in the first place? At face value, recruiting children does not appear to be a good business model. Children are undisciplined and harder to control, physically weaker and less skilled at fighting than adults, and lacking in tactical and strategic judgement.[20] But, despite this, evidence suggests that using children in battles can positively affect an armed group's fighting capacity.[21] In other cases, armed groups recruit children because they are facing troop shortages and need to fill their ranks, or as proof of the universal character of their cause.[22] There are also strategic reasons for recruiting children. They are more malleable, adaptable, and obedient than adults.[23] In the case of the Islamic State specifically, indoctrinating and recruiting boys and male youth is believed to provide the organization with "transgenerational capability."[24] In other words, they are attempting to create a terrorist group that can outlast its territorial defeat.[25] Similarly, the Islamic State is known to abduct and integrate children of their enemies, such as pre-pubescent Yazidi boys. While this is again done with the goal of creating a sustainable fighting force, it is also done to eliminate their opposition's ability to provide long-term resistance to the group.[26]

When recruiting children into armed groups, there are a variety of methods used by the organizations. Almohammad draws comparisons between the Islamic State's methods of recruitment with that of pedophiles.[27] He cites two strategies – predatory and structural – based on which all other decisions, including enlistment, indoctrination intensity, and future tasks are determined. In the case of the Islamic State, recruiters often employ an extra-familial grooming process over an extended period of time, which involves coercive and manipulative actions that isolate boys from their family.[28] While in some cases children were forcibly abducted from their homes, in others, they were targeted according to their level of vulnerability. For example, children living in single-family households, experiencing domestic abuse or neglect, or those who have less adult supervision were all targeted.[29] Similarly, orphans and children living in refugee camps were also targets for ISIS recruitment.[30] This method was easier due to the Islamic State's ability to operate with impunity in territories it controlled and the resulting levels of access they had to child recruits.[31]

While much of the existing literature generally agrees that in many situations, it is impossible for children to remain unaffiliated with armed conflict, there are a variety of factors that motivate their decision to join, even if it is not wholly

voluntary.[32] Some of these appear relatively mundane, such as physical and food security. In fact, class is often an important determinant when it comes to child soldier recruitment. Wealthy parents can send their children away from areas of conflict, while poorer families are more vulnerable – in a multitude of ways.[33] This also explains why financial and economic benefits can incentivize children to join.[34] Other children join armed rebel groups to enact revenge on enemy forces for lost parents or destruction of their homes.[35] Relatedly, children frequently find a surrogate family relationship in the armed group. In the unstable setting of armed conflict, "the collapse of the state and the demise of traditional family coping structures have left a gaping social void."[36] It is easily filled by military forces. In certain cases, children enjoy the freedom and empowerment of being in an armed group. This image of military life could also be shaped by cultural factors wherein boys are raised to revere the "glamour and prestige of a military uniform."[37] Finally, it is impossible to ignore the fact that many child soldiers are kidnapped and abducted from their homes and forced to join the armed group.[38] In the case of the Islamic State, children who refuse to join are beaten, tortured, and raped.[39]

General Tasks and Roles of Child Soldiers

Unsurprisingly, the work and tasks of child soldiers vary considerably. Generally, they can be combatants, laborers, spies, cooks, or sex slaves, among other roles. In some settings, boys are used as executioners and are forced to kill members of their families and village members.[40] This binds them to the armed group and prevents them from being able to return home. Young girls are frequently treated as sex slaves and are married off to commanders.[41]

In the case of the Islamic State specifically, some research suggests that recruited children are typically divided into four groups: locals (Syrians and Iraqis), Middle Eastern and North Africans (MENA), foreigners, and orphans.[42] Children of MENA and foreign fighters are separated from the two other groups for them to be taught Arabic.[43] All boys undergo approximately a month of combat training, wherein they are brutalized and manipulated. Aside from this, the Islamic State also runs a number of specialized camps, such as ones that train children on manufacturing IEDs.[44] Following their training, many children begin their work as spies, and are urged to chapter on family and community members who do not oblige to ISIS' rules and practices.[45] Others are trained to spy on the enemy. The boys who are considered the least talented are often coerced or manipulated into conducting suicide attacks.[46] Like in other armed groups, young girls perform support roles and are often coerced into marrying Islamic State fighters and local commanders.[47]

Consequences of Involvement

There is broad consensus in the research literature that when children are surrounded by armed conflict and spend their formative years engaged as soldiers, it has severe and long-term effects on their health, well-being, and ability to peacefully rejoin society. As soldiers, children are exposed to extreme violence and trauma.[48] Many of them have lost family members and friends, either due to death or separation. It is common for them to have experienced beatings, torture, and sexual abuse.[49] They miss out on years of education and moral development.[50] The militaristic discipline and abusive settings that child soldiers lived in also means that many never developed healthy concepts of autonomy or control.[51] Simply, former child soldiers "had not learned how to be adults in peace time, yet they were also not prepared to return to the role of children."[52]

Existing research demonstrates the wide-ranging impacts this combination of factors can have. Many experience severe mental health issues, others are physically disabled because of the armed conflict, and some were forced to become addicted to drugs and illicit substances by their military superiors.[53] Frequently, this results in the hallmark symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some scholars disagree with this diagnosis though, and instead argue that cultural considerations should be applied before using PTSD as a starting point for diagnoses.[54] In order to facilitate the best chances of recovery and healing, former child soldiers would ideally be able to return to a situation close to peacetime normality, but this is often impossible on several levels. After the signing of peace agreements, countries and regions are still deeply unstable. Similarly, many former child soldiers would not be welcomed by their old communities if they returned because of their actions while with the armed forces.[55]

The Islamic State's Cubs: Institutionalizing Extremism

> "Raising Mujahid Children. This is the most important role women can play in Jihad – raise their children to be brave and loving, courageous and sensitive, and fearing none other than Allah. Raise them as such not only in spirit, but also in terms of physical ability and training. And raise not only sons as such, but daughters as well. The key is to start instilling these values in them while they are babies. Don't wait until they are seven to start, for it may be too late by then."[56]

Boys and male youth have featured centrally in the Islamic State's caliphate narrative and actions. Considered a cornerstone of the present and the future, cubs were exploited and promoted to make the caliphate more terrifying and resilient.

Arguably, following the argument of Benotman and Malik, their central role as poster boys and perpetrators of violence was in fact *because* they were children.[57] While the Islamic State's zenith only lasted a limited number of years, from 2014 to 2017 – in some places until 2019 – the group succeeded in its strategy to integrate children into its structure and practices through pre-defined roles of exploitation that would see them grow up to become essential parts of the state project. While the previous part looked more generally at children in conflict, this part moves the focus more to conditions and roles of boys and male youth within the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

Boys and male youth in the ranks of the Islamic State can be divided into three categories: (1) children of local Islamic State members, (2) children of foreign fighters travelling to join the Islamic State, and (3) local children from families opposed to the Islamic State who ending up joining the group. The following sections look at selected key features of the Islamic State's institutional efforts aimed at boys and male youth and, when possible, discuss the importance of the distinctive categories identified above. These include recruitment, schooling, military training, socialization and indoctrination, and propaganda. This examination sheds light on how comprehensive and strategic the group's efforts to indoctrinate and radicalize boys and male youth were and lays the ground for the ensuing discussion of their agency. As will become evident, all these elements feature and overlap in the Islamic State's efforts to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize children within and outside their territorial control.

Recruitment

Building a state for the future, the Islamic State from the outset realized that a necessary component of its state building project involved integrating children and preparing them for a number of roles within the caliphate. For that to happen, *recruitment* of children became a focal point for the group in its activities. In terms of child recruitment, the Islamic State enjoyed several privileges. Because a large number of local and foreign families joined the group, the group had easy access to a massive pool of children whose parents not only supported the group and its ideology, but also the idea that their children should follow in their footsteps. Children of local members and migrating foreign fighters were immediately integrated into the Islamic State's formal and informal structure including its school system, military training, dawa activities[58], and media production. Additionally, as the sole formal authority the Islamic State had exclusive control to define legislation, set up institutions, and manage the media, which provided it with enormous hard and soft power to manipulate children and youth.

The discussion on membership of the Islamic State, including in the context of children, typically distinguishes between *voluntary* and *involuntary* membership.[59] While this issue relates to a more general discussion on agency that we come back to in the end of this chapter, there is an argument to be made that the Islamic State's child recruitment was mainly involuntary, yet through mechanisms that might conceal joining as voluntary. This is obvious in the context of Islamic State member families, yet is more obscure in terms of local children from non-Islamic State member families.

Highlighting the Islamic State's holistic approach to recruitment, the group has attempted to recruit entire families to enable synergies and to strengthen the socialization process, playing especially on the mother-child relationship. Zeiger et al. report how the Islamic State "distributed books clearly instructing mothers on ways to bring up their children, encouraging them to recite bedtime stories on topics such as martyrdom and other stories that underlined and highlighted ISIS values."[60]

Schools were, as the following section explains in further detail, an important venue for recruitment, indoctrination, and socialization. One interviewee in Raqqa explains how the Islamic State employed a particular technique that proved effective to recruit children of non-Islamic State members. Mobile media points would visit the schools screening violent, yet appealing, Islamic State videos and play the group's a cappella (*anashid*) songs through the loudspeakers directed mainly at male students. Besides conveying the ideology of the Islamic State, the various propaganda products promoted the social bonds and camaraderie and the military adventure that came with joining. This proved an effective method to intrigue substantial numbers among especially the male youth to feel attracted to the group and eventually subscribe to its ideology.[61] Parents have also narrated how children felt attracted to join the Islamic State after exposure to propaganda videos as part of formal and informal education, for instance in the mosques where videos were regularly screened.[62]

Another recruitment activity was through its public outreach engagement which, among other things, featured events focusing on children. Typically taking the character of festivity, these events involved contests and games and handing out sweets coupled with a religious *dawa* (proselytization) component.[63] At these events, the state attempted to portray itself as a caring institution, exploiting the children's interests to make it appear attractive, yet with an underlying objective to recruit and indoctrinate. During these communal outreach activities, exemplary boys who had undergone the state's religious and military training would feature and speak in a show of symbolism that children among the audience could take example from and aspire to become.

The group has also relied on more coercive methods including kidnapping and forced recruitment targeting Muslim communities and religious and ethnic minorities alike. While girls were typically enslaved or forced into marriage, boys were enlisted at the military camps where, in addition to military training, they went through an indoctrination process. Whereas the Islamic State viewed the parents as unbelievers (*kuffar*), they considered the children as easy prey that through its institutional socialization and indoctrination would align with the organization's theology and political objectives.[64]

Schooling

The Islamic State's education system has arguably been its most effective tool to recruit, radicalize, and indoctrinate children and youth within its territorial domain. Immediately after taking control of territory in Iraq and Syria, the group began to reform the education sector, but with the primary objective not being to educate children in any conventional sense but to "produce resolute and unwavering soldiers of the caliphate" and instill a "self-reproducing system."[65] Morris and Dunning argue that its aim was "to incentivize and emotionally justify violence by children, commonly through fostering sentiments of heroism and in-group superiority,"[66] but in fact the objective was even broader with the aim "to instill its norms, values, and 'system of meaning' in children."[67] While precise data is hard to come by, boys had a much higher enrolment rate than girls, likely because their socialization into Islamic State ideology and its *system of meaning* and their going through military training as part of the school system was considered more decisive. This was particularly the case in the Syrian provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour and reportedly less so in Iraqi-controlled provinces.[68] A rough estimate is that approximately 150,000 children attended schools administrated by the Islamic State between 2014 and 2017.[69]

The Islamic State started to control territory in the Levant from early 2014, yet it was not before the announcement of the caliphate in late June 2014 that it embarked on implementing a comprehensive school system for all children within the borders of the caliphate. This process began with the formation of the Ministry of Education and Teaching (*Diwan al-Tarbiyya wa al-Ta`lim*) in July followed by the drafting of an entire textual corpus by the so-called Curriculum Office (*Mudiriyyat al-Manahij*) comprising as many as 400 officials over a nine-months period, essentially forming the caliphate's new school curricula.[70] The first textbooks were released in October 2015 and focused on teaching for grades 1-5.[71]

Prior to the capture of cities like Raqqa and Mosul, a large number of the provinces' urban school facilities had been bombed since Islamic State fighters used them as bases and camps. While this left a weak educational infrastructure for the newly created caliphate to exploit and in places like Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour, the group never prioritized to invest in and rebuild schools.[72]

According to official Islamic State policy, the school system was divided into three sections with primary school starting at the age of six and lasting five years, followed by secondary school lasting for two years, and ending with high school lasting for another two years.[73] As a girl, you could only go to school between the age of six and 11. Besides disposing a number of courses such as arts, sports, and philosophy, the most revolutionary element of the Islamic State's schooling reform was the adoption of an entirely new Islamic State produced textbook corpus. The scope of the task meant that the new textbooks were only ready for the start of the school year in 2015. Unsurprisingly, the two most important classes in the primary school were creed (*aqida*) and Qur'anic studies. To ensure that teachers taught the proper creed and Qur'anic interpretation (ijtihad) as dictated by the Islamic State, the group forced teachers to undergo a two-month training.[74] Both male and female teachers were expected to attend a shari'ah session,[75] with reports of the Islamic State killing teachers not following the curriculum.[76] Besides its own narrow interpretation of Islam, no other religious education was allowed. In a video issued by Amaq News Agency on March 10, 2016, the Ministry of Education burned a large pile of "Christian instruction books" in an act of resistance against the regime.

It has been reported that the Islamic State made it mandatory for children to attend its school, but interviewees tell another story, saying that the decision was left to people themselves.[77] Based on interviews with some of the women in detention camps in northeastern Syria, they often kept their children at home out of fear of drone strikes and other attacks. Over time, however, and after realizing the true content of the Islamic State's educational reform, a large number of families opposed to the group decided to take their children out of school and, in some instances, send them to regime-controlled territory to continue their education.[78] In the latter cases, when this was detected the Islamic State called on students to repent and subjected them to two-weeks shari'i sessions.[79] This aligns with other reporting that many classrooms were eventually left empty.[80]

Military Training

For children coming from Islamic State families or those who decided to join the group, military training became a natural extension of, and in some cases replacement for, education in the schools. A testament to how the Islamic State

viewed children and the contemporary and future roles within the caliphate, boys were expected to also take on militant roles if not immediately then at least in the future as they grow up.

Defining for the group's perverted view of children and childhood, the Islamic State considers boys and male youth as agents of violence partly as a contribution to its insurgency and as a mechanism of desensitization to violence. Similar to the schooling system, between 2014 and 2017 the Islamic State introduced a relatively formal system for military training under the administration of *Idarat al-Mu'askarat*, that likely was part of the *Diwan al-Jund* (Department of Soldiers),[81] in addition to the physical training and combat exercises that were part of the school curriculum. The precise procedure for receiving military training appears to have differed depending on the location and time and also the extent to which it complemented or replaced schooling.

In families where parents were part of the Islamic State, boys would typically replace school with military training around the age of twelve to thirteen, where they would live and train in a *muaskar* (military training camp).[82] One example is al-Farouq Institute for Cubs in the city of Raqqa, which the Islamic State detailed in a February 2015 video.[83] Here boys as young as eight-years-old were trained in various military techniques, including gruesome tactics such as beheadings and assassination.[84] The Islamic State also abducted boys from schools, sending them to undergo military training. According to UNAMI and OHCHR, in 2015 the group abducted as many as 900 boys between the age of nine and fifteen from Mosul and forced them to go through religious and military training.[85]

The military camps were considered a transition from boyhood to adulthood despite the children's young age. Not only did they learn military skills and were taught to become agents of violence, but they also left home for extended periods of time to immerse in the training and the ideological indoctrination. This was also the case for non-Sunni boys and male youth who were occasionally kidnapped and forced to undergo even more intense indoctrination schemes. As Zeiger et al. report, the Islamic State's approach to Yazidi boys and male youth between the age of eight and fourteen was to separate them from their families, move them to different parts of Islamic State controlled territory, and force them to undergo military and ideological training.[86] That way the group managed to isolate the boys in an environment conducive to extreme manipulation and socialization. Whereas for some the training at the camps provided them with basic military skills useful for a future as an infantry for the Islamic State, others were selected for specialized training preparing them for special roles including snipers, suicide operations, and special operations.

For parents being members of the Islamic State, the decision to send their boys to a military camp followed naturally from their own support to the group ideology and its militant activities. In addition, they had an economic incentive to let their boys join the military since these implied higher monthly payments from the 'state'.[87] Yet it was not exclusively boys from Islamic State families that took part in the military training of cubs. Boys and male youth, including orphans, who were either recruited or enslaved also underwent training.[88]

Socialization and Indoctrination

In addition to its educational system and military training, the Islamic State promoted and developed several mechanisms to socialize and indoctrinate boys and male youth living under its rule with extensive focus on adaptation to its religious creed and desensitization to violence. These efforts were part of a process to reengineer their mentality, effectively changing their norms and their perception of reality.

As Vale shows, the Islamic State encouraged boys and male youth to follow in the footstep of their fathers or important male relatives who, functioning as instructive role models, guided their own trajectory through violence and radicalization. For boys whose parents or extended family had joined the Islamic State, this was an effective strategy as it involved some degree of automation. Not only was family symbolizing a role model, but they were also often performing as teachers, or instructors, enabling boys and male youth's introduction to extreme violence. These actions, she writes, are "symbolizing a rite of passage into manhood and militancy."[89]

As the quotation above illustrates, the group and its supporters understood the importance of influencing children at an early age. Besides the formal school system and military training, a number of digital applications were developed targeting children. Arguably the most well-known is the *al-Huroof* (alphabet) application helping children to learn the Arabic alphabet and vocabulary. The app teaches letters and words through militant and extremist concepts and references such as *sayf* (sword) to learn the letter 's' or *midfa'* (cannon) to learn the letter 'm'. Highlighting an understanding for adapting to children's mindset and preferences, supporters in the Islamic State ecosystem (known as *munasirun*) also developed smartphone games playing on references to well-known Western action figures such as Captain America. While violence is not an unusual feature of children's games, the striking thing about the games the Islamic State developed is that they take place in an Islamic State inspired universe promoting the group's unique worldview and ideology.

Another mechanism was through exposure. Vale writes that "By infiltrating private and public spaces to broadcast its images and messages, IS seeks to 're-program' children to disregard normal behaviors, judgements, ethics and values, and instead adopt those that will equip minors to become brutal fighters themselves."[90] One interviewee residing in Raqqa explains that it was common for parents to bring their children to witness public acts of violence such as hudud[91] punishments, including public beheadings that regularly took place at Raqqa's al-Naim square. Although the children might not sympathize with the Islamic State's ideology, witnessing such explicit brutal acts of violence normalized their view of violence, even its extreme expressions, as a method to handle social and political conflicts.[92]

Establishing a strong degree of in-group loyalty, especially among children and youth, is key for the Islamic State to ensure its future existence. Time and again in Islamic State propaganda, this has been identified as a central task for mothers to form children's identity and prepare them to become militants.[93] While such degree of loyalty through indoctrination and socialization might seem straightforward in families where parents are members of the Islamic State, it is more challenging dealing with children whose families oppose the group. Yet, interviewees shared accounts of children, whose parents opposed the Islamic State, who ended up reporting on their own families.[94]

Objects of Propaganda

For the Islamic State, the reliance on children as agents of violence was not sufficient. They had to show it to the outside world in order to prove how comprehensive its state-building project in fact was and as a symbol to instill fear. The Islamic State's focus on and employment of children in its propaganda can be divided into two overlapping periods. The first mainly covers the years of territorial expansion and state creation from 2013 to 2015 and utilizes children and youth to promote the narrative of a prosperous, well-functioning, state. The second, beginning in 2015 and lasting until the present day, focuses on boys as agents of war and perpetrators of violence.

In June 2015, the Islamic State for the first time issued a propaganda video showing a boy beheading a captive.[95] Six months prior, in January, a boy featured for the first time in the role of executioner and in January 2016, the group escalated its use of young boys in its propaganda with the just four-year-old Isa Dare, labelled the *Junior Jihadi*, detonating an IED, allegedly killing four.[96]

The employment of boys for military purposes and to strike fear in its propaganda escalated over the years with children featuring ever more frequently and in new

roles. One interviewee recalled the story of a 10-years-old boy who was convinced to cut the head of a captive to be used in a propaganda video after Islamic State fighters had told him that the captive was responsible for killing the boy's brother.[97] A series of videos from 2015 highlight the transition from the first to the second phase. Titled "Cubs of the Caliphate" and issued by the Islamic State's media offices in Raqqa and Diljah provinces, they show boys as institutionalized agents attending school classes and receiving ideological education, followed by their military training and dressed in military fatigues.[98] In July, the same year, the group shared a terrifying video from the world-renowned amphitheater in Palmyra showing 25 male youth executing Syrian soldiers taken captive.[99]

Following this trend, a number of videos portraying children and youth as perpetrators of violence were published over the coming years.[100] In August 2016, a video showed five youth killing Kurdish prisoners execution style.[101] The following year, a ten-year-old American boy, Yusuf, was seen in the propaganda film *Fertile Nation* where he threatened the U.S. President saying "My message to Trump, the puppet of the Jews: Allah has promised us victory and He has promised you defeat. This battle is not ever going to end in Raqqah or Mosul, it's going to end in your lands. By the will of Allah, we will have victory, so get ready, for the fighting has just begun."[102] If possible, an even more brutal vide as issued by the Islamic State supporter network *Hadm al-Aswar* in March 2021 titled "The Terrifying Generation" that showed showing a male youth beheading a captive in front of two small boys who had been instructed to encourage the assassination.[103]

This emphasis on the youth is reproduced in other geographical areas outside of the Levant. On January 18, 2022, the Islamic State's West African Province (ISWAP) published a propaganda video titled "The Empowerment Generation" (*jil al-tamkin*) that showed a large group of male youth doing military and physical training and receiving religious education.

This type of propaganda material serves several purposes. For the external audience, its aim is to cement the terrifying nature of the Islamic State to the outside world by employing innocent boys and male youth as dangerous perpetrators fighting based on their support to the group's ideology. For an internal audience, the propaganda serves as a driver of recruitment highlighting how boys and male youth can obtain agency and play important roles in the caliphate's jihad rather than act as passive subjects.

Besides the violence, boys and male youth feature as central actors in the Islamic State's visualizations of its public outreach activities. As part of the *dawa* convoys, they are showcased as happy and pious youth that are experiencing a joyful childhood in the caliphate.[104] This is intended to show a soft side to the role

as perpetrators of violence and speak to the idea of peaceful life dedicated to immersing oneself in the religion.

Children in the Camps in Northern Syria

From 2017, and more intensively since 2019, the detention camps in northeastern Syria have become central in defining the situation for a large number of boys and male youth associated one way or another with the Islamic State. Al-Hol and al-Roj, the two largest camps in the region, together hold around 56,000 individuals which includes as many as 37,0000 foreigners. What is particularly worrying is that over half of the camps' population are children, with another 850 boys held in prisons in the region. With abysmal conditions and little jurisdiction defining life in the camps, children and youth are at risk and it is regularly being reported that a child has died or been killed.[105] Children, especially girls, are also at risk of sexual violence.[106]

With a large number of children currently remaining in camps, the Islamic State is reported to be actively attempting to recruit among the boys and male youth either through its supporters in the camps or by smuggling them out to indoctrinate and train them. Because children in the camps are particularly vulnerable as a result of their social, mental, security, and health conditions, they should be considered at serious risk for recruitment.[107]

Despite the loss of territorial control and the de facto end of its governance structure, including its formal education system, the educational indoctrination has continued in the camps, where some mothers are seen arranging informal courses for the children to keep them in the radicalization loop.[108] The continued lack of a formal education system is only making the situation worse since there is a real risk that other children find such informal education appealing because it might resonate with their lived experience.[109]

The militarization of boys is also continuing within the camps. In addition to ideological education, mothers are teaching their children, both boys and girls, courses in military training in their captivity, and also teaching their children that the Kurdish guards at the camp were the ones who killed or detained their fathers.[110] Media reports also note that the Islamic State is actively attempting to smuggle out boys from the camps to provide them with military training in preparation for conducting terrorist attacks.[111]

Testament to their dedication to Islamic State ideology and the group's survival, it has been reported how incarcerated women in the camps in northeastern Syria are coercing male youth to impregnate them. This exploitation is done to ensure

a continued stream of children growing up and being indoctrinated as a form of investment in future human resources. While boys and male youth, already from the age of ten to twelve, are typically relocated from the camps and moved to prisons, there have been reports that Islamic State sympathetic women are forcing them to wear niqab as a trick to hide their identity.[112]

Conclusion

In the contemporary context with a large number of children and youth imprisoned in camps across Syria and Iraq awaiting repatriation or prosecution, there is considerable debate on their experience in the caliphate and what potential threat they might pose. Having examined the roles and involvement of boys and male youth in the Islamic State, this chapter contributed to this debate through a discussion on children's agency in joining the Islamic State and carry out activities on the group's behalf.

In the literature on child-soldiers, the debate on agency ranges from the caretaker position viewing children "as lacking appropriate agency to engage in political violence" and the free-ranger position that considers children as "capable of rational, politically informed self-understanding, and thus possess agency which can be used to justify engagement in violence."[113] While the former position emphasizes armed groups' 'exploitation and abuse' of children, the latter stresses children's 'informed decision-making' and the importance of context.

During the zenith of the caliphate in the Levant from 2014 to 2017, the Islamic State employed boys and girls in a variety of roles: preparing them to become future fighters, as role models, executioners, sex slaves, and objects of propaganda. In doing so, the Islamic State changed the conventional structure of childhood by enforcing a system defining clear, but limited, subject positions that turn children into victims and involuntary perpetrators.

In addition to any potential future "threat" these children might post, we would be remiss to not discuss the very real struggles these children experienced under the Islamic State and after. With the fall of Baghouz, women and children were transported to a series of open-air camps in north-eastern Syria with al-Roj and al-Hol being the most prominent. Life in these camps can only be described as an emergency situation. What is most shocking about al-Hol is the number of children one sees when visiting the camp. Around 34,000 (56 percent) of the camp's residents are under the age of seventeen, with 30 percent of them being between the ages of five and eleven.

All of these children have experienced a host of challenges while living under the Islamic State as well as after entering the camps: from interrupted education, to

witnessing the death of a parent or sibling; early exposure to violence (including executions, drone strikes, and beheadings); as well as repeated displacement. UNICEF and Save the Children have repeatedly called for restorative justice, repatriation, and mental health support for these children to little avail.[114] Many of these children have been through immense trauma and continue to undergo many challenges. The only way to ensure a return to normalcy in their lives is through proper psychosocial and community support.

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