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The Cubs of the Caliphate

Challenge vs Threat

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The Cubs of the Caliphate are the children who were exploited by ISIS during the armed conflicts in its quasi-state within Iraq and Syria. Created to serve one purpose, to ensure the continuity of the Caliphate and to convey ISIS ideology and message to future generations all over the world. Even though the Islamic State was militarily defeated, the number of children indoctrinated by the Islamic State's ideology is still increasing, and if not treated properly, those children will definitely represent a threat to European security.

Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (RFTF) experience in Europe and particularly in Balkans is very unique since the involvement of adult fighters with ISIS was a voluntary-based involvement and not a recruitment-based one. Despite the global interest in fighting violent extremism in the past two decades, only few efforts focused on the deradicalization process itself. Ultimately, the available reintegration programmes are likely to be inadequate for those children since they were originally developed to address adult soldiers and not minors.

This article defines the Cubs of the Caliphate, their role, their purpose, and their long-term impact on European security. As well, it presents the three possible scenarios awaiting RFTF and their family members and provides recommendations based on the analysis of different case studies from the Middle East.

A Perpetual Impact

A research published by ICPVTR¹, indicates that ISIS has a multigenerational vision when it comes to recruiting and indoctrinating children and the consequences of such vision will probably develop a multigeneration impact. The legacy of war and its psychological aftermath will continue to shape the lives of children who were recruited by the Islamic State for a very long time.

This means that children who have participated in violence during armed conflict tend to suffer from psychological illnesses, while their continuous exposure to violence could possibly lead to the steady incorporation of violence as a criterion – when the exception becomes a rule.

¹ Sara, Mohamed. 2016. "Cubs of the Caliphate: The Islamic State Focus on Children", International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research – Children Recruitment Impact.

When ISIS was defeated and amidst their withdrawal, thousands of children were left behind. Those children who were exposed to wars and armed conflicts, and were indoctrinated with such extreme ideologies (once disarmed, and demobilized), will definitely become a challenge to peace and security. The integrated radical thoughts and extreme beliefs in those children's brain are heavily rooted. Such doctrine was developed specifically to be conveyed to their entire generation and consequently to the entire region.

The Iraqi government announced recently, that there are more than 1.000 foreign children of ISIS-affiliated parents on its territory, where most of them are held inside detention centres and were left without their families in Iraq after the defeat of the organization in 2017. Between the harsh living conditions and an uncertain future, Islamic State children remain as the organization's most affected victims by its terrorism in Iraq and Syria over the past 7 years.

According to ICPVTR, the participation of children in Islamic State provokes a recurring pattern of violence that is likely to persist at three levels:

- Children involved in violence are likely to fall back into the same.
- Children will continue to represent and fight for Islamic State due to ISIS systemic indoctrination.
- The present generation of children will act as a catalyst for the mobilization and recruitment of subsequent generations.

To attain a successful reintegration and rehabilitation process, relevant institutions should focus on developing tailor-made DDRR² programmes (disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and rehabilitation). It is true that the participation of children in violent actions violates conventional war conduct; however, child soldiers always remain neglected during the post-conflict restructuring stage after cessation of hostilities.

In a nutshell, physical, psychological, and social needs of children who were indoctrinated by the Islamic State or by similar ideologies, must be an essential part of any DDRR program or similar reintegration programmes. Providing educational training for children who have missed proper schooling while being a part of the Islamic State, will definitely establish social and economic alternatives to being a member of a terrorist organization.

² Benotman, Noman & Malik, Nikita. 2016. "The Children of Islamic State," Quilliam Foundation.

Three Possible Scenarios

Between the walls of correction facilities and the remaining refugee's camps in Iraq and Syria, thousands of orphan ISIS children, whose parents have died in combat or fled to other countries, are awaiting an unknown fate. And amid tight security, they are being transported across the borders of Syria and Iraq back to their countries of origin. The return of those cubs to their home countries is still a big challenge facing the international community especially EU and Balkan countries, since most of them are still minors, under 18 years of age.

The return of those children back to EU and Balkan countries, did not end the crisis. On the opposite, their return created a new challenge yet to be faced by those countries' governments, i.e. achieving a psychological balance through rehabilitation for these prisoners. We are not here today to address or discuss statistics and number, but to face the fact that quite a large number of such indoctrinated children are actually living among us in Europe, regardless of whether they took part of some armed conflicts abroad or not. EU and Balkan countries, have the full responsibility to take serious steps towards rehabilitating those children, otherwise the question remains, what will be the fate of those children in Europe if no action is taken?

Here we are looking at three possible scenarios: Reintegration, Imprisonment and Taking no action.

Rehabilitation and Reintegration

The first scenario is to reintegrate those children back into their societies. However, this step must be preceded by a phase of psychological, educational, and societal rehabilitation; considering that those children used to live in very exceptional circumstances throughout wars and beyond.

Considering the challenges facing the reintegration scenario, we need to point out that the rehabilitation phase, to achieve a psychological balance for those children and reintegrate them back into their local communities requires a very long time maybe even years, since the purpose here is to get rid of all the negative effects and potential extremist ideas that were established in the minds of those young people.

Rehabilitation per se is not an impossible task, but rather requires very specific and dedicated treatment programmes, adequate budgets, and special facilities, in addition to specialists in psychiatry and social care, time, and huge effort related to the cooperation and the orchestration between

relevant institutions involved in the process. We have to note that the state capability to confront the ideology of terrorist organizations – resources and its ability to keep up and stay updated – and time, are the two major elements to save the children of the Islamic State.

Few European countries, as well Canada and Australia have succeeded in absorbing those children upon their return, taking important steps towards a psychological, health and social rehabilitation, reintegration courses, and dialogue sessions between specialists and victims of such terrorist organization. Such practices emphasize the significance of a serious and a thoughtful interaction with those children.

Imprisonment

Field reports indicate that the majority of Islamic State children are coming from Eastern European countries as well from Germany and Turkey. The Central Criminal Court in Baghdad is one of the main institutions that is responsible for deporting those children back to their countries of origin. Some of those countries have rejected the responsibility to receive them, while other countries have agreed and started the procedures for their return and for their rehabilitation process.

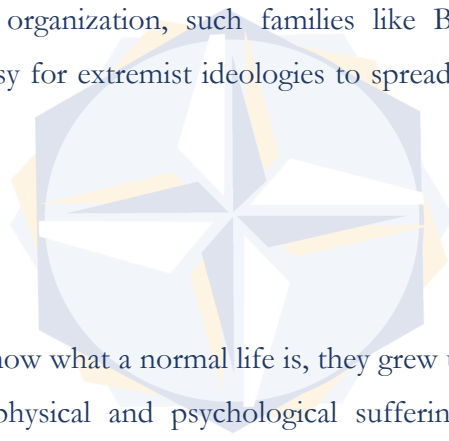
Regarding imprisonment, we are all aware that a prison would not be the most adequate place for ISIS children, and it is far from being a practical solution to reduce their future potential risk. Such scenario of “throwing them in the hole” will probably result in an opposite outcome: it will rather facilitate for those children to become preys to the same terrorist organizations or to extreme individuals currently in prison or worse to organised crime.

On the legislative side, relevant institutions must understand that tightening laws against ISIS children and punishing them with imprisonment can only cause irreversible damages. Given the fact that children at such a young age, need a rebuilding for their mind and perception, as well as to erase the negative influence of the ISIS phase, the post-ISIS phase, and the loss of their families; rather than punishing them for something they did not do, or maybe for something they did under coercion or while they were not really aware of.

Taking No Action

The most alarming action that EU countries and the international community can take, is to leave ISIS children without any rehabilitation or reintegration process. Unfortunately, this is the scenario I am expecting for those children upon returning to their home countries, and this is exactly what the Islamic State is expecting us to do and even wishing for it. Such approach will only facilitate the reproduction of new extremists who believe only in violence and in taking up arms and fighting against the members of their own communities.

Many experiences in the past have underestimated the return of Islamic State children and their families, which led to the creation of new generations of extremists that until today the world is suffering from their actions. One of those experiences was the return of the first generations of Al-Qaeda fighters to their home countries, which resulted in the emergence of Bin-Laden who became later the leader of the same organization, such families like Bin-Laden's, were left without rehabilitation which made it easy for extremist ideologies to spread down the line through younger generations.



Conclusion

Islamic State children do not know what a normal life is, they grew up in a different society and they have been through extreme physical and psychological sufferings. The reintegration of those children will be a very hard task to achieve. One of the factors that will determine the proper methodology for the reintegration of those children is to study whether they have chosen willingly to join the Islamic State, or they were forced by their parents to join – “victims vs radicals”. In other words, to learn whether if the ISIS brainwash process already took place and to which extent, or they were just at the wrong time in the wrong place.

In order to answer such question, an inclusive analysis should be made to determine the nature of their involvement with such terrorist groups as well their tendency to join similar groups in the future after being reintegrated! Relevant institutions involved in this process, must focus on the environment surrounding those children, such as school, friends, and the society as a whole. Engaging their surrounding environment in the reintegration process, will play a major role in the

prevention of radicalization of those children by raising the public awareness, facing, and talking about the problem rather than running away from it.

Different study cases indicate that the reintegration approach must be on a case-to-case basis, and the rehabilitation and reintegration process must be designed and tailor-made according to every individual and/or group of individuals; regardless of whether those children will be submitted to court proceedings or not before going through such programmes.

Our experience in Europe is different, since the involvement of the adult fighters with those terrorist groups was on a voluntary basis and not on a recruitment one. Thus, reintegrating their children will be a hard task, and finding them will be even harder. There are thousands of children that are being held in those detention facilities, and with the lack of resources and proper reintegration methods and approaches, those children will risk being left without rehabilitation and as I mentioned earlier, that's the last scenario we wish to have.

At this point, I would like to raise a question: *Let's imagine a group of children, who are being held together at the same detention facility in Iraq or Syria, coming from similar cultures or backgrounds, and speaking the same or similar language; regardless of whether if they will go through a rehabilitation process or not! How would they feel towards their countries of origin, if those countries lock them behind and throw the key? Frustrated maybe? Developing a need to revenge? Or developing a need to punish those countries? or the citizens of those countries?*

Recommendation

From this standpoint, relevant institutions in Europe and particularly in Balkans, must treat the Cubs of the Caliphate as a special case and with the assistance of specialized NGOs and civic organizations, to develop dedicated tailor-made programmes to the rehabilitation and reintegration of those children.

Case studies in the Middle East³, indicated that traditional DDR programmes are likely to be inadequate for children. If we take children who have been indoctrinated by extreme religious or political beliefs, and apply such programmes on them, we will notice that traditional programmes focus on immediate physical health needs but are too short to address the psychosocial aspect, not

³ Benotman, Noman & Malik, Nikita. 2016. "The Children of Islamic State," Quilliam Foundation.

to mention the deradicalization component. Such programmes were originally developed to rehabilitate adult soldiers and not children.

Despite the global interest in fighting violent extremism in the past two decades, only few efforts focused on the deradicalization process itself. Understanding how terrorist recruiters exploit children's vulnerabilities is a very important factor in the development of effective deradicalization programmes that can guarantee a safe and successful rehabilitation process. Prevention, raising public awareness, information exchange and transfer of know-how are the key in fighting terrorism and violence and the only path towards a successful reintegration.

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Rabi W. Sédrak, special coordinator for the counterterrorism program at CSR covering South Eastern Europe. His research interests include illegal immigration, terrorism, and counterterrorism with a focus on al Qaeda and ISIS, radicalization, and European Security. In 2013, Rabi designed the Balkan Integration and Immigration Program (BIIP), a tool assisting SSE countries to control and integrate the waves of immigration that hit Europe following the Syrian war. In the past ten years, he completed extensive research on a range of international security issues including the relationship between RFTF and terrorism in South Eastern Europe, the Islamic State, and Counter-Violent-Extremism.



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