



A
Rise to Peace
Special Report
On
Youth and Violent Extremism in
Iraq



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About Us

Rise to Peace

Although we live in dangerous times, rife with both international and domestic terrorism, there is hope and there is a clear path towards peace – that road is education and Rise to Peace helps to build that path one person at a time.

Rise to Peace believes that one cause of extremist violence is the recruitment of vulnerable youth with hateful propaganda and misinformation as to why the “way of the gun” is the only option to succeed and find a meaningful life. Rise to Peace counteracts this propaganda with the “way of the word” as to why education and understanding other cultures, values, and religions is the only true path towards a peaceful and fulfilling life.

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Introduction

Terrorist groups and government backed militias across Iraq actively recruit and exploit vulnerable youth. It is crucial that the international community continues to condemn the use of child soldiers and hold those responsible for such horrific practices accountable. In order to craft wise, sustainable policies it is vital to understand the ways in which terrorist and militant groups continue to recruit, radicalize, and exploit youth throughout the region. The underlying social and economic conditions that allow these groups to flourish must also be addressed.

Much of the success of various terrorist movements rests on the vulnerability of youth worldwide, and because of this, it is essential that the international community take action to counter the recruitment and use of these child soldiers. The international community needs to acknowledge this problem and create tangible means in which to aid the children and families affected by terrorist groups, in order to rehabilitate and prevent the use of child soldiers in the future. The political, social, and economic structures within Iraq are highly dependent on its youth. Currently, frustrated youth are emigrating when they can, and many young men are becoming the foot soldiers for the country's most radical groups. Building a peaceful future for Iraq will require putting systems in place that empower the country's youth as well as creating an environment in which they can thrive.¹

The Recruitment of Youth in Iraq

The United Nations describes a child soldier as “a child associated with an armed force or armed group. Any person below 18 years of age who is, or has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity.”² In July 2005, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1612, which made the recruitment and use of child soldiers an international crime.³

Despite international condemnation, terrorist organizations and armed actors within Iraq have continued to recruit, kidnap, and indoctrinate children. Such practices pose a significant threat to the peace and stability of Iraq today and will have consequences for generations to come. In Iraq, child soldiers have primarily been used by IS, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and their affiliates, and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Reports have been released of armed groups recruiting children, training them, and using them in military operations.⁴ In 2016, Human Rights Watch reported that tribal militias made up local Sunni fighters (such as Hashad al-Asha`ri) recruited children from refugee camps in preparation for the Mosul offensive.⁵

According to the 2015 Annual Report of the UN Secretary-General, dozens of children were used by different armed actors in Iraq throughout 2015. The statement reads, “the recruitment and use of 37 children... 19 were attributed to [IS]... 6 to the Kurdish Workers Party... 12 to groups under the umbrella of the popular mobilization forces (PMF).”⁶ The report concedes the ambiguity associated with collecting data from terrorist organizations hampers accurate numbers. Monitoring the extent to which child soldiers are used by armed groups in the country is difficult given the fact that groups are not always open about their use, and some try to hide the practice.

Children continue to be victims of terrorism. The UN recorded 809 child casualties in the second half of 2015 with 63% being as a result of military operations. Between January 2015 and January 2016, 39% of Iraqi children died in planned car bomb attacks, and 33% in battles. 60% of the youth and children were between the ages of 12 and 16, while 6% were between the ages of eight and 12 years.⁷

Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK)

The People’s Defense Forces (HPG) and the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ) are PKK affiliates. According to Human Rights Watch, they regularly use child soldiers to staff checkpoints, clean and prepare weapons, and fight in territories that are routinely bombed by adversaries. The YBŞ is a Yazidi militia who have heavily recruited children in an attempt to gain strength in numbers against IS. The HPG is the PKK’s armed wing, and has been known to recruit children younger than 15 years old from local schools funded and run by the PKK.⁸

However, in October 2013, the HPG signed the Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment promising to end recruitment of children younger than 16 and to transition children 17 - 18 years old to provide services in non-combat zones.⁹ However, Geneva Call's success has been limited, and close monitoring is difficult due to restricted access to YBŞ/HPG/PKK territories.

Islamic State (IS)

Limited access to IS inner workings has made the extent of child soldiers within IS challenging to gauge. However, the International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) reports, "IS propaganda between 2015-2016 included 89 eulogies of children". These reports were used as propaganda for recruiting suicide bombers.¹⁰ In addition, 51 children blew themselves up in Mosul in January 2017.¹¹ The overall number of children lost to such acts is expected to be much higher according to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime.¹²

As a way to weaponize children, IS intentionally uses indoctrination and radicalization tools to propagate their apocalyptic visions for the future. They achieve this through their Cubs of the Caliphate program as well as by exposing children to violence and employing ideological narrative education.¹³ Children who attend IS-sponsored military camps are referred to as Cubs of the Caliphate. IS has operated 12 training camps in Iraq, three of which were located in the Anbar province, three in Salahaddin, two in Ninewa, and one in Kirkuk.¹⁴ It is not uncommon for young boys at the age of 13 to be given responsibilities that include guarding strategic locations, arresting civilians,¹⁵ spying, bomb-making, guarding prisons, or executing prisoners.¹⁶ Children are also provided with weapons to enforce the interests of the group while engaging in these practices. In some cases, the children are sent to other IS-sponsored schools to help recruit and mobilize other students. IS leaders know that their group's survival depends on the future generation, and they are grooming children to keep the narrative alive and uphold their legacy in the future.¹⁷

Pro-Government Militias

The Iraqi Army and pro-government militias have also made use of child soldiers in the country during operations aimed at countering IS and re-establishing government authority over territories lost to the group following its emergence. Child soldiers were also used by government forces under Saddam Hussein's rule.¹⁸ Due to the need for an expansion of its military capabilities, the Iraqi government has recruited child soldiers as young as 11 years old to serve in the PMF, a paramilitary group under the command of the Prime Minister, to fight IS.

Militant groups often use child soldiers out of necessity to replenish their ranks and to ensure survival, and this is the case with PKK and pro-government militias.¹⁹

Mobilization to Violence Trends

Recruitment is the lifeline that feeds violent extremist organizations, and their attempts to recruit are based on a variety of “push” and “pull” factors. Fink defines these factors by saying, “Push factors are those characteristics of the societal environment that are alleged to push vulnerable individuals on the path of violence, and pull factors... are the emotional or spiritual benefits which affiliation with a group may confer.”²⁰ With Iraq’s state of risk and fragility on the rise,²¹ grievances within the country continue to grow. Today, terrorist organizations in Iraq capitalize on the four main factors: low state capacity, poor education, a sense of injustice and a state plagued by corruption.

Poor Education

Iraq has historically had high literacy rates²² with education in Iraq becoming free and compulsory in the 1970s.²³ However, literacy rates have dropped significantly with about 30% of the rural population now unable to read and write.²⁴ According to a report by the Iraqi Ministry of Education and UNICEF, in 2015-2016, Iraq spent less than 6% of its government expenditure on education. The report further revealed that “355,000 internally displaced children remain out of school in Iraq, representing 48.3% of the total internally displaced school-age children. In conflict affected governorates, such as Salah al-Din and Diyala, more than 90% of school-age children are left out of the education system.”²⁵ In 2014, IS closed over 900 schools in Mosul in order to alter the curriculum before reopening. Under IS occupation in Mosul, Iraqi children were either taught an IS-centric curriculum or did not attend school, affecting over a million Iraqi children.²⁶ In Sinjar, only eight of 225 public schools were still functioning as of September 2017, and deserted schools were transformed to barracks and weapons factories.²⁷ Lack of accessibility to schools and education are exasperating the problem because not only are the literacy rates dropping, but schools have also been targeted as recruitment centers.

Poverty & Low State Capacity

It is important to note that many young people may be pushed to join armed groups in Iraq prior to radicalization. Some children may initially join in hopes of gaining material benefits and then be radicalized by others within the group upon joining. In many cases, groups will offer children money, food, protection, and accommodations as a way to prey on the weak and gain

loyalty.²⁸ Groups like IS have provided clothing, beds, and meals to children in training camps. In Iraq, the PMF has also targeted vulnerable children in poor urban areas such as Basra, Diwaniya, Amara and Baghdad's Sadr City.²⁹ Many children and youth were forced to join units within the PMF to earn a salary and receive survivor benefits for their families. Both PMF and PKK argue they do not recruit children, but allow for volunteers; however, in desperate situations where poverty is rampant, and state-power is weak,³⁰ children feel they do not have any other choice.³¹ The discussion of compulsory or voluntary becomes irrelevant when groups use insecurity, escaping poverty and ability to survive as enticements.

Government Corruption: A Sense of Injustice

Youth also continue to be motivated to join terrorists and armed groups in Iraq because of revenge, fear of further victimization, and a sense of injustice - "including perceptions of discrimination and political marginalization, pervasive corruption, and abuses by state institutions."³² IS strategically launched a campaign specifically aimed at winning over individuals who felt marginalized and unfairly treated by the government. After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, sectarian tensions were significantly heightened. The Iraq Coalition Provisional Authority forced citizens "to declare a sect on all state documents...and each sect was allocated a quota on the country's governing council. Sectarian identity, long a component of personal pride, was made into a divisive question of inclusion or exclusion."³³ The Iraqi government's failure to address the legitimate grievances of its populations coupled with the eventual withdrawal of U.S. troops led to higher levels of instability within Iraqi cities. Armed groups were able to fan the flames of injustice, leading to an increase in violence and recruitment.³⁴

Many Iraqi youth recognize the rampant corruption and continue to distrust the political institutions of Iraq. One Iraqi student stated, "We have corruption in all the ministries. Only the members of parliament can refer you to work in the Intelligence Ministry with a letter of recommendation and they do it for large sums of money."³⁵ It is clear that if government corruption continues, terrorist organizations and militias will find more success at garnering support among disillusioned youth. Many Iraqis also view the government as a Shi'a institution that has limited legitimacy among Sunnis. The severity of the problem crystallizes when one considers how the Iraqi government is plagued by an inability to deliver basic services to its citizens. Sunni grievances continue to be exploited by AQ and IS, while Kurdish grievances are exploited by PKK. For too long, sectarianism has been the lynchpin of Iraq's problems, a significant catalyst for the country's seemingly unending cycle of terrorism. The narrative is furthered by the expanding Iranian influence throughout Iraq, evident in religious and

governmental ties. Iraq's sectarian issues will only further inhibit the already struggling government, creating more disenfranchised youth as the situation is unaddressed.

Abuses Drive Youth to Terrorist Organizations

Grave abuses committed by terrorist organizations such as IS have pushed youth to take up arms. This is clear when analyzing the Yazidi and Kurdish populations.³⁶ IS has brutally raped, kidnapped, and sexually enslaved young Kurdish girls.³⁷ The government's lack of ability to protect Kurdish women and children creates a strong push factor for young boys who believe (and are told) that they need to take matters in their own hands and fight against the very real and present danger. Kurdish and Iraqi children are easily recruited to groups like the PKK and PMF simply because of the perception of security. Yezidi children (increasingly after IS captured 10,000 Yezidis in Mt. Sinjar in 2014) as young as 9 years-old were sold, raped, and tortured by IS.³⁸ Many children see their fight against IS as not only heroic, but as existential in nature.

Many children in Iraqi villages also experienced trauma, sometimes at the hands of U.S soldiers. According to Iraq Body Count , between 2003 and 2011, at least 1,201 children were killed by U.S. coalition forces in Iraq.³⁹ It is clear that civilian casualties continue to aid terrorist recruitment efforts. Between 2011 and mid-2013, there were many received reports of children recruited by AQ, as well as reports of children seen patrolling with IS members, specifically in the cities of Ninawa, Salah al-Din and Diyala. During this time, AQ also operated a youth wing named the "Birds of Paradise," recruiting children primarily for support roles and filming attacks, and sometimes the planting Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) . An example of this is seen on May 17th, 2012, when two boys, ages 16 and 17, were killed by Iraqi Security Forces while attempting to place an IED on a roadside in Mosul.⁴⁰

Child "Terrorism" & The Role of Coercion

There are five ways terrorist organizations take control of children: children travel to terrorist-controlled territory with their families, they are volunteered by local fighters and militias, they are recruited, they are involuntarily taken from their parents, or they volunteer themselves.⁴¹ Regardless of child soldiers' roles or how they were recruited, such children are all victims. There is no denying that the region's children, who are used as strategic tools, continue to be emotionally manipulated and left with few options. Iraqi children are inundated with violence, death, torture, rape, and executions. Growing up in a violent culture desensitizes children who accept, and in many cases need violence.⁴² The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) compares IS recruiting techniques to the manipulation techniques pedophiles

use in a four step predatory recruitment process. The steps are as follows: selection of a recruit, gaining access, developing emotional trust, and then ideological pre-schooling and agency development (starting the indoctrination process by teaching ideology through games and rewards).⁴³ The techniques used to gain trust are manipulative and often unsuccessful coerced children have a lower attack success-rate due to their not wanting to perpetrate the act.⁴⁴ IS hosts celebrations throughout its territory where children are encouraged to play “radical” trivia games. When they answer questions correctly they are awarded toys and prizes. Mixing radical messages and imagery results in children believing brutality is normal. They are quickly desensitized to the sight of guns, and decapitations. They lose any awareness that they are abuse victims themselves. Seeing children parading around with AK-47s in IS strongholds has just become part of life.⁴⁵

The reality remains that survival in war zones often makes the difference between choice and coercion unrecognizable for children. 14-year-old Usaid Barho was told to choose between becoming a suicide bomber or a militant. IS recruiters made him believe that if he refused to fight, his mother would be raped by barbaric Shi’ites. After deciding on the former, he was tasked with detonating a bomb at the Shi’ite mosque al-Bavah in Baghdad. Instead of following through he turned himself in crying, “I’m a suicide bomber. I’m a Muslim and I don’t have any intention to kill Muslims. I want to go back home to see my mother. Can you help me?”⁴⁶

Terrorist organizations within Iraq have innumerable ways to access children including schools, mosques, orphanages, and refugee camps.⁴⁷ Having control of the curriculum makes the indoctrination process simpler. IS hand-picks their “Cubs of the Caliphate” directly from schools that they control. They turn the selection into a competition. At school, children are exposed to pro-IS propaganda which makes escaping the influence impossible. If a child is viewed as desirable, recruiters find a way to make themselves available by continually being at their homes, schools, and any other social environment.⁴⁸

As part of the “Cubs of the Caliphate” program, IS established two main schools - ideological and combat - to psychologically and physically prepare children to carry out suicide attacks.⁴⁹ The ideological school is considered the most dangerous. In this school, children are taught an extremist ideology, hatred, and how to separate emotion from traditionally deplorable acts, such as beheadings. The combat school seeks to train the children in hand-to-hand combat. In a propaganda video called “Blood of Jihad 2,” the Islamic State highlighted a children’s training camp in Iraq’s Ninewa province. The video showed more than a dozen children being taught hand-to-hand combat, weapons handling, and what appears to be infantry

tactics. The name of the training facility is “Abu Musab al Zaraqawi camp,” in tribute to the deceased founder of al Qaeda in Iraq. In addition to this facility, there is the “Zaraqawi Cubs Camp” in Damascus, Syria where additional children’s camps are named after the slain terrorist. Four children, who were interviewed after escaping IS control, felt bloodshed became a normal thing for them after witnessing violent incidents in the training camps. The outcome of the training is highlighted by interviews of children who managed to escape IS control. These children speak to the desensitization of bloodshed, saying that killing became normal after witnessing a multitude of violent acts in training camps.⁵⁰ There is undoubtedly a “cultural-emotional dimension of jihadi mobilization.”⁵¹ Militants work to identify not only personal but also national grievances in the populations they seek to exploit. IS constantly monitors information that children receive, especially in their training camps.

Recommendations

Although IS continues to dissipate in Iraq, child recruitment still poses a serious threat. Armed groups continue to recruit children and countless youth remain radicalized. With IS losing ground, the U.S should focus on reconstruction efforts in Iraq and allow for former child combatants to have access to humanitarian networks. Thus far, the U.S response to child recruitment has been fairly limited. Nevertheless, there are ways for the U.S to engage and actions that can be taken to mitigate the growing danger of violent extremism among youth in Iraq. The U.S. should support the development of regional, locally driven Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) programs that work with local governments and civil society organizations to engage communities throughout Iraq. Given the ethnic and religious diversity in Iraq, it is important that subgroups and regions develop and manage their own context specific elements, pertaining and adapting to evolving circumstances on the ground. When designing these locally-led programs, youth, women, national political leaders, diverse religious leaders, civil-society organizations and minority groups should all be part of a preliminary dialogue. While the U.S. can fund these programs, they should not be labeled overtly as a U.S. effort. Local governments and local NGOs that receive funding and assistance should be subject to inspection by international bodies to prevent the illegal allocation of resources. In addition to CVE programming, the U.S. should strengthen anti-corruption efforts in Iraq and put pressure on the Iraqi government to stop the recruitment of children.

Education

While defense is important, the U.S. should work closely with the United Nations and other education providers throughout the region to develop P/CVE programs that prioritize the education of both boys and girls. Cities that were formerly under IS control, such as Mosul, are in desperate need of educational policies that can help undo indoctrination. There is a need for...“courses that teach human rights and tolerance for Iraq's diversity...Public education can serve as a bridge to normalcy in Iraq. It also can help reduce sectarian tensions, provide children and youth the citizenship and professional skills needed for a fully functioning society, and help a generation manage the lingering trauma of war.”⁵²

While it is clear that there is presently an education problem in Iraq, it would be unwise to assume that simply adding more schools to the country will solve the educational crisis or reduce terrorism. In some cases, schools in Iraq have proven to exacerbate ethnic tensions.⁵³ Iraq is a multiethnic and multireligious society composed of Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Yazidis and many other smaller ethnic groups.⁵⁴ At times, Iraqis have voiced that they feel certain school programs favor “the Shi'a interpretation of Islam and some teachers focus on subjects not directly addressed in the curriculum, such as the treatment of non-Muslims and jihad.”⁵⁵ Education curriculum must be designed in a way that does not fuel sectarianism. Moreover, the U.S. should invest in educational programs that aim to “increase the integrative complexity (IC) of the students in order to decrease “black and white” thinking and improve critical thinking skills.”⁵⁶ While efforts should be made to improve the educational sector, the fact remains that many children in Iraq are out of school. Therefore, there is also a great need for safe meeting spaces for youth. “Alternative (non-extremist) meeting spaces and activities that attract youth should be provided, such as sport, cultural, educational, and especially faith-based places and events where youth can congregate outside the home.”⁵⁷

Given Iraq's ethnic and sectarian divides, the U.S. should also consider supporting the development of programs that work to promote “in-country cultural immersion.” “In-country cultural immersion” programs could bring together youth with different ethnicities, ideologies and religions. These programs would prove useful when aiming to lessen ethnic tensions while promoting increased empathy, understanding and acceptance of others. Offering incentives to civil society actors for participating in activities could also prove beneficial.

Such programs would allow volunteer students to spend time with another family of a different religion or culture. Participating children could travel to their counterparts' schools, meet their friends, and stay with their families. Students from different backgrounds would be exposed to diverse cultures within their own country, and hopefully feel closer to them, appreciating the diversity. To prevent this from being counter-productive, and to ensure

children's safety, an NGO would be formed for this sole purpose, which would also organize activities with the exchange students in the regions visit, and stay engaged with them through their experience. Indeed, something quite similar has been going on in Turkey, as part of the April 23 National Sovereignty and Children's Day celebrations. In this sense, regional cooperation would also prove quite fruitful. We see the role of the U.S. in this scenario as a party that encourages these activities, provides funds when necessary, and remains engaged with local governments to prevent corrupt officials from taking advantage of this new attempt to mitigate sectarian divisions among youth.

Youth are not only victims of terrorism. They remain the future of Iraq and they can serve as powerful change-agents that play a vital role in P/CVE and conflict transformation efforts.⁵⁸ It is imperative that their voices are heard and actions are taken to both recognize and ameliorate legitimate grievances. Past efforts to strengthen governance in Iraq have been primarily top-down and have failed to consider local needs.⁵⁹ Better national governance that enhances the legitimacy and powers of the local governments is vital. Moreover, to push back against violent extremism, it is imperative that local citizens and marginalized communities are engaged in P/CVE efforts. Despite countless setbacks, grassroots youth activism is growing in Iraq.⁶⁰ Iraqi youth have demonstrated throughout the country, calling for improved governance. When seeking to further engage youth throughout Iraq, "it may prove effective to partner with and use prominent youth leaders at the provincial level...to address more isolated youth at the sub provincial level."⁶¹ Little progress may undermine youth demonstrators' faith in civic engagement. Therefore, "NGOs working in this space should facilitate partnerships between youth organizers and established civil society organizations."⁶²

While funding for P/CVE programming is important, the U.S. must also work to apply considerable pressure on the Iraqi government to end child recruitment. Congress is prohibited by the 2008 Child Soldiers Protection Act to deploy certain forms of military equipment to countries that have a record of assisting with the recruitment of child soldiers. The international community must also continue to condemn the killing and imprisonment of minors on the battlefield. Currently, there are over 2,000 children jailed in Iraq's cells.⁶³ Such policies are largely counterproductive, given that these jails often turn into breeding grounds for the next generation of jihadists.⁶⁴ The mistreatment of juveniles in detention will only exacerbate high levels of radicalization. Many of the teenagers that ended up in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq found themselves there after accepting payments to engage in violence. Ed O'Connell and Cheryl Benard report, "For \$50 to \$100, they were persuaded to plant an IED, shoot a mortar or fire a machine gun at coalition troops. Upon capture, they are detained in a special

section of the prison...To find themselves in Abu Ghraib, alone, charged with murder, must surely be a terrifying experience. Under this pressure, some youths manifest serious psychological distress and behavioral disturbances...No one warns child jihadists about these dark possibilities during their initial recruitment.⁶⁵

Reintegration and rehabilitation efforts are vital when it comes to child soldiers and youth who have been exploited by armed groups. Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives have long sought to re-integrate ex-combatants back into communities. DDR initiatives can occur in the “context of ongoing counterinsurgency operations.”⁶⁶ There have been at least 60 DDR initiatives that have taken place worldwide since the late 1980s.⁶⁷ In 2003, the United States Department of Labor signed a cooperative agreement with UNICEF entitled the Demobilization of Child Soldiers and Socio-Economic Reintegration of War-Affected Young People in Afghanistan (the “D&R” project).⁶⁸ This project sought to rehabilitate, and reintegrate thousands of child combatants in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, reintegration occurred in 29 provinces and the project demobilized 7,476 child soldiers.⁶⁹ UNICEF partnered with 20 NGOs, Afghanistan’s Ministry Of Martyrs & Disabled & Public Affairs And Labour, the Ministry of Education, as well as community leaders in 159 districts and hundreds of mullahs.⁷⁰ The project, which ended in 2005, provided education and training opportunities for countless vulnerable children.⁷¹ DDR programming can often involve “deradicalization processes and related efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE).”⁷² While there are differences between DDR and P/CVE efforts, there are also a number of similarities. Both initiatives seek to rehabilitate former combatants while placing “importance of family participation and in building social bonds that endure beyond the programme...”⁷³ Moving forward, the U.S. should invest in more research regarding DDR and CVE linkages, given that no policy guidance exists to address the DDR-CVE nexus.⁷⁴

There remains a growing need for more creativity and coordination when it comes to deradicalization and rehabilitation programs. In the case of youth deradicalization, researchers like Wietse van der Berge argue that deradicalization should not be the goal at all since it is extremely difficult to measure. Rather, the goal should be disengagement. Disengagement ensures that even if people keep their radical ideas, they change their minds about using violence to make their ideas about the world a reality. Nevertheless, when it comes to youth, it is clear that “a reorientation in outlook and direction”⁷⁵ is needed as well support for dealing with the consequences of trauma and abuse. Terrorism expert, Mia Bloom, highlights the need for a multi-pronged approach that “addresses the psychological trauma suffered by the children and...re-education so they can unlearn (ISIS’) distortions of the Islamic faith.”⁷⁶ While children

exploited by IS undoubtedly need psychological assistance, rehabilitation and reintegration is also necessary for the countless other child soldiers in Iraq, whatever their affiliations may be.⁷⁷ De-radicalization programming may also be beneficial to the many kids forced to attend IS controlled schools in areas such as Mosul. To avoid recidivism during deradicalization and reintegration efforts, it is important that youth are provided a sense of real purpose or constructive avenues to channel their energy.⁷⁸ “The West and its regional allies will have to provide local leaders with financial, administrative, and technical support for these efforts...”⁷⁹

It is now widely acknowledged that local governments and even more so, local communities prevent and combat radicalization more effectively than the national government. Rejecting the current “capital city” oriented approach and acknowledging its injurious effects should be the US’s first step towards assisting with the development of deradicalization strategies. While women do engage in violent extremism, research continues to show how women, especially mothers, are uniquely capable of countering and preventing radicalization.⁸⁰ In the development of regional P/CVE programs, women should also be engaged directly and educated on early intervention for de-radicalization.⁸¹ In some communities, it may be necessary to reach out to elders and leaders within the community prior to engagement. When seeking to deradicalize and reintegrate youth formerly engaged in violent extremism, individualized interventions should be prioritized in order to address unique grievances and reintegration ought to extend “over a period of five years or more in order to give children a viable long-term alternative to military life.”⁸² The strongest plans “leverage local cultural patterns to achieve their objectives. One implication of this observation is that deradicalization programs cannot simply be transplanted from one country to another, even within the same region. They have to develop organically in a specific country and culture”.⁸³

In Iraq, children’s rehabilitation and reintegration into society are only a part of the solution to this problem and the larger adult population of combatants has to also be demoralized and launched on the process of reintegration. However, if the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers, including mental health and psychological support, are not recognized as priority areas to be included as key components of humanitarian and development programs in conflict and post-conflict settings, the rebuilding of societies could be undermined by external actors. The international community came together and united to face the threat of terrorism. “The response to the challenge of rehabilitation must also be global in mobilizing funds and expertise. Otherwise, we will only facilitate the gestation of another generation of terror.”⁸⁴ It is time to begin addressing the conditions that allow violent extremism

to flourish. International cooperation is indispensable to effective and long-term measures aimed at rehabilitating victimized youth brutally impacted by their war-torn environments.

Endnotes

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