The Forever War:

The Doctrine and Legacy of ISIS Child Soldiers

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About the Author

Omar Mohammed is a historian from Mosul, known until recently only as the anonymous blogger 'Mosul Eye'. Through Mosul Eye, Omar set out to inform the world about life under the Islamic State in his city. He is the host of the podcast series Mosul and the Islamic State, which tells untold stories from inside the Islamic State's reign of terror, the pursuit of justice in its aftermath, and the enduring struggle of the people of Mosul for a better future. Omar is currently teaching Middle East History and Cultural Heritage Diplomacy at Sciences Po University.

His focus has now shifted to the advocacy of social initiatives for the people of Mosul, including the international effort to re-supply Central Library of the University of Mosul. At the intersection of media, academia, and civil society, Omar is motivated to develop new networks of collaboration and innovations in humanitarian action. As a historian and lecturer at the University of Mosul, he focuses his scholarly work on conceptual history and research dealing with local historiographies and narratives, micro-histories, and Orientalism. Omar is a regular media commentator on Iraq, has an MA in Middle East History from the University of Mosul, and was named 2013 Researcher of the Year by Iraq's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. His doctoral research explores history and historians in the 19th and 20th century Mosul. He now lives in exile in Europe.

About The Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and nonviolent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of The George Washington University.

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Abstract

This research paper delves into ISIS's strategy in using children as soldiers and the social, theological, and ideological infrastructures the group created to achieve this goal. The paper outlines the steps ISIS took to deconstruct familial and social bonds, establish a competitive system of meaning through propaganda, and use schools to indoctrinate and train children. The paper also examines the current state of children affected by ISIS and the two dangerous concepts that have emerged as a result: "The Sons of Martyrs" and "The Sons of Daesh." Finally, the paper offers recommendations for addressing the long-term consequences of ISIS's use of child soldiers and the social stigmatization faced by families with perceived ISIS affiliations. The paper underscores the need for a comprehensive and sustained effort to address the aftermath of ISIS's reign and prevent future conflicts in which children could become the engine of brutality and radicalization.

Introduction

During their initial meeting with the University of Mosul faculty on June 17, 2014, the head of ISIS' education department declared that the singular objective of their education system was to produce resolute and unwavering soldiers of the caliphate.[1] This statement serves as the bedrock of the militant group's novel approach to education.

It may be assumed that the enlistment of children in wars and conflicts is a transitory and restricted phenomenon, only employed for a specific requirement or objective. However, throughout history, children have been conscripted to partake in conflicts and subjected to cruel exploitation, both in terms of active violence and in other roles such as reconnaissance, espionage, and sabotage.[2] They have been deployed as decoys, messengers, and suppliers, carrying provisions to the front lines, or supporting the fighting factions by shouldering heavy loads. In some cases, they have been tasked with finding and procuring ammunition and equipment, forging paths or discovering routes, manning checkpoints, acting as human shields, or serving as bodyguards or guards at strategic locations that align with the objectives of the conflict.

For ISIS, the role of children in crafting war narratives and literature is not merely peripheral but rather foundational to their war doctrines. The recruitment of children constitutes a crucial and essential aspect of their mission, which centers on the unwavering protection of the caliphate. The methods used by the militant group to recruit children were systematic and institutionalized. In fact, ISIS established an entire system dedicated to the recruitment of children, which was implemented for a period of over three years in Mosul, Anbar, Telafar, and other cities.

In the following analysis, this paper endeavors to disentangle the ISIS doctrine of child soldiers through a meticulous examination of the group's activities during its occupation of Mosul and other cities. By drawing on empirical evidence, it will assess ISIS doctrine concerning children from the standpoint of those who were subjected to it, in order to gauge its effectiveness and implications for the future generation of places like Mosul. Additionally, this paper will scrutinize the ways in which ISIS sought to alter the very concept of childhood, and identify the key components of their strategy that enabled the group to maintain control and effectively implement their system.

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[1] Private Archives, Omar Mohammed. The author was present during the meeting on June 17, 2014, as a faculty member of Mosul University, where he recorded the early occupation of the university.
[2] Interviews with several parents and teachers from Mosul, Anbar, Telefar and other cities conducted by the author over several time periods.

A Narrative for Future Violence

Examining the social and political circumstances prior to and following ISIS' occupation and proclamation of the caliphate provides a lucid understanding of the peril of the system that the group established between 2014 and 2017. The conditions and political environment before 2014 may have made it more challenging for ISIS to recruit children. However, with the occupation of one third of Iraq, ISIS gained the necessary infrastructure to cultivate and prepare the "Future Generations of the Caliphate" or "Ashbal Al Khilafa."

To construct a comprehensive system that ISIS deems fundamental to its very existence, numerous departments of its self-proclaimed state generated and disseminated materials explicitly aimed at children. Among these, the three most significant departments were those of the military, media, and education. This underscores the pivotal role that children played in the group's narrative for future violence.[3]

Media

Among the various departments of ISIS' self-proclaimed state, the first institution established on June 6, 2014, while fighting was still underway, was the media department. Its most formidable component was the "Nokta 'Ilamiyya - Media point," which was responsible for ceaseless streaming of ISIS propaganda materials to the public, with the primary objective of attracting new recruits. It is estimated that in one "Nokta 'Ilamiyya" from June 2014 to December of the same year, over 3,000 children between the ages of 12 and 16 were conscripted by ISIS after being exposed to its propaganda materials.[4]

Contrary to popular belief, analysts have suggested that ISIS' media department was not solely focused on streaming violence to instill fear among people. Rather, the systematic design and structure of ISIS' propaganda aimed at children had multiple objectives, one of which was the recruitment of children. The most alarming aspect of this endeavor was the group's attempt to infiltrate and alter the family structure, with the goal of establishing a sustainable recruitment drive.

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[3] "The Structure of the *Khilafah*," July 6, 2016, *al-Furqan Media*.
[4] Private Archives, Omar Mohammed. This data is also collected from interviews the author conducted with parents and teachers in the cities of Mosul, Anbar, Fallujah, Qaim Telafar. The interviewees provided details of similar activities in their areas. which explains the centralization of ISIS's media systems.

In the typical familial structure in Mosul, children are taught to listen to and obey their parents. However, ISIS offered children the promise of "independence" from parental control and integration into the Islamic State system, where the caliph, as the representative of the prophet, is the sole leader. Many of these elements of indoctrination were integrated into ISIS video propaganda and the "safari" trips they organized in Mosul.

To attain the goal of "sustainable human resources" for future wars, ISIS viewed the dismantling of what it deemed "Un-Islamic" familial and social systems as a central strategy, which is heavily embedded in the group's doctrine of violence. In his recent study titled, "The Long Jihad: The Islamic State's Method of Insurgency: Control, Meaning, & the Occupation of Mosul in Context," political communication and propaganda deconstruction expert Haroro Ingram explains how the group's media department implemented a system of meaning through propaganda, identity, and engagement.[5]

Propaganda plays a pivotal role in the Islamic State's insurgency strategy, with the group's venerated propagandists serving as the chief architects of its competitive system of meaning, projected to friends and foes alike. The group's propaganda doctrine states that, "The media operative brothers - may Allah the Almighty protect them - are charged with shielding the ummah from the mightiest onslaught ever known in the history of the Crusader and Safavid wars!"[6] Other ISIS doctrine concerning its media operatives states, "They are the security valve for the sharia of the Merciful. They are warding off an invasion, the danger of which exceeds even the danger of the military invasion. It is an intellectual invasion that is faced by the Muslims in both their minds and their hearts, corrupting the identity of many of them, distorting their ideas, inverting their concepts, substituting their traditions, drying the headwaters of their faith, and deadening their zeal."[7]

The long-term effects of this media doctrine are evident and will require extraordinary, coordinated, and sustained efforts to rectify. The outcomes of ISIS' propaganda campaigns are still observable in many regions, including Mosul, where children were enticed by the group's propaganda as recently as the end of last summer. The

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[5] Interviews with 25 families and teachers from different cities conducted during different times. In many cases, the families expressed a common experience of fearing their children after they had been exposed to ISIS media, where the children became aggressive in defending the Islamic State and accusing their parents of being "apostates" for not supporting ISIS.

[6] Ingram, H. *The Long Jihad: The Islamic State's Method of Insurgency- Control, Meaning, & the Occupation of Mosul in Context* (Washington, D.C: The Program on Extremism at George Washington University, 2021).

[7] Ingram, H., Winter, C., and Whiteside, C. *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2020).

repercussions of ISIS's indoctrination of children will undoubtedly have long-lasting consequences and will require targeted efforts to counter the impact of the group's systematic approach to recruitment and propaganda.

Education

It is well-established that ISIS has a well-defined strategy for disseminating its propaganda and ensuring that its message is received by the intended target audience in a manner that shapes their perceptions, polarizes their support, and eventually mobilizes them into violent action. This approach is also employed by other terrorist groups, including Al-Qaida. In discussing ISIS's propaganda strategy, Ingram posits that, "the potential appeal of extremist propaganda is largely dependent on how such messaging is strategically designed to leverage psychosocial forces and strategic factors that are pertinent to its target audiences."[8]

To fortify its narratives and ensure that they are internalized in the minds of its audience, ISIS creates a "competitive system of meaning," which acts as a lens through which supporters perceive and judge the world. These potent mental models - or more accurately, a network of mental models - are designed to fundamentally shape the perceptions of its audience by strategically leveraging and interplaying identity, solution, and crisis constructs through a combination of narratives and imagery.[9] This strategy has been especially prominent in the group's education department, which was tasked with ensuring that ISIS's doctrine and values were imparted to future generations in a manner that reinforced their commitment to the caliphate.

Through its education system, ISIS endeavors to offer a moral, spiritual, political, social, and economic justification for its worldview, along with a training manual that steers its adherents toward a particular understanding of the world. Each individual component is presented in a manner that is easy to comprehend, and seemingly not dangerous on its own. However, as the various elements of the puzzle that ISIS presents through its textbooks are pieced together, the group's dangerous worldview is unveiled. This highlights the crucial role that education played in the group's overarching strategy, aimed at fostering the commitment of the future generation to the caliphate and its violent ideology.

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[8] Author interview with teachers from different schools in Mosul.
[9] Zeiger, S., Atamuradova, F., Elsayed, L., and Chung, M. *Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree: Establishing a System of Meaning Through ISIS Education*, (Washington, D.C: The Program on Extremism at George Washington University, 2021).

The Islamic State in Mosul was essentially a propaganda state, and the Department of Dawa and Mosques Administration (*Diwan al-Dawa wa-l-Masajid*) and the Department of Education (*Diwan al Talim*) are non-media departments that played a crucial role in imprinting the group's system of meaning into the population. These departments– like the Islamic State's media units– focused primarily on employing ideological, symbolic, and propagandistic activities to establish a "lens" through which the population's perceptions were shaped and its support polarized.

Sharia advisers from the Dawa department were ubiquitous throughout the Islamic State, responsible for instilling ideological beliefs and jurisprudential understanding that would foster deeper identity-based attitudinal support from the population. The education department was committed to ensuring that the youth in the Islamic State would adopt the group's system of meaning, thereby sowing the seeds for an intergenerational struggle. Through these departments, ISIS sought to create a self-reproducing system of support for its violent ideology, guaranteeing its long-term survival and the continuation of its dangerous worldview.

Schools were the cornerstone of ISIS's implementation of the doctrine of child soldiers, utilizing various mechanisms and strategies to transform children into ruthless and violent fighters. The group's first step was to deconstruct and destroy familial bonds and establish a new system of meaning, which they accomplished by employing several strategies inside schools themselves. These included:

- Sports
- Visualization of school books
- Extensive usage of graphics depicting guns and military symbols
- Extensive usage of games-like arguments and persuasion
- Treating children as adults
- Using a behavioral technique of "rewards" to encourage children to provide information about their parents and other relatives
- Using children as "recruiters" to influence their peers
- Training children to become informants at any level of society
- Encouraging children to disobey their parents while giving their exclusive obedience and loyalty to the Islamic State.

Families throughout the city of Mosul have reported the direct impact of such strategies on their children. Some parents expressed fear of questioning their children's obedience

to avoid putting their lives at risk. They were afraid that their children would be questioned by ISIS and reveal any criticisms of the group, leading to the arrest or death of the parents. This showcases the success of ISIS in indoctrinating children and undermining familial and social structures to solidify the group's hold on the next generation.

Many families interviewed reported that ISIS would question children in schools and on the streets about their parents' opinions of the group. The immediate results of ISIS indoctrination were evident in dramatic and extreme changes in their children's behavior, including social withdrawal, furtiveness, anger, smartphone addiction, self-censorship, secrecy, lying as a mechanism of survival, and fear.

By using schools to indoctrinate children and provide physical training, ISIS sought to not only prepare fighters for a limited period but also to leverage families. Using children as tools to dismantle the family and social structure, the group established a system of violence that could be utilized well into the future for any number of militant operations. This approach allowed the group to establish a self-reproducing system of support for its violent ideology, guaranteeing its long-term survival and the continuation of its dangerous worldview.

The use of schools to indoctrinate and recruit children has long-lasting consequences not only for the children themselves but also for the wider society. By creating a generation of children who are trained in violence and have been taught to be obedient only to ISIS, the group has effectively created a "lost generation" that is ill-equipped to integrate back into society without extensive and sustainable psychosocial support.

Furthermore, the systematic dismantling of familial and social structures has left a void in these children's lives, one that ISIS sought to fill with its violent ideology. This has contributed to a deepening sense of isolation and desperation among many young people in the region, with some even resorting to suicide as a means of escape.

The use of children as soldiers also has grave consequences for the children themselves. They are often subjected to brutal physical and psychological abuse, forced to commit heinous acts of violence, and denied even the most basic human rights. Many are killed in battle, and those who survive may be left with lifelong physical and psychological scars.

Military

The military training camps established by ISIS were designed to prepare children both physically and intellectually. These camps, known as "Ma'ahid Shar'iyya - Shari'a Education Institutes," were spread throughout Mosul province and Syria, and they provided special programs for the military training of children.

Through these camps, ISIS aimed to create a generation of child soldiers who would be ready and willing to fight in its wars. The group's investment in children was driven by its belief in a "Forever War" and the need for global expansion. In ISIS's view, global expansion was ideologically obligatory, strategically necessary, and symbolically powerful.

According to a core ISIS text, *Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State*, "External relations are the first foundation for building every nascent state, and they are among the foundations that show the strength and might of the state, and they should constitute for it, a general stance in everything that happens in the world with the people of Islam and be for it an external hand protecting its dealings."[10]

The use of child soldiers by ISIS not only violates international law and basic human rights, but it also perpetuates violence and instability in the affected regions. The creation of a generation of child soldiers has long-lasting consequences for both the children themselves and the wider society. Efforts must be made to prevent future generations from being indoctrinated and recruited by violent extremist groups and to rehabilitate and reintegrate child soldiers back into society.

The emphasis of ISIS on the military training of children is secondary to its goal of instilling historical and social narratives in their minds. The current generation witnessed the revival and ascent of the caliphate, the previous generation undertook the responsibility of declaring it, and the succeeding generation's task is to safeguard and extend the system.

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[10] For deeper coverage, see: Ingram, H., Winter, C., and Whiteside, C. *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2020).

The Current State of ISIS Children

The social impact of ISIS on the population of Mosul and ISIS-affiliated families is vast and incalculable. During its reign over one third of Iraq, ISIS conducted experiments of perpetual warfare, using cities and communities as laboratories for testing its ideology. While it may take considerable time and effort to fully comprehend the effects of this radical and ruthless system, the behavioral consequences for the children in the camps and those who have returned to their communities is already observable. However, the current situation is different from pre-ISIS radicalization, as communities are now dealing with severely traumatized children who were exposed to early radicalization. While a military response to the ISIS threat remains necessary, countries worldwide must also commit to long-term efforts to address the narratives established by ISIS during its rule. In short, there is a continued need for a structured and comprehensive mechanism to deconstruct the conceptual narratives of ISIS.

Two examples highlight the potency of these narratives: "The Sons of Martyrs" and "The Sons of Daesh." These are two of the most dangerous concepts to emerge during ISIS's rule in Mosul and other Iraqi and Syrian cities. Both concepts encapsulate the entire system of meaning that ISIS continues to invest in, ensuring that its doctrine of "forever war" remains alive.

Legacy

The concept of "The Sons of Martyrs" is a significant part of ISIS's legacy, based on a complex historical and social narrative that was put into practice during its rule. It grants a special status and benefits to the descendants of fighters who were killed during the group's battles, and it is heavily invested in ISIS's theology. This concept has been shaped into a main literary and historical narrative known as the "Hagiography of Jihad," and it is an embodiment of the efforts that ISIS invested in during its rise as a state. Children who fall into this category are already trained and indoctrinated with the belief that their duty in life is to protect and advance their fathers' legacy as martyrs, which involves killing and being killed for the caliphate.

This legacy provides ISIS with an almost endless supply of future recruits, as there is no need for further indoctrination or training. Families take it upon themselves to prepare these children, and the environment inside the camps in Syria or prisons in Iraq provides the perfect space for this doctrine to continue to thrive. As a result, the "Sons of Martyrs" concept will have long-lasting effects, and it will be challenging to undo the

narrative and social behavior that has been ingrained in the minds of these children. Therefore, it is crucial to address and deconstruct the narratives that ISIS established during its rule and to provide comprehensive support and rehabilitation to children who have been affected by this legacy.

Stigmatization

Another concept, "The Sons of Daesh", feeds into the social stigmatization against families with perceived ISIS affiliations that emerged in Mosul after the city's liberation. This stigmatization had significant and pronounced post-war social consequences, as men were put in prison and women and children suffered from gender-based violence and were denied access to basic needs like education and healthcare. In this context, the concept of "The Sons of Daesh" represents a dangerous legacy of ISIS, as it allows the group to exploit the suffering of these stigmatized families for its future cause. By granting the children of these families a sense of identity and belonging within the larger ISIS ideology, the group can potentially mobilize a new generation of fighters without the need for extensive indoctrination or training. As such, it is important for countries and communities affected by the rise of ISIS to address the root causes of social stigmatization and ensure that all individuals, regardless of their perceived affiliations, have access to their basic human rights and fundamental needs.

In addition to the stigmatization and discrimination faced by families with perceived ISIS affiliations, the children of these families are also at risk of being further radicalized. Many of these children have experienced trauma, displacement, and loss, and are vulnerable to extremist narratives and recruitment by groups like ISIS who may promise a sense of belonging and purpose. In addition, the lack of access to education and other basic needs can create a sense of hopelessness and desperation that may make them more susceptible to radicalization.

Furthermore, the continued marginalization and discrimination against these families may perpetuate a cycle of violence and extremism, as it creates a sense of injustice and victimization that can fuel resentment and a desire for revenge. This is a dangerous and unsustainable situation that must be addressed through comprehensive and long-term efforts to promote reconciliation, social inclusion, and the protection of the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their perceived affiliations. Failure to do so may result in further radicalization, violence, and instability in the region.

After speaking with families and teachers from various areas in Iraq, the challenges posed by the concept of "The Sons of Daesh" become even more apparent. Not only is

the term used to describe children whose fathers were ISIS members, but it has also become a social and political tool to discriminate against anyone in disagreement with the norm. Even children without family members in ISIS may be labeled as such if their classmates or friends have such ties. This worsening social problem creates a perfect environment for ISIS to attract children to its cause, providing them with alternative social systems where they can be accepted and treated equally under the guise of "justice".

The consequences of ISIS's occupation of Iraq and Syria go beyond the destruction of cities, the loss of countless lives, and the injuring of many others. It has also sowed the seeds for future conflicts, where children - who will soon grow up and become the driving force of brutal conflicts and radicalization - must be treated quickly and comprehensively across many diverse, interconnected levels.

Recommendations

Based on the understanding of the impact of ISIS's indoctrination of children and the resulting challenges, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Comprehensive Rehabilitation Programs**: It is imperative to have comprehensive rehabilitation programs that focus on addressing the physical, mental, and social needs of children affected by ISIS indoctrination. Such programs should prioritize psychosocial support, mental health counseling, and educational opportunities to equip these children with the tools they need to overcome the effects of radicalization.

2. **Combatting Stigmatization**: Governments and civil society organizations must work together to combat the stigmatization of families with perceived ISIS affiliations. Such stigmatization only serves to fuel resentment and make it more difficult to reintegrate these families into society. Instead, efforts should be focused on promoting social inclusion and addressing the root causes of radicalization.

3. **Strengthening Education Systems**: To counteract the effects of ISIS indoctrination, education systems must be strengthened to promote critical thinking, tolerance, and respect for diversity. Such an approach can equip children with the skills and knowledge they need to make informed decisions, resist extremist narratives, and promote peaceful coexistence.

4. **Long-Term Investment**: Addressing the challenges posed by ISIS indoctrination requires a sustained, long-term effort. Governments, civil society organizations, and the international community must commit to investing in programs and initiatives aimed at preventing radicalization and rehabilitating those affected by it.

5. **Multi-Stakeholder Approach**: Combating ISIS's indoctrination of children requires a multi-stakeholder approach that involves governments, civil society organizations, religious leaders, and the wider community. The engagement of all actors is essential to effectively prevent radicalization and promote peacebuilding efforts.

6. **Evidence-Based Practices**: Governments and organizations must invest in evidence-based practices to prevent and counter violent extremism. Programs

must be grounded in the latest research and best practices, and they must be continuously evaluated to ensure that they are effective.

7. **Collaborative International Efforts**: The global nature of the threat posed byISIS's indoctrination of children necessitates collaborative international efforts. Governments and organizations must work together to share best practices, resources, and knowledge to prevent radicalization and promote peacebuilding efforts around the world.

In conclusion, the use of children by ISIS as soldiers is a complex issue that involves various social, psychological, and political factors. While ISIS has been significantly degraded militarily, the long-term impacts of its child soldier doctrine are still present and will require concerted efforts to undo. The physical and psychological trauma experienced by the children who were indoctrinated and trained as fighters will have long-lasting effects that must be addressed. Moreover, the social stigmatization and discrimination faced by the children of ISIS-affiliated families create a fertile ground for future radicalization and conflict.

Dealing with the legacy of ISIS child soldiers requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach that involves addressing the root causes of radicalization, promoting social cohesion and reconciliation, and investing in education and mental health services. This also requires a concerted effort from the international community to support affected countries in developing and implementing long-term strategies to address the complex issues related to child soldiers and radicalization.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the issue of child soldiers is not unique to ISIS; rather, it is a global problem that requires attention and action. Addressing this issue is not only a matter of protecting children's rights but also a matter of promoting global peace and security.