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Deradicalizing Syria's Children of ISIS: *A Humanitarian Imperative*



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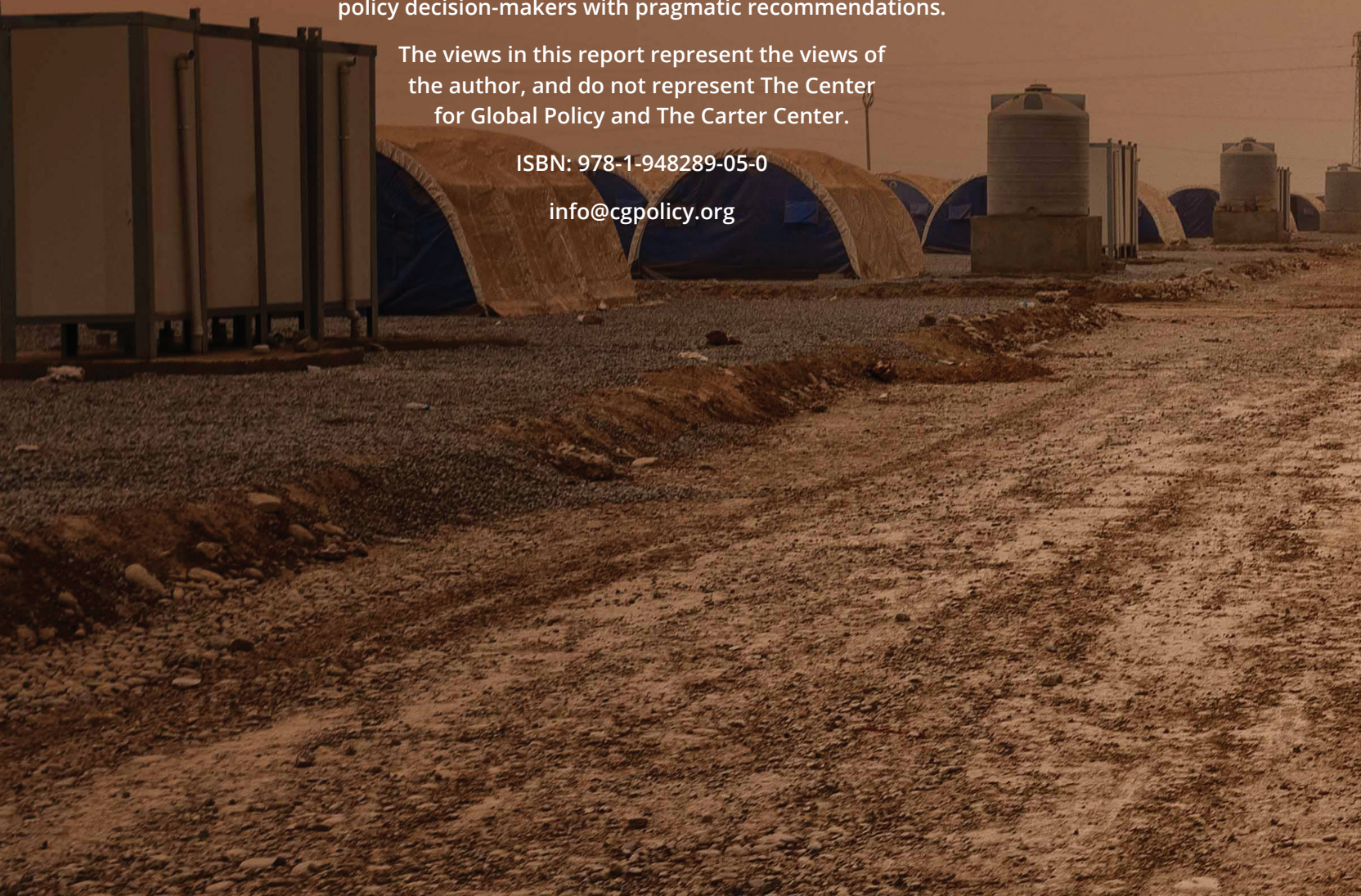


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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

After years of intense fighting against ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, also called Daesh,") the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces announced the official defeat of the terrorist group in March.¹ Though ISIS lost the territory it called its caliphate, another issue has lingered: the fate of ISIS-affiliated children.² These children, dubbed by ISIS as "cubs of Caliphate," grew up radicalized, left behind by those who indoctrinated them and were later killed or captured or went underground. Given the level of ideological indoctrination they have been exposed to, these children suffer from deep-rooted psychological trauma. ISIS-affiliated children of Western parents recently drew the world's attention, but the need to deradicalize and integrate Syrian children has been neglected.

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This policy brief makes the case that the deradicalization of Syrian children is a humanitarian crisis that should be an

international priority. Human rights and aid groups should focus on this issue not just because of the threat of terrorism these children could eventually pose, but also — and most importantly — because these children are human beings who are themselves victims of terrorism in need of social integration, ideological disengagement, and rehabilitation programs. The resources being expended in the "war on terrorism" should be refocused to address this pressing but neglected matter. Such deradicalization will help uproot violent ideologies and cut the ties between ISIS and the future generation of Syria.

Radicalized children, as a phenomenon, are included here in the framework of child soldiers because ISIS had radicalized them to have them fight for its violent causes. Although the effects of the prevailing environment of war, violence, and trauma should remain a source of concern, this brief centers on the systematic and destructive radicalization of children and the need to start a conversation about it.

Outside Syria, there have been debates about Western children in ISIS-controlled areas — whether they should be returned to their home countries, whether they should be treated as potential threats to the West,



or whether they deserve the accusation of being “among the most ideologically committed to ISIS”.³ The Syrian children have not garnered as much attention, even though their indoctrination, education in terrorist tradecraft, and deradicalization need to be addressed as much as the Western children’s abuse at the hands of ISIS. This paper tries to amend such neglect by shedding a light on ISIS’s treatment of Syrian children as spoils of war, examining the process of radicalization and what it means to children, and concluding with policy recommendations on how to deradicalize these children.

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Children of ISIS members work in the al-Hol camp. Copyright © of Robin Wright



ISIS'S USE OF CHILDREN

ISIS has been around in some form or another for about 16 years. Its roots are in Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Jamaat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad organization, founded in 2003. Three years later, the group known as the Islamic State in Iraq was founded. In 2013, after occupying large swathes of Syria, the group then known as ISIS or Daesh began to draw increasing international attention. In June 2014, ISIS seized Iraq's northern cities, Mosul and Tikrit.

This use of children as weapons led to a shift in outsiders' perception of these children, from victims to willing predators. It is an ISIS tactic to target vulnerable and impressionable children with cleverly argued and powerfully communicated ideology, and eventually recruit them to commit violence.

During its campaign of violence, ISIS not only sexually enslaved female children; it also used male children as tools of terrorism. This use of children as weapons led to a shift in outsiders' perception of these children, from victims to willing predators. It is an ISIS tactic to target vulnerable and impressionable children with cleverly argued and powerfully communicated ideology,

and eventually recruit them to commit violence. Generally, children were given an assortment of motivations to join ISIS, including "financial incentives, peer or family pressure, an escape from family problems, or a desire for social status."⁴ Yet, only ideology could motivate a child to carry out a suicide operation with a smile on his face. ISIS's footage of aspiring suicide bombers often focused on the supposed happiness demonstrated by soon-to-be child "martyrs" of the group's ideology. The brainwashing engineered by ISIS could turn children into gullible ideologues to the degree that one of them fought to the death for the group that had already killed his uncle.⁵

The usual implication of a relationship between children and a terrorist organization is that the children are victims. Whether in markets, streets, or even in mosques, children often fall victim to indiscriminate violence perpetrated by terrorists. This connection, tragic though it is, has been eclipsed by a more complex association in which children

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become labeled as terrorists, as Jo Becker from Human Rights Watch pointed out in a critique of the incrimination of children by some Kurdish courts.⁶ ISIS-affiliated children have faced retaliatory measures including detention, torture, and imprisonment if they confessed, even against their will, that they had been jihadist fighters.

ISIS has been particularly interested in recruiting, training, and using Syrian children on the battlefield and as potential suicide bombers. The group implemented this strategy even in areas where it never controlled territory. ISIS lured entire families from many foreign countries to Syria and weaponized them. In some cases, online radicalization led minors to join ISIS against their parents' will or without their parents' knowledge. The number of these children, who are sometimes labeled "a ticking time bomb," is unknown, but we can say that tens of thousands are in this predicament, since the number of ISIS's foreign fighters alone was estimated to be 35,000.⁷

ISIS is not the first entity to use children in Syria for political purposes. Children were used in the Syrian revolution that began in March 2011, as well as the civil war that began a few months later and brought ISIS to the stage. However, ISIS found ways to

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exploit children more radically and systematically. The terrorist group found a country full of children to recruit into its apparatus, turning them into a "lost generation"⁸ of victims — regardless of whether they were targets of attacks, displaced,⁹ or recruited as attackers. Out of an estimated population of 21 million people, nearly 8 million Syrians are under age 14.¹⁰ Children account for 36.4 percent of the population of Syria, where 60 percent of the population is under the age of 30.¹¹

A GLOBAL ISSUE

The damage that ISIS's radicalization inflicted on children in Syria is a global concern, particularly because these children are left behind when the group is no longer in control of land or people. With about 41,490 citizens of 80 countries having been affiliated with ISIS, an estimated 4,640 (12 percent) are minors.¹² The fear of their radicalization has incited mixed responses, some of which dehumanize the children and treat them as part of ISIS instead of focusing on their deradicalization.

While commenting on the 175 children from his country living under ISIS, the director of the Dutch general intelligence and security agency raised concerns about the risk to the Netherlands these children might pose. He pointed out their exposure to and training for violence, their potential enthusiasm about it, and the risks involved in putting them in school without resolving their psychological and emotional issues.¹³ Of the 850 Britons who joined ISIS, 145 were women and 50



Children of ISIS members work in the al-Hol camp. Copyright © of Robin Wright



were children.¹⁴ Discussions have already started in the United Kingdom about the ideological commitment and practical skills these children might have acquired and whether they constitute a potential threat.

These Western-born children are suffering from the legacy of ISIS more than those who fear that legacy. Yet the international nature of the issue of ISIS-affiliated children often obscures the plight of Syrian children who were recruited by ISIS not by choice or their parents' choice, but simply because they lived in areas occupied by

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WHAT RADICALIZATION IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

Radicalization, like terrorism, is not easy for either academia or government to define. It could mean the "socialization to extremism which manifests itself in terrorism,"¹⁵ or the process "leading towards the increased use of political violence,"¹⁶ or

endorsing political change "based on a conviction that the status quo is unacceptable while at the same time a fundamentally different alternative appears to be available to the radical."¹⁷



The children exploited by ISIS were innately innocent and radicalized into violence against their will. They did not know that the ideas they adopted were “radical” or deviant. Furthermore, the children believed in the adults’ teachings that they were obeying God, being good Muslims, and working for a just and legitimate authority.

In light of the divergent meanings of radicalization, I propose the following definition: the process in which individuals with extremist political, religious, or social views try to instill such views in others and create such an emotional or mental attachment that the newly indoctrinated individuals stand ready to act upon the extremists’ directives, including the use of violence or terrorism. This working definition focuses on exposure to radical groups that are reaching out to find new recruits. The relational aspect explains how children become radicalized and how they can justify acts of terrorism based on

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ideas in the heads of their indoctrinators, not their own. The children exploited by ISIS were innately innocent and radicalized into violence against their will. They did not know that the ideas they adopted were “radical” or deviant. Furthermore, the children believed in the adults’ teachings that they were obeying God, being good Muslims, and working for a just and legitimate authority.

In the process of establishing an Islamic state, with the intention of having a caliphate for all Muslims, ISIS did not forget about the children; indeed, children were part of the group’s strategy and one of the critical building blocks of the so-called caliphate. The ultimate goal of radicalizing children was to add manpower to ISIS’s fierce forces and to ensure that a younger generation was prepared to defend the caliphate.

In an interview with some ISIS members, aired in August 2014, children were seen playing in the shallow waters of the Euphrates River in the Syrian city of Raqqa, which became the capital of the caliphate. A spokesman for the group announced what ISIS wanted from the children in Syria: “For us, we believe that this generation of children is the generation of Caliphate ... It is the generation that will fight infidels and apostates, the Americans and their allies. Now, all these children have the truthful doctrine (faith) implanted in them, and they love to fight

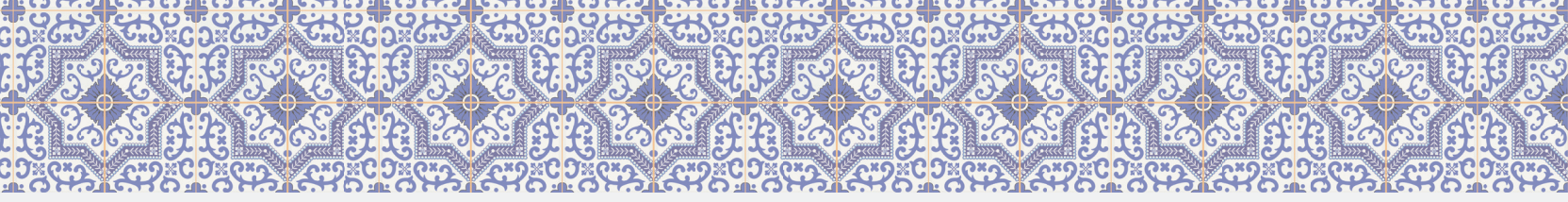


for the sake of the Islamic state.”¹⁸ Children are also seen receiving indoctrination in the form of being encouraged to fight “the infidels,” “Russians” and “Americans.”¹⁹

The ISIS spokesperson explained that children under 15 years of age attend a “*shariah* camp to learn about their creed and religion. Those over 16, they can go to a military training.” When asked if they participated in military operation, the ISIS member said, “Of course, those

who are over 16, having been in training camps, they can participate in military operations.”²⁰

Some confessions by children who escaped ISIS demonstrate that they were so strongly indoctrinated that some were ready to die for their terrorist tutors. One child describes his experience in these camps as being focused on instilling blind obedience: “I must listen and obey even if I have to die.”²¹



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After it established its caliphate, ISIS set up camps for religious and military training in large areas of Syria and Iraq. Children frequently visited these camps, sometimes without their families’ knowledge or approval. In such “religious military camps,” children and adults learned the ideology of ISIS masked as the true religion — a version of a strict and uncompromising Salafi-jihadism in which “everything that deviates from it is forbidden.”²²

The textbooks in ISIS camps are full of pictures of weapons, and the quizzes often revolve around killing non-believers. One math quiz asks students to count how many infidels and apostates they could kill if they have to “equally shoot 42 bullets to snipe at them.”²³ This radicalization, which reflected “extremist and bloodthirsty thinking,” was inundating childrens’ receptive minds on a daily basis so that some parents, who were not ISIS sympathizers, were not comfortable with their children having that type of schooling.²⁴

The major component of the ISIS curriculum was the reinforcement of a binary worldview. Textbooks, instructional materials, and teachers reinforced the “us-versus-them” mentality in which those fighting the terrorist organization are labeled the “Crusader coalition.”²⁵ This imagined enemy, which is certainly against ISIS but not against children or Islam, was used to connect children and create “a band-of-brothers effect.”²⁶

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WHAT DOES RADICALIZATION MEAN TO CHILDREN?

Terrorist activities are not based on objective reality, but on a subjective interpretation of the world in order to achieve a certain political, economic, and social goal.²⁷ Radicalization — understood as advocating violence based on ideological conceptualization, such as killing a person because he or she is not Muslim — paves the way for terrorist behavior. The necessary components of radicalization include the will to transfer those ideological concepts from one mind to another, regardless of any sociopolitical conditions that could be conducive to radicalization. For instance, the unstable and dangerous political situation in Syria in itself, though damaging to children, does not necessarily cause radicalization among the population.

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Under ISIS's authority and campaign of propaganda, children in Syria are the victims of certain interpretations of their social reality, including ways of thinking of Islam and the Syrian revolution.

Hypothetically, if Syria were to find complete peace and become the leading democracy in the Middle East, the radicalization of its children would not fade. Indoctrination cannot be undone simply by declaring ISIS dead and the war over.

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Likewise, the radicalized mothers, some of whom joined ISIS as minors and came from peaceful, democratic, Western countries, are not expected to leave their beliefs at the borders when returning to their homelands. Before joining ISIS, some of them suffered from social or mental problems, such as alienation, the susceptibility to joining a cult, and “dogma-induced psychotic depression.”²⁸ Yet focusing solely on their physical survival might lead to a neglect of their trauma and indoctrination. According to World Health Organization's review of 129 studies in 39 countries, among people who have experienced conflict or other conflict in the previous 10 years, one in five (22%) will suffer from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other psychological disorders. The study pointed out that the availability of mental health services and



psychosocial support in Syria is on the rise, which means that even during war, Syria can respond to the needs of its people.

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CONCLUSION

The war in Syria has deprived millions of children of their homes, loved ones, and access to education. The stakeholders in the conflict need to take responsibility for disengaging these children from both the war and reminders of the damage it has inflicted on them. The Syrian children who lived under ISIS are burdened with the added tragedy of being associated — against their will — with the terrorist group. Rehabilitating these children should be an international humanitarian priority, and action should be taken sooner than later.

Syrian children radicalized by ISIS have a right to be deradicalized. Recognition of that right, by the global community and

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the children themselves, can shape the future of the country. Rather than being treated as willing participants in terrorism, these children need to be treated as innocent human beings in need of a safe, caring, and encouraging environment so that they can become part of the hopeful future of Syria — not the lost generation of ISIS.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Change How ISIS-Affiliated Children Are Perceived

ISIS and other parties used and abused these children, who did not have the cognitive ability to resist such brainwashing. The propaganda and beliefs presented to them were strong enough to sway countless adults toward ISIS; thus, treating the children as if they are at fault for their affiliation with the terrorist group is erroneous victim blaming. The children are victims of indoctrination, not terrorists themselves. Moreover, children of ISIS members should not be made to carry the stigma of an affiliation that was beyond their choice. Demonizing these children will make them pawns for other jihadist groups. Awareness campaigns, media outlets and social media need to

begin breaking the connection between ISIS and the children it radicalized by not identifying children with terrorist groups or with crimes in which they were not willing culprits.

Psychologically, children have no innate motivations for terrorism; neither have they made a rational (based on cost-benefit logic) choice to join terrorist groups. The international community, including Syria itself, needs to have a clear vision on how to shape and spread a more accurate perception radicalized children. Deradicalization will only succeed if we perceive them as victims in need of help, not predators, criminals, or terrorists.

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Promote Education, Not War

The Paris Principles on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict 2007 defines the child soldier as “any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity ... as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes.”²⁹ Since child soldiers are part of the war in Syria, they merit part of the funds and efforts already allocated for the war in Syria. There has been heavy investment in the war, with various international players



pouring funds into various factions, providing training, and engaging in direct military operations in Syria. Now that the war is almost over, these players have ethical responsibility to redirect these efforts and funds to rebuilding Syria. The Paris Principles underscore the need for stakeholders to support services regarding disengagement and to make sure that governments around the world comply with their obligations under international law.

Syrian children have lost valuable years of proper schooling. It is reported that one in every four Syrian schools has been

closed by the war. There are 5.7 million children inside Syria who need education assistance. Even though funding education plans for all Syrian children should be a priority for countries responding to rebuilding Syria, the deradicalization of ISIS-affiliated children is a crucial need.

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The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development reported that funds for child soldiers fell from \$27 million in 2010 to \$6.5 million in 2016.³⁰ By June 20, 2017, the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS had cost Washington \$14.3 billion.³¹ The war is expected to cost an estimated \$1.3 trillion, if it continues to 2020.³² Now that ISIS has lost its caliphate, funds need to be redirected toward efforts to disconnect children from ISIS's militarization, ideology, and radicalization. Stakeholders in Syria's recovery and stabilization need to

secure funding to establish centers with trained staff for the task of intellectually and emotionally rehabilitating radicalized Syrian children.

The 19th-century French writer Victor Hugo, who witnessed war and exile, said, "He who opens a school door, closes a prison."³³ Radicalized children have been living in the prison of war, ideology, and terrorism — and only if the efforts allocated to war are redirected to education will they be free from such prisons.





Learn from Other Deradicalization Experiences

The international community might have already begun to realize the new reality in Syria, where the standing government or a modified version of it (under the regime's watch) will likely be in charge of Syria. When Syria is reintegrated into the international community, its government needs to be in accord with global initiatives for countering extremist radicalization. The culture of radicalization and deradicalization is new to Syria, but the country can learn from historical and global experiences. Collaboration among the international community, humanitarian organizations, and the Syrian government is necessary to deal with the phenomenon of radicalization, regardless of the political reception of the Syrian regime.

German children in 1936 were taught in their books that, "The Devil is the Father of the Jews. When God created the World, He invented the races: The Indians, the Negroes, the Chinese and also the wicked creature called the Jew."³⁴ With some children, especially those between 14-18, involved in the war as *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth), the response to what happened to the children during the Nazi regime was thorough denazification that took place in post-war Germany.³⁵ There is hope that ISIS's radicalization of children will go the way of the anti-Semitism that prevailed at the time in Germany but later became unacceptable. But deradicalization is not

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an easy process with fast results, and the Syrian government currently does not have any centers for such a daunting task.

During its Fifth Review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy on July 1, 2016, the U.N. General Assembly adopted Resolution 70/291, which built on a former resolution (60/288, approved in September 2006) in emphasizing the need for collective efforts against terrorism with support, cooperation, and assistance among member states. Resolution 70/291 called for "preventing the radicalization to terrorism and recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters, including children."³⁶ Though the



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threat foreign fighters can pose is very real, Syria and Syrian children were missing from this call to implement deradicalization programs. Because of its brutality, the Syrian regime has faced many forms of criticism and intolerance, but Syrian children should not be neglected based on political disputes. Regardless of how the international community views the Syrian regime, it should cooperate with Damascus on deradicalization efforts for the sake of the children. The regime also needs to realize that such collaboration is apolitical, and meant as a humanitarian cause.

Syria should also follow the footsteps of other countries that have already established deradicalization policies. For example, Sierra Leone — whose child soldier population due to the civil

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war (1991–2002) ranged from 5,000 to 10,000 — had the National Committee for Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration. The Commission was able to enroll more than 6,774 children.³⁷ France, where ISIS killed at least 130 people in November 2015, announced a unified Plan of Action against Terrorism and Radicalization in May 2016. This plan resulted in calling for “improving research into the drivers of radicalization, developing reintegration and rehabilitation centers for radicalized individuals, better securing vulnerable sites, and building national resilience to terrorist attacks.”³⁸ After opening a Reintegration Center as part of this strategic policy, France planned to open others in all 13 of the country’s mainland regions. Austria recognized the fight against radicalization and violent extremism as a key priority.³⁹ And for its 2017 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe chairmanship, Belgium’s central counter-radicalization strategy was identifying people at the starting point of radicalization to take appropriate action.⁴⁰ These international efforts can inform the Syrian government’s efforts in dealing with heavier, more deeply rooted, and larger-scale radicalization among its child citizens.



Focus on Uprooting the Ideology of ISIS and its ilk

Radicalization in Syria started with the systematic imposition of jihadist ideologies as part of the campaign to topple the Assad regime. Abusing religion for the sake of political gains in Syria has perpetuated the suffering and exploitation of children. This indoctrination needs to stop. Though ISIS was the main culprit in carrying out such indoctrination, other groups in Syria belonging to what is called “Islamic” factions of the opposition espouse rhetoric

that can prolong the radicalization of Syrian children.⁴¹ All these factions must be dismantled and denied control over Syrian populations. Moreover, centers for deradicalizing Syrian children should be staffed with educators and counselors who know the ideology of ISIS and similar extremist groups, recognize the powerful impact of these ideologies, and counter them by explaining how they are not teachings of Islam.





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Children’s deviation toward terrorism was structured by ideologies disguised as part of Islam, such as the notion of establishing an Islamic state, excommunication (or

denouncing other Muslims as infidels), and the idea that any religious group can announce jihad against what it calls “enemies of God.” These were some of



the notions that caused confusion among children about what is Islamic and what is man-made and non-Islamic. Eliminating such ideological confusion will give children a sense of peaceful coexistence in their community.

Authoritarian regimes like Assad's tend to repress terrorist ideology and permit secular-oriented education. The international community can invest in the useful aspect of this regime by coordinating on programs to reintegrate ISIS-radicalized children. The regime most likely will welcome any calls to erase the reminders of such ideology. That said, it is necessary that the regime stop politicizing children and indoctrinating them itself, as it did with the Syrian educational system before the war. Forcing children from a so-called "Islamic" ideology to a political one would be only more confusing. The focus of education for the children of ISIS should be on deradicalization, not forcing them to embrace more indoctrination.

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NOTES

- ¹ Khalid Adil, "While Fighting in Baghouz, ISIS Released in Its Media a Message of Defiance," *Islamio*, 22, March 2019, <http://islamion.com/news/لہ تبتہ إصدارا جدیدا من داخل الباغوز آخر معاقل التنظيم> where one of its members is quoted says: "The Caliphate is remaining and expanding. It is not like a hotel when the service is bad, we leave it."
- ² Children are defined by the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child as human beings under 18: UNICEF, "The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child," 1989, https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf?_ga=2.243465734.2097536339.1557390104-251897433.1557390104.
- ³ Jessica Trisko Darden, "Shamima Begum: ISIS Bride or Committed Terrorist?," *AEIdeas*, 19, February 2019, <https://www.aei.org/publication/shamima-begum-isis-bride-or-committed-terrorist/>.
- ⁴ Human Rights Watch "'Everyone Must Confess' Abuses against Children Suspected of ISIS Affiliation in Iraq." March 6, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/06/everyone-must-confess/abuses-against-children-suspected-isis-affiliation-iraq>.
- ⁵ This is based on a true account involving people with whom the author is closely familiar.
- ⁶ Human Rights Watch "'Everyone Must Confess' Abuses against Children Suspected of ISIS Affiliation in Iraq." March 6, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/06/everyone-must-confess/abuses-against-children-suspected-isis-affiliation-iraq>.



- ⁷ Tom Kington, "45,000 Children of Isis 'are Ticking Time Bomb'," *The Sunday Times*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/45-000-children-of-isis-are-ticking-time-bomb-lp0nq9q2m>.
- ⁸ UNICEF, "No Lost Generation Protecting the Futures of Children Affected by the Crisis in Syria," January, 2014, https://www.unicef.org/appeals/files/No_Lost_Generation_Strategic_Overview_January_2014.pdf.
- ⁹ It is estimated that more than 2,500 children from more than 30 countries are living in three northeastern Syrian camps for displaced people from the last areas held by ISIS: Al Hol (at least 40,000 people), Ain Issa (12,000), and Roj (1,500). In these camps, children showed signs of psychological distress, due in part to the excessive violence these children have seen inflicted by ISIS and/or its opponents.
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Our leader is Bin Laden ... O you who terrorized America
We destroyed America ... With a civilian airplane
The [World] Trade Center became a heap of sand
O you Nusayri (Alawite) Police ... Wait for us O Alawites
We are coming to slaughter you ... Unheeding any convention





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