Between Child Soldiers and Terrorists: Reintegrating Child Members of the Islamic State

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Abstract

In parts of the Republic of Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic controlled by the Islamic State children were subjected to systematic indoctrination into extremist ideologies, with many of them being actively integrated into the Islamic State to be trained as the next generation of fighters. As Islamic State lost virtually all physical territory to other actors in the region, these children will present a serious long-term threat to security and stability unless successfully reintegrated into functioning communities. When available data on the way the Islamic State recruited, trained and indoctrinated children is examined, it can be seen that these children exhibit characteristics of child soldiers as well as those usually found in members of terrorist organizations. This paper therefore argues that, in order to devise and implement an optimal approach to their reintegration, relevant lessons should be drawn both from child soldier reintegration initiatives as well as from terrorist deradicalization and rehabilitation programs. Those lessons should then be adapted to specific requirements and constraints of this particular case.

Introduction

The use of children for acts of terrorism is not a recent phenomenon. However, with the proliferation of terrorist groups that maintain prolonged control over significant areas and their respective populations, the extent of the problem has greatly increased. Children in such territories might be exposed to years of persistent indoctrination efforts, coupled with training in military and terrorist tactics. Wresting control of territory from terrorist groups is rather straightforward in theory, even if it proves quite difficult in execution. Reintegrating into society children who have adopted an identity linked to violent extremism, and who have possibly already personally committed acts of violence, is significantly more complex.

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While a number of terrorist organizations is reported to use children in different capacities and to varying extents[2], it is the Islamic State (IS - formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) that elevated this problem to an unprecedented degree. This paper will therefore focus on children who are or have been members of that particular organization, and examine the likely challenges that will arise in connection to their rehabilitation and reintegration.

The problem of reintegrating child members of terrorist groups into society can be approached in various ways. They can be treated as child soldiers and attempts can be made to reintegrate them drawing upon experiences from similar efforts undertaken largely in African states. They can also be viewed as terrorists and subjected to disengagement and deradicalization processes commonly used in such cases. Both of those approaches have advantages and disadvantages. The ideological component of terrorist indoctrination is often much more significant than the one used for purposes of soldiering; on the other hand, incentives for disengagement and deradicalization effective in adults might not be immediately transferable to children. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, as many elements of one will necessarily be found in the other, and their convergence will be greater precisely in cases of large terrorist organizations utilizing strategies and tactics usually associated with more traditional armed groups. There are other ways to address the problem of children in terrorist organizations; the reason this paper focuses on two aforementioned broad approaches is due to the magnitude of the problem and the objective constraints of the environment it is situated in, as these will largely dictate the amount of resources available to such projects.

After addressing key terms and definitions, the paper will proceed by creating an overall picture of children in the IS. This will be followed by a general overview of the state of knowledge about reintegration of child soldiers, as well as deradicalization and rehabilitation of terrorists. The lessons from these two approaches will then be combined and reviewed for their applicability to children in the IS, ultimately arguing that, in order to

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[2] M. Bloom and J. Horgan, "The Rise of the Child Terrorist", *Foreign Affairs*, 9 February 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-02-09/rise-child-terrorist accessed February 19 2017.

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address this challenge with a reasonable chance of success, both approaches must be leveraged in a context-specific way.

On definitions and terminology

There is no universal definition of a child soldier. According to UNICEF, the term includes "any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of ... armed group in any capacity, including ... cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups ... The definition ... does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms."[3] This definition is very broad and, given the UNICEF's mandate, understandably so; all children associated with armed groups should be afforded adequate protection. It should be clear, however, that actions required for secure and successful reintegration might vary significantly with regard to specificities of a child's involvement.

Attempts to define terrorism in a universally acceptable way face similar problems, due to serious political implications of this label. It would be difficult to dispute that the IS indeed exhibits key attributes of a terrorist organization by any definition; but due to varying degrees of involvement with the IS an individual can have, it is much less clear whether all those associated with it at some point could accurately be considered terrorists. This is especially problematic with children. Many will reason that the very idea of a 'child terrorist' is problematic because it is debatable whether a child can rationally pursue political aims or hold a genuine belief in any particular ideology.[4] This is a valid argument; still, it does not remove from existence large numbers of children trained in the use of force and indoctrinated in violent ideologies to a greater or lesser extent. Children attached to the IS are, by definition, child soldiers. However, the ideological component must be addressed as well, regardless of how shallow we might think a child's acceptance of it actually is. The potential capacity of child combatants to inflict harm upon others should not be taken lightly. This in no way

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[3] UNICEF, *Cape Town Principles and Best Practices* (Cape Town: UNICEF, 1997), *Definitions*.
[4] L. Gittos, "There is no such thing as a child terrorist", Spiked, 27 July 2015, http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/there-is-no-such-thing-as-a-child-terrorist/17233 accessed February 19 2017.

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diminishes the fact that they are victims themselves, but those roles are not mutually exclusive.[5]

Any time a child is involved in violence, especially if it has a role of the perpetrator, there is bound to be some controversy due to the sensitivity of the issue. Labelling any child a 'soldier' or, even worse, a 'terrorist', might seem like assigning children agency to a degree that often doesn't correspond with the reality of their situation. The lines between terrorism and warfare are becoming increasingly blurry, making it difficult to clearly designate roles children play in certain conflicts. It is certainly not the intention of this paper to equate children in armed groups with adult soldiers, nor children attached to terrorist organizations with adult terrorists; both terms are inherently unfortunate and an oversimplification of the nuanced levels of involvement a child might have with such groups and organizations.

Children and the IS – the scope of the problem

The attention the IS paid to actively involving children in its functioning is significantly greater than anything exhibited by terrorist groups that preceded it. It was definitely not the first terrorist organization to either undertake the mission of indoctrinating the youth[6] or use them operationally. However, perhaps exactly because the IS considered itself not a movement but a state, children were not viewed merely as tools to be used in furtherance of tactical objectives, but as strategic assets. For the IS, training and indoctrination of children was essentially a state-building project,[7] as they were considered to be a new and improved generation of fighters.[8]

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[5] C. Martinez Squiers, "How the Law Should View Voluntary Child Soldiers: Does Terrorism Pose a Different Dilemma?", *SMU Law Review* 68 (2015), p. 575.

[6] UN, *Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, 20 April 2016, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=s/2016/360&referer=/english/&Lang=E accessed February 21 2017, p. 14.

[7] Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, *The Cubs of the Caliphate: How the Islamic State attracts, coerces and indoctrinates children to its cause* (Baghdad: Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2016), p. 3.

[8] M. Townsend, "How Islamic State is training child killers in doctrine of hate", The Guardian, 5 March 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/05/islamic-state-trains-purer-child-killers-in-doctrine-of-hate accessed February 6 2017.

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There were several ways children could have come to be associated with the IS. They could have been children of supportive locals or foreign fighters, abandoned children found in orphanages, runaways who volunteered for service, as well as children taken from their parents by force.[9] Some families enrolled their children into IS programs for purely economic reasons, as the IS paid a monthly salary to children in its service.[10] For some children, especially refugees, the IS may in fact have appeared as the hopeful solution for the future, offering structure, purpose, and a sense of belonging.[11]

Whatever their original circumstances might have been, once in a training camp, a child's ethno-religious identity was actively supressed by enforced uniformity,[12] as they were subjected to round the clock combination of indoctrination and weapons training.[13] They were systematically desensitized to aggression through physical punishment and regular exposure to violence, both virtually and in person,[14] and those refusing to carry out executions ordered by the IS faced the risk of extreme corporal punishment, including amputations.[15] By the time a child was ordered to kill an actual person, many of them were so desensitized that they found it neither mentally not physically repulsive.[16] Children who showed greater aptitude for ideology and were able to communicate well were used to help recruit other children.[17]

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[9] J. Horgan and M. Bloom, "This is how the Islamic State manufactures child militants", VICE News, 8 July 2015, https://news.vice.com/article/this-is-how-the-islamic-state-manufactures-child-militants accessed February 6 2017.

[10] B. Berti and A. B. Osete, "'Generation war': Syria's children caught between internal conflict and the rise of the Islamic State", *Strategic Assessment* 18:3 (2015), p. 46.

[11] A. Gallagher, "The Islamic State's child soldiers", Al Monitor, 3 April 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/lebanon-islamic-state-child-soldiers-syria-iraq-hrw-afp.html accessed February 9 2017.

[12] Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies (2016), p. 11.

[13] A. Rossi, "Islamic State training child suicide bombers in special camp", Sky News, 18 December 2016, http://news.sky.com/story/islamic-state-training-child-suicide-bombers-in-special-camp-10700852 accessed February 6 2017.

[14] J. G. Horgan, M. Taylor, M. Bloom and C. Winter, "From cubs to lions: A six stage model of child socialization into the Islamic State", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 0 (2016), p. 10.

[15] L. Adel, "Islamic State amputates hands of 2 children for refusing to execute civilians", Iraqi News, 2 February 2017, http://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/islamic-state-amputates-hands-2-children-refusing-execute-civilians/ accessed February 6 2017.

[16] A. Loyd, "The children of Islamic State", The Times Magazine, 21 January 2017, http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-children-of-islamic-state-0ldjj6l8t accessed February 6 2017.

[17] M. Bloom, "Cubs of the Caliphate", *Foreign Affairs*, 21 July 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-07-21/cubs-caliphate accessed February 8 2017.

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Child soldiers are usually transplanted from their normal environment into an armed group, and their existence while in that group appears mostly separate from their previous life. The situation with the IS was different: a large number of people found themselves in the 'physical' IS without being active members of the group. There are currently an estimated 2 million individuals under 18 who have lived under the IS since its inception.[18] Children who were recruited into the organization itself were not necessarily extracted from their regular communities. This lack of separation between normal and abnormal modes of existence makes it difficult for a child to comprehend which activities are acceptable and which are not. Even children who were never directly associated with the IS through formal membership in one of its training programs were still subjected to a continuous and systematic radicalization campaign. As the IS gained control over a certain populated area, it went to great lengths to appropriate educational institutions and adapt their curriculum to reflect its ideology.[19] It established its own Office of Education, and has systematically modified the curriculum of primary and secondary schools to promote religious extremism,[20] while practical skills taught in school included bomb-making.[21] Parents who opposed the idea of their children being indoctrinated in this manner were left with no option but to deprive them of formal education altogether.[22]

Indoctrination efforts started even before a child reached school age.[23] Very young children were lured through gradual socialization, by being made to feel they were part of a

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[18] S. Mekhennet and J. Warrick, "For the 'children of ISIS,' target practice starts at age 6. By their teens, they're ready to be suicide bombers", The Washington Post, 7 October 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/for-the-children-of-isis-target-practice-starts-at-age-6-by-their-teens-theyre-ready-to-be-suicide-bombers/2016/10/06/3b59f0fc-8664-11e6-92c2-14b64f3d453f_story.html?utm_term=.d9bca4a52bc6 accessed February 8 2017.
[19] Berti and Osete (2015), p. 49.
[20] UN (2016), p. 26.
[21] G. Gupta, "Bomb classes and gun counts: trauma of Mosul children under Islamic State", Reuters, 24 January 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-schools-idUSKBN1581SZ accessed February 6 2017.
[22] Iraqi Institution for Development, *Education in Mosul under the Islamic State (ISIS) 2015-2016* (Mosul: Iraqi Institution for Development, 2016), p. 4.
[23] A. Withnall, "Isis booklet issues guidelines to mothers on how to raise 'jihadi babies'", The Independent, 1 January 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-booklet-issues-guidelines-to-mothers-on-how-to-raise-jihadi-babies-9952721.html accessed February 9 2017.

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special group; only later was this followed by ideological education.[24] A variety of tools was used to reach young children, including creating terrorism-themed smartphone games.[25] As many parents were forced to feign adherence to IS ideology in order to avoid reprisals, young children were passively radicalized by the environment they were growing up in. It was a common occurrence for the IS to pay or in some other way incite children to spy and inform on their relatives, friends and neighbours.[26] This suggests that many adults refrained from saying anything contrary to the teachings of the IS in front of children out of fear of being reported.

Children recruited into the IS were put to various uses, from active participation in combat to donating blood for injured fighters.[27] They were also consistently used for suicide attacks,[28] but not because they were considered expendable; adult fighters regularly performed suicide operations as well.

Child members of the IS present a unique challenge in that many of them are much like child soldiers: they were a part of an armed group and trained in weapons and tactics. But they are also very much like terrorists: they were integrated in an exclusive group and intensely indoctrinated in a shared violent extremist ideology. Therefore, in exploring how best to manage such children, there is a need to draw upon lessons from dealing with both child soldiers and terrorists.

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[24] Bloom (2015).

[25] B. Farmer, "Islamic State children's mobile app lets junior jihadists attack Big Ben", The Telegraph, 19 December 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/19/islamic-state-childrens-mobile-app-junior-jihadists-attack-big/ accessed February 6 2017.

[26] Horgan et al. (2016), p. 9.

[27] K. Kuntz, "First come the sweets, then the beheadings", Der Spiegel, 29 July 2016, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-how-the-is-trains-child-soldiers-a-1103941.html accessed February 6 2017.

[28] Bloom et al. (2016), p. 30; O. Dorell, "Here's how the Islamic State turns children into terrorists", USA Today, 22 August 2016, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/08/22/islamic-state-trains-children-terrorists/89107872/ accessed February 6 2017.

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Reintegration of child soldiers

Child soldiers are used throughout the globe; by some estimates, almost 80 per cent of conflicts worldwide involve children below the age of 15.[29] However, available literature mostly draws on reintegration research conducted in several African states, primarily Sierra Leone, Uganda, Burundi, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The extensive use of children in conflicts in those areas, as well as the subsequent involvement of a number of international non-governmental organizations focused on reintegration of demobilized children, made those states conducive to research of the topic.

Scholarly research of recruitment mechanisms and causes behind the increased use of children in violent conflicts has lagged behind the immediacy of the issue, often contributing to either paralysis or uninformed action.[30] But while the subject of reintegration of child soldiers is still understudied relative to its far-reaching significance,[31] there is enough material to allow for some extrapolation based on similarities across programs and states they were implemented in.

One thing almost universally agreed upon is that the reintegration of child soldiers is difficult. Reintegrating adult combatants is usually easier because they were socialized to appropriate norms prior to their engagement in hostilities, but involvement in violence at an early age can arrest social development of a child.[32] Some former child soldiers have shown to be incapable of distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable behaviour upon their return to

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[29] E. Kaplan, "Child soldiers around the world", Council on Foreign Relations, 2 December 2005, http://www.cfr.org/human-rights/child-soldiers-around-world/p9331#p7 accessed February 19 2017.
[30] V. Achvarina and S. F. Reich, "No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers", *International Security* 31:1 (2016), p. 163.
[31] M. J. D. Jordans, I. H. Komproe, W. A. Tol, A. Ndayisaba, T. Nisabwe and B. A. Kohrt, "Reintegration of child soldiers in Burundi: a tracer study", *BMC Public Health* 12:905 (2012), p. 2.
[32] L. Russell and E. M. Gozdziak, "Coming Home Whole: Reintegrating Uganda's Child Soldiers", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 7:2 (2006), p. 59.

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their families and communities, and have perpetrated acts of violence, contributing to their further exclusion from the community. In their minds, they never ceased being soldiers.[33]

Rejection of the soldier identity is the most basic step towards a successful reintegration, and children who fully embraced their role as members of the armed group present the greatest challenge. It is this level of identification with the group that appears to be the most reliable indicator of the level of aggression a child is likely to exhibit during the reintegration process, more so than whether the child has actually been forced to kill another human being.[34] This particular piece of data serves as a reminder that certain important things about former child combatants might be somewhat counterintuitive, and it might be dangerous to make uninformed assumptions when assessing which of them pose the greatest risk.

Once an armed group decides to integrate a child into its ranks, the process appears very consistent across groups and countries. Children are gradually socialized into violence, at first mostly through physical abuse and humiliation. Unwarranted expressions of emotions such as empathy towards victims of the group are punished, and children are assigned tasks with an increasing level of violence, culminating in killing of unarmed human beings. This is combined with specific ceremonies and symbolic rites of passage, aimed at severing the child's connections to their former lives – families, communities, and perceptions of what is right and what is wrong.[35] Group's enemies are depersonalized, and child's identity is formed through a culture revolving around weapons, symbolism of uniforms and selective use of traditional rituals.[36] Once they are accepted as members of the group, they are likely to engage

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[33] L. Verneij, "Socialization and reintegration challenges: A case study of the Lord's Resistance Army" in Özerdem, A. and S. Podder (eds.) *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 183.

[34] E. Schauer and T. Elbert, "The psychological impact of child soldiering" in Martz, E. (ed.), *Trauma Rehabilitation After War and Conflict: Community and Individual Perspectives* (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2010), p. 347.

[35] N. Boothby, J. Crawford and J. Halperin, "Mozambique child soldier life outcome study: Lessons learned in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts", *Global Public Health* 1:1 (2006), p. 90.

[36] J. Trenholm, J., P. Olsson, M. Blomqvist and B. M. Ahlberg, "Constructing Soldiers from Boys in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo", *Men and Masculinities* 16:2 (2012), pp. 212, 215, 216.

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in a whole range of violent acts, a number of them often directed against their families and communities they were taken from.[37]

One of the largest empirical studies on demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers, undertaken in Sierra Leone, has shown that ideologues, male fighters and younger former combatants find it more difficult to break ties with their units.[38] Time spent attached to the group also plays a significant role: children who were with the armed group longer are harder to re-socialize, as they are more likely to identify themselves as members rather than victims of the group.[39] And an early age of entry into a violent group is likely to result in higher levels of appetitive aggression – a rewarding perception of the perpetration of violence.[40]

Reintegration, defined by the UN as a process "by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income,"[41] is multifaceted and should include social, economic, psychological, legal and political dimensions.[42] These dimensions are mutually reinforcing and a comprehensive program would ideally address all of them, though with appropriate prioritization.

The first step in the reintegration process might involve placing children in dedicated assistance centres. Also called Interim Care Centres (ICCs), these controlled environments provide an opportunity for individual assessment. The programs there are likely to focus on establishing appropriate codes of conduct, re-establishing self-regulatory processes through rewarding group-oriented behaviours, and activities that promote security and trust. A

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[37] T. S. Betancourt, I. Ivanova Borisova, T. Philip Williams, T. H. Whitfield, J. Williamson, R. T. Brennan, M. de la Soudiere and S. E. Gilman, "Sierra Leone's Former Child Soldiers: A Follow-Up Study of Psychosocial Adjustment and Community Reintegration", *Child Development* 81:4 (2010), p. 1078.

[38] M. Humphreys and J. M. Weinstein, "Demobilization and reintegration", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51:4 (2007), p. 533.

[39] N. Boothby, "What happens when child soldiers grow up? The Mozambique case study", *Intervention* 4:3 (2006), p. 249.

[40] R. Weierstall, R. Haer, L. Banholzer and T. Elbert, "Becoming cruel: Appetitive aggression released by detrimental socialisation in former Congolese soldiers", *International Journal of Behavioural Development* 37:6 (2013), p. 210.

[41] UN, *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards: Level 4 Operations, Programmes and Support - Reintegration* (New York: UN, 2014), p. 2.

[42] Tonheim (2014), p. 634.

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renewed sense of meaning is provided by traditional and religious authorities through ceremonies that help children come to terms with their past deeds, renounce affiliation to armed group, acknowledge government authority and embrace love of family and community.[43] Centres can also be used to provide initial medical care and (re)introduce a typical day structure through scheduling.[44] The time a child spends in an ICC can be used to trace the family and prepare the community for receiving the child, as well as to plan the reintegration process.[45]

ICCs might be a good place to provide psychological assistance to children, as many are likely to benefit from it. Short-term trauma focused treatment seems to help with the reduction of PTSD symptoms,[46] but long-term monitoring is required to ensure successful reintegration. This is especially true because the challenges for the child do not end the moment he is separated from the armed group; events during the reintegration itself might be just as traumatic.[47] This long-term psychological care can generally be carried out with a good degree of success by adequately trained local lay counsellors.[48]

However, temporary institutionalization of former child soldiers will not always be a viable option, and even when it is, UNICEF strongly recommends "all efforts should be made to keep or reunite children with their families or to place them within a family structure"[49] as soon as possible. If a child has already returned to his family and community on his own or through their help, he should not be forced to join a formal reintegration process that would

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[43] Boothby et al. (2006), p. 93.

[44] I. Derluyn, S. Vindevogel and L. De Haene, "Toward a Relational Understanding of the Reintegration and Rehabilitation Processes of Former Child Soldiers", *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 22:8 (2013), p. 873.

[45] UN, *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards: Level 5 Cross-cutting Issues – Children and DDR* (New York: UN, 2006), p. 19.

[46] V. Ertl, A. Pfeiffer, E. Schauer, T. Elbert and F. Neuner, "Community-Implemented Trauma Therapy for Formed Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda: A Randomized Controlled Trial", *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 306:5 (2011), p. 503.

[47] T. S. Betancourt, R. T. Brennan, J. Rubin-Smith, G. M. Fitzmaurice and S. E. Gilman, "Sierra Leone's former child soldiers: A longitudinal study of risk, protective factors, and mental health", *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 49:6 (2010), p. 612.

[48] Ertl et al. (2011), p. 504.

[49] UNICEF (1997), p. 3.

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include removing him from his family once again.[50] This is consistent with the almost universally agreed upon idea that it is the social aspect of reintegration that truly determines its success or failure, and forms the basis for all other types of reintegration.[51] It is also the most complex one, as returning child soldiers often face discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion.[52]

Challenges to social reintegration are numerous. In many cases, the returning children have been a part of a group that has inflicted great harm upon the community in question, and some might have actively participated in acts of violence. This makes fear the first obstacle to overcome. The community fears the children because of who they think they are and what they might do, often justifiably so. It is true that most former child soldiers just want to be reunited with their families[53] and start a normal life. But it has also been shown that the propensity for violence, learned while being a part of a militant group, often stays with the individual once he returns to the civilian setting; and both male and female ex-combatants are more likely to engage in violent behaviour than general population.[54] While child soldiers have experienced trauma-inducing events, more often than not so have the communities they are to be reintegrated into. Their anxiety is to be expected.[55] Children whose involvement was limited to support roles, including girls who were used for domestic tasks, sexual purposes, or were forcibly married to adult members of the armed group are not immune from social exclusion either.[56]

Children also fear the reaction of the community and potential retribution,[57] and this mutual fear reinforces distrust. Some communities manage to draw upon their own internal

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[50] UN (2006), p. 21.
[51] Tonheim (2014), p. 642.
[52] Derluyn et al. (2013), p. 871.
[53] Boothby et al. (2006), p. 95.
[54] UN (2014), p. 41.
[55] Derluyn et al. (2013), p. 873.
[56] M. Tonheim, "Genuine social inclusion or superficial co-existence? Former girl soldiers in eastern Congo returning home", *The International Journal of Human Rights* 18:6 (2014), p. 637.
[57] S. Schiltz, S. Vindevogel, E. Broekaert and I. Derluyn, "Dealing with Relational and Social Challenges After Child Soldiering: Perspectives of Formerly Recruited Youth and Their Communities in Northern Uganda", *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 26 (2016), p. 314.

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resources and resilience to cope with the challenges of reintegrating returning children,[58] but most will need, and would certainly benefit from, at least some degree of outside help. While this help is likely to initially be provided largely by actors outside of the state the reintegration is taking place in, such as foreign NGOs and organizations like the UN, relying exclusively on them to carry the process through is not recommended. Successful reintegration is, above all, a long-term project,[59] and funding from external donors has a tendency to decrease once the country in question is no longer perceived in a state of emergency. [60] This is not to say that resources available through foreign sources should not be used to maximum effect. There are likely to be situations where outside help will be the only help available; most reintegration initiatives are set up by NGOs as governments often have more pressing matters to deal with in the immediate aftermath of a conflict.[61] NGOs have also been known to create programs for reintegration of child soldiers even before the cessation of hostilities in a given region,[62] but they are hardly perfect. Among other identified problems, they might want to steer community needs in the direction of the help they are interested in or able to provide, while not necessarily doing what is actually most needed.[63] For long-term success, the majority of the effort should come from the community itself.

One particular use external actors are well-suited for is financial assistance, but simply giving money to returning child soldiers or their immediate families in hope that they will put it to best use is not a realistic option, and might even be counterproductive. [64] If the standard of living in the community is low, overtly devoting significant resources to returning child soldiers might serve only to alienate them further, as people might resent perceived preferential treatment of those who contributed to the present misfortune of the community.[65]

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[58] S. Vindevogel, M. Wessells, M. De Schryver, E. Broekaert and I. Derluyn, "Informal and formal supports for former child soldiers in northern Uganda", *The Scientific World Journal* 2012 (2012), p. 2.
[59] Jordans et al. (2012), p. 10.
[60] Derluyn et al. (2013), p. 874.
[61] Derluyn et al. (2013), p. 872.
[62] Russell and Gozdziak (2006), p. 57.
[63] S. Shepler, "The rites of the child: Global discourses of youth and reintegrating child soldiers in Sierra Leone", *Journal of Human Rights* 4:2 (2005), p. 204.
[64] UN (2006), p. 21.
[65] Derluyn et al. (2013), p. 871.

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"Dual targeting" assistance programs that distribute resources between the individual and his community have shown to have higher success rates, as have area-based interventions which target a specific geographic territory where there are large groups of individuals in need of reintegration. These interventions leverage locally based resources and actors through large-scale economic projects, helping the community come together in the process of reintegration.[66]

Long-term reintegration process is usually preceded by a set of short-term, targeted measures termed reinsertion. Reinsertion includes economic assistance to provide for immediate needs of former combatants, but does not guarantee sustainable income.[67] In order for reintegration to be permanent, returning child soldiers must be enabled to become self-reliant and productive members of their communities.[68] To this end, resources allocated to assist demobilization and reintegration should not be distributed as an immediate relief, but managed as a long-term investment.[69]

Re-enrolling children into formal educational programs is generally recommended.[70] Apart from the obvious benefits, schools serve as an environment where they can build and rebuild positive social ties.[71] But some former child soldiers might be so far behind in their education that it is unlikely they will ever catch up, leading only to frustration and loss of time.[72] For such children, programs should be developed to provide vocational training suitable to the needs of the communities they are reintegrated in.[73] Equipping youth with practical skills could help them take part in rebuilding communities they have participated in destroying.[74] Even some of the skills and knowledge a child has acquired during his time with

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[66] UN (2014), pp. 9-10.
[67] UN (2014), p. 7.
[68] T. S. Betancourt, S. Simmons, I. Borisova, S. E. Brewer, U. Iweala and M. De La Soudiere, "High hopes, grim reality: Reintegration and the education of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone", *Comparative Education Review* 52:4 (2008), p. 565.
[69] UNICEF (1997), p. 5.
[70] UNICEF (1997), p. 3.
[71] Betancourt, Ivanova Borisova et al. (2010), p. 1081.
[72] Betancourt et al. (2008), pp. 570, 578.
[73] UN (2006), p. 27.
[74] Russell and Gozdziak (2006), p. 61.

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the armed group might be beneficial for the community, and capitalizing on those might help them reintegrate faster.[75]

However, depending largely on their age, some children will simply not be motivated to resume school, and educational stipends will prove ineffective. They might primarily want to "earn money, find a wife and build a house."[76] In those cases, support tools might include on-the-job training, informal education, assistance in starting and maintaining self-employment, and micro-finance support.[77] Having an income-generating activity has shown to be an effective tool in preventing re-recruitment.[78]

Reintegrating child soldiers also presents legal and political problems, driven largely by the question of the degree to which the children should be held responsible for their association with the armed group. While some children might state and indeed believe that they have joined an armed group of their own accord, it can be debated whether that choice can truly be viewed as their own, given their cognitive development and the complex implication of such a decision.[79] On the other hand, the example of Uganda setting the minimum age for criminal responsibility at 12 years of age[80] illustrates how specificities of a conflict influence the way child soldiers might be viewed by the law.

Finally, what is actually known about the success rate of demobilization and reintegration programs for child soldiers? Broad generalizations across countries may be misleading, but hope is definitively present. Research shows that former child soldiers in Burundi have integrated well within their communities, have high employment and literacy rates, and no apparent differences can be seen in functioning and mental health when compared to never-recruited peers.[81] Reintegrated boys in Mozambique tracked into adulthood seem to fare as well or better than the average in most economic and social

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[75] Derluyn et al. (2013), p. 878.
[76] Boothby et al. (2006), p. 105.
[77] Jordans et al. (2012), p. 3.
[78] J. McKnight, "Child Soldiers in Africa: A Global Approach to Human Rights Protection, Enforcement and Post-Conflict Reintegration", *African Journal of International and Comparative Law* 18:2 (2010), p. 134.
[79] Derluyn et al. (2013), p. 870.
[80] McKnight (2010), p. 133.
[81] Jordans et al. (2012), p. 7.

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indicators, and severity of psychological trauma appears to decrease as time passes, though it never goes away completely.[82]

Disengagement and deradicalization of terrorists

When examining ways in which an individual can be separated from an extremist group, two broad terms most often used are disengagement and deradicalization. Deradicalization as an initiative is a term commonly used to "refer to programmes that are generally directed against individuals who have become radical with the aim of re-integrating them into society or at least dissuading them from violence,"[83] while on an individual level it can be defined as "a reduction in commitment to extremism and a change in beliefs that conforms to mainstream values."[84] It is naturally preferable to simple disengagement, as it suggests not only the cessation of participation in terrorist activities or contact with terrorist groups, but also a change in ideology.[85] Deradicalization, however, cannot easily be measured; and as with any other endeavour whose ultimate objective is essentially to change someone's mind (and in this particular case, possibly someone's identity), it might simply be too much to hope for. Ultimately, a state's objective regarding terrorism is mostly measured in acts of terrorism that it managed or failed to prevent, so disengagement is likely to be considered a 'good enough' outcome.[86]

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[82] Boothby et al. (2006), p. 101.

[83] UN, *First Report of the Working Group on Radicalisation and Extremism that Lead to Terrorism: Inventory of State Programmes*, 2008, https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=10129 accessed February 21 2017, p. 5.

[84] B. F. Bubolz and P. Simi, "Leaving the world of hate: Life-course transitions and self-change", *American Behavioral Scientist* 59:12 (2015), p. 1589.

[85] Conti (see Conti, B., "Between Deradicalisation and Disengagement: The Re-engagement of the Radical Actor?" in Jayakumar, S. (ed.), *Terrorism, Radicalisation and Countering Violent Extremism: Practical Considerations and Concerns* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 56.) suggests that both deradicalization and disengagement seem to deprive the subject of a sense of agency, and proposes a more involving approach of "re-commitment."

[86] M. J. Williams and S. C. Lindsey, "A social psychological critique of the Saudi terrorism risk reduction initiative", *Psychology, Crime & Law* 20:2 (2014), p. 136.

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In certain ways, it might be argued that disengagement is to deradicalization what reinsertion is to reintegration. When pressed for time, both reinsertion and disengagement are good places to start, and provide visible indicators of progress. However, neither of them are meant to be the complete solution, and should be followed by a set of more strategic and thorough measures in order to significantly reduce the risk of subjects relapsing into violence.

The certainty with which definitive conclusions on the effectiveness of a given deradicalization approach can be drawn is limited, largely because it is a complex process whose success has to be measured in the long term (though abject failure is likely to be observable in the short term as well). Public access to data on such programs is also limited, as most of them are run by governmental agencies; this means that a lot of the information is classified, and what is released has to be viewed with awareness that governments have a clear interest in presenting their deradicalization initiatives as successful. Lack of data also leads to programs being evaluated based on what intuitively seems likely to work, but honesty requires recognizing that there are still a lot of unanswered question about how radicalization works and, subsequently, how deradicalization works.[87] However, as with reintegration, deradicalization is a time-sensitive issue, dictating immediate and continuous action while constantly integrating new knowledge as it becomes available.[88]

Among various deradicalization programs, the one used in Saudi Arabia is often presented as the flagship of such initiatives.[89] Its main strength is the broad spectrum of activities it encompasses, all of which are intended to work synergistically towards permanently separating a former terrorist from the group and accompanying extremist ideologies. Broadly speaking, it employs six angles of approach. First, in-group members

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[87] M. Dechesne, "Deradicalization: not soft, but strategic", *Crime Law and Social Change* 55:4 (2011), p. 291.

[88] Both radicalization and deradicalization are complex processes that can be approached through a variety of theoretical frameworks (see Koehler, D. *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism* (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 65 – 94.); elaborating on them is beyond the scope of this paper. What is presented here is an overview of most common threads in various deradicalization programs.

[89] It is not the intention of this paper to present any of the deradicalization programs mentioned as a standard or a blueprint to be followed indiscriminately; the effectiveness of all of them is understudied due to a number of objective constraints (see Horgan, J. and K. Braddock, "Rehabilitating the Terrorists? Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-radicalization Programs", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22:2 (2010), pp. 267-291.). Nonetheless, elements of these programs and their variations are likely to be used until better approaches appear.

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such as family and friends are asked to persuade the individual to renounce violent extremism. Counter-ideologues perceived as authorities on religious matters by the subject attempt to persuade him of the doctrinal errors inherent in violent extremism, while already deradicalized former terrorists offer their own experiences on the merits of renouncing violent ideologies. The government provides financial and social support, including assistance in gaining employment, as well as continued psychological and religious support post-release. All the while, the subject is monitored and required to check in at regular intervals. Finally, the government helps in strengthening the subject's social network, and incentivizes marriage and starting a family.[90]

This is the blueprint generally copied in many Muslim-majority countries when tackling the deradicalization challenge. The extent of assistance, especially financial one, varies; but basic concepts are generally similar across the board. Indonesia believes the path to deradicalization begins with disillusionment[91] with terrorist ideology or tactics, followed by development of relationships outside of extremist circles. This should lead to a change of priorities in an individual, while law enforcement uses soft approaches to assist him in re-joining normal society.[92] Similarly, India's approach includes having the subject engage in a dialogue with moderate religious authorities and receive education and vocational training. Family and community are involved in the process of resocialization, stable relationships are promoted, and therapy is provided if needed.[93]

Focusing exclusively on providing access to jobs and financial help when helping former fighters to reintegrate is to oversimplify the deradicalization process. Money does help, but the notion of economic deprivation being the principal driver behind terrorism is

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[90] Williams and Lindsey (2014), p. 137.
[91] While disillusionment consistently appears as a factor in the process of disengagement, it is seldom sufficient to initiate separation from a terrorist organization. Research has shown that it usually needed to be combined with rational cost-benefit analysis, which validates original, more emotional impulse to disengage. See Hwang, C. J. *Why Terrorists Quit: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 172.
[92] Z. A. Sukabdi, "Terrorism in Indonesia: A review on rehabilitation and deradicalization", *Journal of Terrorism Research* 6:2 (2015), p. 40.
[93] E. B. Hearne, "Re-examining India's counterterrorism approach: Adopting a long view", *Strategic Analysis* 36:4 (2012), p. 535.

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increasingly losing credibility.[94] Other programs have initially focused on the war of ideas, based on an assumption that if one could only be persuaded to replace a violently extremist worldview with a more moderate one, the problem is essentially solved. There will always be a limited number of true ideologues, and they are most likely to be found at the top of the terror group's hierarchy. But many of the group's members don't join the group because they find every idea it promotes appealing; instead, they first find the idea of belonging to a group appealing, and they adopt the group's ideology once they have assumed the identity of being a member of that group.

Breaking away from terrorism will therefore succeed or fail based on how effectively an individual can be separated from a terrorist group as well as from an ideology. As theories advocating that those attracted to terrorism are primarily drawn to it by the promise of companionship and meaning in life gain ground,[95] deradicalization programs must adapt by shifting their focus on influencing relationships between the individual and the community, as well as between the individual and the terrorist group. The extremist identity adopted through exposure to and interaction with a radical organization is primarily a group identity. Once the individual becomes part of such a group, he is likely to defend the complete ideology of the group, even if he has doubts regarding certain aspects of it.[96] By forcibly removing him from that group, a void appears that has to be filled with an adequate substitute if deradicalization process is to be successful.[97] The deradicalized individual has to assume a new role, a new identity, complete with corresponding relationships and responsibilities. In cases where an individual's attachment to the ideology of the group is secondary to his attachment to the group itself, deradicalization is facilitated by establishing a new identity as a family man and a productive member of the society, and the accompanying feeling of social responsibility.[98]

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[94] J. Auld, "The need for a national deradicalisation program in Afghanistan", *Journal for Deradicalization* 4 (2015), p. 214.
[95] C. Mink, "It's about the group, not God: Social causes and cures for terrorism", *Journal for Deradicalization* 5 (2015), p. 69.
[96] F. Wali, "Post-radicalisation identity: Understanding 'collective identity' within radical Islamist groups", *Journal of Social & Psychological Sciences* 4:1 (2011), p. 50.
[97] Hearne (2012), p. 534.
[98] Williams and Lindsey (2014), p. 142.

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The idea that deradicalization is a process that takes place in the physical world just as much as in the mind directs deradicalization efforts towards creating a favourable environment to reintegrate into, including securing an education, an income generating activity, a place to live in and a supportive social circle.[99] This means providing support to the individual in question, but also to other involved parties. Saudi Arabia has, for example, recognized the advantage that could be gained in leveraging the returning extremist's family and immediate social circle, and offers them social support on the condition that the returning individual does not relapse.[100]

Ideological aspects will still have to be addressed by any serious deradicalization program. Especially in dealing with religious extremism in general and Islamist extremism in particular, the fact that a terrorist group binds its ideology to religious identity of its members has a significant influence on how that aspect of deradicalization should be approached. The underlying objective of this part of the deradicalization process is basically the same across programs: the individual should be persuaded that religious interpretations exalting violence as an individual obligation of a believer are a distortion of the true spirit of the religion. This is then ideally followed by the individual's acceptance of a more moderate interpretation of religious teachings. Such an approach has the best chance of bypassing the identity problem; if the subject can be persuaded that violence is not integral to his religion, conditions are set for him to renounce violence without feeling he is betraying his core beliefs in the process.[101] Once such an individual internalizes the idea that his religion does not prescribe acts of violence, he should become more resilient to any subsequent re-radicalization efforts.[102]

When attempting to ideologically deradicalize an individual, a government must proceed with great caution, as he will likely be an adherent of narratives aimed at portraying the government's objectives as fundamentally incompatible with his personal religious

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[99] J. Horgan, "What makes a terrorist stop being a terrorist?", *Journal for Deradicalization* 1 (2014), p. 3.
[100] A. Rabasa, S. L. Pettyjohn, J. J. Ghez and C. Boucek, *Deradicalizing Islamist extremists* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2010), p. 21.
[101] Williams and Lindsey (2014), p. 140.
[102] Rabasa et al. (2010), p. 4.

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obligations.[103] This is why it is important that those involved in the deradicalization process be well acquainted with relevant religious teachings and practices, thus avoiding the risk of antagonizing the subject and reinforcing his negative views of the government.[104]

Deradicalization efforts are generally directed at individuals and, as much as circumstances and available resources allow it, are tailored around his specific views and situation. However, experiences from interrogations of members of the IS in Iraq have shown that the final obstacle in gaining cooperation was the subject's fear that his comrades would think less of him.[105] Collective deradicalization campaigns that took place in Egypt and Libya[106] are different from the mass deradicalization of children and youth that will have to take place in areas where extremist groups are removed from power, but lessons learned suggest that deradicalizing a group has a sort of a multiplication effect on each individual within that group. The group of interest here is not the formal terrorist organization itself, but a social group within that organization: individuals that are held in that place more by mutual bonds than by allegiance to the organization's ideology. If those bonds could be preserved, perhaps an entire group could be ideologically transplanted from an extremist into a moderate worldview. Leaving an extremist organization with other people is easier than leaving it on one's own, because those leaving with friends or family find it easier to imagine a future life outside of the organization, in essence taking their social support structure with them.[107]

Deradicalization initiatives aimed specifically at children, such as the Sabaoon program in Pakistan, are still rare. Sabaoon works on deradicalization of a number of children rounded up by government forces during operations against the Taliban, turned in by their parents for re-education, or who have surrendered themselves to escape from the Taliban. These children have been trained in broad spectrum of active and supportive military roles, and many were subject to intensive indoctrination by the Taliban. The program tries to

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[103] F. Demant and B. De Graaf, "How to counter radical narratives: Dutch deradicalization policy in case of Moluccan and Islamic radicals", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33:5 (2010), p. 411.
[104] Sukabdi (2015), p. 47.
[105] Mink (2015), p. 72.
[106] Rabasa et al. (2010), p. 81.
[107] Bubolz and Simi (2015), p. 1598.

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counteract the effects of those experiences by providing a standard school curriculum combined with counselling sessions and vocational training, with the focus on deradicalization through promoting ideas of interreligious tolerance and incompatibility of suicide bombings with the teachings of Islam.[108] A team of psychologists supports the regular curriculum and, while the school continues to be a target of militants and is forced to keep its location a secret with the addition of extensive security measures,[109] the program looks promising for the time being.[110]

Tracking success rates of deradicalization programs is complex and demanding, even assuming a uniform consensus is reached on how exactly success is to be measured. Recidivism rate in the Saudi program is estimated to be between 10 and 20 per cent,[111] but the reoffending rate for released Guantanamo Bay detainees is also reported to be around 20 per cent, and the Saudi program is only available to those who have not directly caused injury or loss of life in the first place.[112] As more data becomes available, it is expected that deradicalization initiatives will fine-tune their approaches, although any real precision in either program design or success tracking still seems rather distant.

Deradicalization and reintegration of children in the IS

After reviewing some key lessons from reintegration and deradicalization efforts, it should be possible to make certain informed predictions about the challenges lying ahead for child members of the IS and communities that will try to reabsorb them, as well as make some recommendations based on approaches that have shown the most promising results.

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[108] M. Fitzgerald, "Today's lesson: how not to kill", Irish Times, 8 January 2011, http://www.irishtimes.com/news/today-s-lesson-how-not-to-kill-1.1276857 accessed February 8 2017.

[109] C. Coughlin, "Pakistan school offers hope for children rescued form the Taliban", The Daily Telegraph, 5 October 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/9590838/Pakistan-school-offers-hope-for-children-rescued-from-the-Taliban.html accessed February 8 2017.

[110] J. Horgan, "Child suicide bombers find safe haven", CNN News, 27 March 2013, http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/27/world/asia/pakistan-anti-taliban accessed February 8 2017.

[111] J. Stern, "Mind over martyr: how to deradicalize Islamist extremists", *Foreign Affairs* 89:1 (2010), p. 95.

[112] Williams and Lindsey (2014), pp. 135, 137.

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It should be noted that this paper concerns itself with the reintegration and deradicalization of children who will continue their lives in Iraq and Syria. The children of foreign fighters who will be repatriated, or children who will be relocated to another country for other reasons, will be subject to whatever rehabilitation program is in use in the destination country.[113] The process of determining who is ultimately responsible for children of foreign fighters is a complex legal problem in its own right due to a number of factors, from the lack of adequate documentation needed to provide proof of parentage for orphaned children, to the tendency of many states to delay assuming responsibility for such children for as long as they can, often invoking security concerns.[114] It should also be taken into account that Iraq and Syria differ significantly in many aspects, so it is likely that their approaches to reintegration and deradicalization will also differ; but the essential problems they will face will be similar, and principles valid in one state are likely to be valid in the other one also.

What should also be mentioned is that the almost exclusive focus of this paper on boys rather than girls is not an accidental omission. It is estimated that up to 40 per cent of child soldiers worldwide are female,[115] the hardships suffered by girls associated with armed groups being just as great as those endured by boys, and they often face even greater difficulties reintegrating. Many communities consider girls who were victims of sexual abuse to be

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[113] While an important issue in itself, the deradicalization and integration of such children is beyond the scope of this paper. Documents such as those by RAN (see RAN, *Child returnees from conflict zones*, 2016, and RAN, *Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families*, 2017) exhaustively elaborate on recommendations for dealing with returnees, including children. These recommendations assume a level of dedicated infrastructure, resources, and institutional commitment that can reasonably be expected from stable and relatively affluent states, as well as a relatively small number of children in need of such help. It would be unrealistic to expect countries such as Iraq and Syria, which are the focus of this paper, to be able to replicate such an environment at this point in time, given their current political and security situation. Therefore, this paper strives to achieve a balance of sorts when outlining reintegration approaches between what might be considered optimal and what might be considered realistic, given objective constraints that countries in question are facing.

[114] J. Cook and G. Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate* (2019), ICSR, https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ICSR-Feature-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-II-The-Challenges-Posed-by-Women-and-Minors-After-the-Fall-of-the-Caliphate.pdf accessed September 3 2019, p. 10.

[115] IRIN, "Girl soldiers face tougher battle on return to civilian life", The Guardian, 18 February 2103, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/feb/18/girl-soldiers-battle-civilian-life?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487 accessed March 2 2017.

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impure or promiscuous,[116] and girls who have children of their own from the time they were associated with the armed group are especially likely to experience social rejection.[117] However, strict segregation of roles by gender within the IS in accordance with espoused radical ideology means that the use of violence was reserved almost exclusively for male children. They will present the most immediate security concern, and it can be expected that the greatest part of the reintegration effort will be tailored to mitigate the risk they present.

When considering rehabilitation of children formerly under the IS, two general groups have to be addressed. The first are children who have lived in territories controlled by the IS, but were never actual members of the organization. These children, which might be called 'passively' radicalized, make up the target population of a long-term deradicalization effort, strategically important for ensuring that the next generation is able to break the cycle of radicalization and violence. It is likely, however, that this long-term project will have to give way to a more pressing problem, and that is the children who were actively involved in the functioning of the IS. Likely to be a bit older, and therefore more physically and intellectually capable of inflicting real and immediate harm, they will have to be managed with an appropriate sense of urgency.[118] This urgency might necessitate an unfortunate trade-off between what would be optimal and what can actually be done at any given moment.[119]

Legal issues

As is the case with reintegrating child soldiers elsewhere, there will be a set of complex and sensitive legal issues to be resolved before children who were part of the IS can

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[116] Betancourt, Ivanova Borisova et al. (2010), p. 1081.

[117] Tonheim (2014), p. 638.

[118] Almohammad (see Almohammad, A., *ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment* (2018), ICCT, https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ICCT-Almohammad-ISIS-Child-Soldiers-In-Syria-Feb2018.pdf accessed September 3 2019.) addresses the difference between "structural" and "predatory" recruitment, providing insight on how the type of recruitment might have implications on the degree of caution that should be employed during DDR efforts.

[119] A context-specific risk assessment template might be of great use in getting a general picture of the psychological state of a child (see Kizilhan, J. I., *Providing Psychosocial Care to Child Soldiers Living in Post-IS Iraq* (2019), ICCT, https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ICCT-Kizilhan-Providing-Psychosocial-Care-to-Child-Soldiers-Living-in-Post-IS-Iraq-May2019-1.pdf accessed September 3 2019, p. 5.).

be reinserted into their communities. A number of them will be very young, and unlikely to have actively participated in acts of violence; it can be reasonably assumed that such children, while still subject to some version of deradicalization program, will not be held responsible before the law. It is also likely that the animosity felt towards them by the community will be negligible; it will be relatively easy to perceive them as victims, and treat them accordingly. At the same time, a lot of them will have no reference point other than militant jihadism, and this will present its own set of challenges during resocialization.[120]

On the other end of the spectrum are children closer to 18 years of age. They are likely to be treated as fully responsible before the law and culpable for both the acts they themselves might have done, as well as the association with the IS as an organization. Though children under the age of 18 cannot be held accountable for terrorism internationally, they can be sentenced in accordance with domestic laws, which are likely to have a lower age limit.[121] Arguably the most tragic figures will be children aged 18 or more at the time of capture, but who were taken in by the IS when they were much younger. While there might be some sympathy expressed due to their recruitment while they were children, this will probably not affect the outcome of them ultimately being treated as adult fighters.

It is the bulk of children that will fall between those extremes that will prove the most problematic to deal with from a legal standpoint, with the most pertinent question being the one at what age should a child involved with an armed group be treated as an adult. The age limit of 18 for individuals to be considered child soldiers according to international law is as recent as 2002; prior to that, the Geneva Conventions and its Additional Protocols set the maximum age at under 15.[122] Cultural norms are also likely to play a significant role: while largely symbolic, it is generally accepted in Islam that a boy can be considered an adult as early as at 12 years of age, and at 15 in any case.

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[120] C. Vinograd, G. Balkiz and A. C. Omar, "ISIS trains child soldiers at camps for 'Cubs of the Islamic State'", NBC News, 7 November 2014, http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/isis-trains-child-soldiers-camps-cubs-islamic-state-n241821 accessed February 8 2017.

[121] L-D Obreja, "The use of child soldiers by terrorist organizations", International Human Rights Network, 8 December 2014, http://jushumanis.org/the-use-of-child-soldiers-by-terrorist-organizations/ accessed February 19 2017.

[122] Kaplan (2005).

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That many children aged 15 or under associated with the IS will be dealt with as adults can be concluded with reasonable certainty based on what is already known about the treatment of captured child soldiers of the IS. Human Rights Watch reported that the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil holds in detention centres a number of boys aged 11 to 17 on suspicion of involvement with the IS. Most were not formally charged or allowed access to a lawyer, and allegations of torture are common.[123] Iraq considers children as young as nine to be legally responsible for their involvement with the IS.[124] In both Iraq and Syria, captured children deemed to be members of the IS are usually treated as adult terrorists, and chances for any kind of rehabilitation in detention facilities where such children are held are virtually non-existent.[125]

The tendency towards harsh sentencing and treatment of children associated with terrorist groups is a global trend.[126] Israel allows the imprisonment of minors under the age of 14 for certain terrorism-related offences,[127] and children as young as 13 have been held at Guantanamo Bay.[128] Fear of terrorism can provoke a disproportionate response towards perpetrators, even if they are minors, and even in places where the threat is very manageable. While treating children like adult terrorists should by all means be condemned, it should also be anticipated and adequate measures taken to minimize the far-reaching harmful effects of such practices. Incarceration in itself does not contribute to deradicalization; simply containing a radicalized individual will do nothing to change his core belief-system. If anything, it is likely to reinforce it.[129]

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[123] Human Rights Watch, "KRG: Children allege torture by security forces", Human Rights Watch, 29 January 2017, https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/29/krg-children-allege-torture-security-forces accessed February 8 2017.

[124] Cook and Vale (2019), p. 13.

[125] Loyd (2017).

[126] C. Hamilton, F. Colonnese and M. Dunaiski, *Children and Counter-Terrorism* (Torino: UNICRI, 2016), p. 37.

[127] L. Dearden, "Israel approves new law to jail child 'terrorists' as young as 12", The Independent, 3 August 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-approves-new-law-to-jail-palestinian-child-terrorists-as-young-as-12-human-rights-stabbings-a7170641.html accessed February 19 2017.

[128] UNICEF (2009), p. 77.

[129] R. Gunaratna, "Terrorist rehabilitation: a global imperative", *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 6:1 (2011), p. 65.

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Disengagement and deradicalization

Children who will not be subject to incarceration will either be reinserted into their communities, to be followed up on through deradicalization programs, or they will be assigned to an interim care centre. Ideally, this choice will be made on case-by-case basis. Following pertinent recommendations, confinement to ICCs would be limited to those children assessed to present too great a risk to be reinserted given their current psychological state, children in need of immediate care (physical or psychological), or children waiting for suitable conditions for reinsertion. In any case, this confinement should be as limited in duration as possible. In practice, however, it can be expected that the route a child will take will largely depend on resources available at the moment a child enters the program, so planning should address the need for reassessment and corrective actions. If, while tracking a child's progress, it is revealed that his status regarding confinement should be altered, measures should be taken to do so as quickly as feasible.

Those detained in ICCs will probably be submitted to some kind of deradicalization program. Some of it will be incidental; once physically removed from the IS, children will naturally be exposed to different worldviews, most of them contradicting the ideology they were taught while within the IS. A lot of it will be planned and structured. Exactly how the initiative for deradicalization and reintegration of child members of the IS will look like is hard to predict. It will most likely be a hybrid of existing deradicalization programs, adapted according to needs and available resources. What can be assumed with reasonable confidence is that it will not have the means available to programs in countries such as Saudi Arabia or Singapore. The need to reintegrate a large number of children and youth into a society burdened with demands of restoring normalcy and maintaining basic security, and do so quickly, might easily overwhelm official capacities. International NGOs might provide considerable assistance in work force and funds, but they should operate cautiously and in close cooperation with local resources, keeping a light footprint and avoiding building programs depending exclusively on foreign aid for their functioning.

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Whoever ultimately staffs the ICCs will face serious initial challenges. More radicalized children will actively try to spread extremist ideology to their peers in the centre.[130] Lessons from child soldier reintegration efforts suggest some children might avoid any interaction, and some might be violent, causing understandable apprehension for the staff. However, as time goes by, children tend to become less unruly, and significant changes might take as little as three months.[131]

Children confined to ICCs will by definition interact with other children formerly associated with the IS, and this might prove to be either a catalyst for positive change or a hindrance to the success of the program. The critical decision those responsible for the program will have to answer is should they try to break up groups of children and focus primarily on the individual approach, or should they try to leverage the cohesion existing among group members and attempt a collective deradicalization of sorts. Both options are promising and risky at the same time.

Individual approach makes sense in the light of the fact that, although many children were subject to similar treatment by the IS, how this treatment affected them will vary significantly from one child to another.[132] This means that any generalized deradicalization treatment will fall anywhere on the continuum from insufficient to excessive, and both too much and not enough engagement are likely to be ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. The individual approach is also compatible with physically separating the child from his group, should it be concluded that the group has a negative effect on the process of deradicalization. The child will still maintain contact with his peers, which is indispensable for facilitating socialization and re-learning how to function in a community in peacetime. However, the program can now tailor the child's immediate social circle by putting him in contact with already deradicalized children of similar age and experiences, which has shown to have promising positive effects. Establishing connection with peers who can demonstrate

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[130] Loyd (2017).

[131] Boothby (2006), p. 249.

[132] S. Vindevogel, K. Coppens, I. Derluyn, M. De Schryver, G. Loots and E. Brokaert, "Forced conscription of children during armed conflict: Experiences of former child soldiers in northern Uganda", *Child Abuse & Neglect* 35 (2011), p. 560.

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personal understanding of what the individual is going through is considered an important part of most deradicalization programs.

But the strength of bonds many children develop with other members of their group can lead to a state where the group is considered family,[133] and breaking it up will significantly add to the trauma. If the program is structured in a way which creates an impression of having to betray the group in order to be considered deradicalized, it is setting itself up for failure. On the other hand, if the program can manage to leverage interpersonal connections between participants so that the transition from extremist to moderate ideology happens collectively, without exposing any single member to feelings of being socially ostracised by his peers, it can potentially be more effective than focusing on individual subjects. Ideally, children will ultimately come to view themselves as part of a broader community, both socially and ideologically.[134] There is also the question of whether confinement should be fixed or flexible in duration. Most deradicalization programs aimed at adult terrorists have no set time limit. Terrorists are generally in some kind of detention, and being considered deradicalized enough is a prerequisite for being eligible for release, however long that might take. But setting this as a condition for allowing a child to move from temporary confinement to reintegration stage is very problematic. Even highly structured and long-running deradicalization programs still struggle with deciding what should be defined as acceptably deradicalized state, and keeping children in confinement indefinitely will only make the problem worse by eventually producing adult detainees, which will then have to be moved to standard incarceration facilities. Once this happens, it might undo all previous efforts at deradicalization.

A fixed confinement period, on the other hand, allows for the possibility of some of the children being moved on to reintegration phase while still harbouring extreme ideologies. Other children, while ostensibly not dangerous, will be deprived of professional attention and care a longer stay in an ICC would have provided. At the same time, a fixed period of

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[133] Verneij (2011), p. 182.
[134] S. V. Marsden, *Reintegrating Extremists: Deradicalisation and Desistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 80.

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confinement means some children will be detained longer than necessary, and certain lessons from rehabilitation of criminal offenders suggest that directing efforts that are too intense at only moderately radicalized individuals might actually result in their increased radicalization.[135] In any case, children for whom the set period of confinement will be just about right are likely to be outnumbered by those who could use either more or less of it.

In terms of both debates (individual versus collective treatment and fixed versus flexible duration), the issue of practicality will be impossible to avoid. There will be a lot of work to be done, with many children, in a short amount of time, and with limited resources. These considerations tend to favour the collective, set-time option.

Reinsertion and reintegration

The first decision that will have to be made is what microenvironment a returning child should be reinserted in. While the child's immediate family appears to be the obvious and preferred choice, in many cases situation might be more complex. On the one hand, reintegrating into one's own family might promote a sense of return to normalcy. Being close to a parent, especially to the mother, acts as a protection against post-traumatic stress reactions,[136] and positive parental support might help guard against recidivism.[137] On the other hand, this will not be possible or even recommendable in several scenarios. Some children will have no families to reintegrate them into: they may be orphans or their kin might be impossible to identify and/or locate. A number of children will have parents that are in need of deradicalization themselves, or are unfit to take care of their returning child for some other reason.[138] There will be cases in which it was the parents themselves who voluntarily

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[135] S. Mullins, "Rehabilitation of Islamist terrorists: Lessons from criminology", *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 3:3 (2010), p. 179.

[136] I. Derluyn, E. Broekaert, G. Schuyten and E. De Temmerman, "Post-traumatic stress in former Ugandan child soldiers", *The Lancet* 363 (2004), p. 862.

[137] M. A. Hakim and D. R. Mujahidah, "Social context, interpersonal network, and identity dynamics: A social psychological case study of terrorist recidivism", *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 0:0 (2018).

[138] There are notable articles (see Koehler, D., "Family Counselling, De-radicalization and Counter-Terrorism: The Danish and German programs in context" in Zeiger, S. and A. Aly (eds.), *Countering Violent Extremism: Developing an evidence-base for policy and practice* (Perth: Curtin University, 2015), pp. 129-136.; Koehler, D. and T. Ehrt, "Parents' Associations, Support Group Interventions and Countering Violent Extremism: An

gave the child up for training and indoctrination by the IS, in which case the risks of returning him to their care might outweigh potential benefits.[139] Finally, returning children to their original homes might also be problematic if they have troubling memories or associations linked to the physical location in question, as location of a traumatic experience was shown to be one of the strongest triggers for reliving that trauma in former child soldiers.[140] In these cases, relocation of the entire immediate family might be necessary for the well-being of the child.

If returning a child to his immediate family or close kin is unrecommendable, the government would ideally establish a support network of reliable foster families who would take care of returning children and guide them through the reintegration process. As this is likely to be almost impossible in practice due to the extent of such a program and resources required, especially in a post-conflict environment, an alternative solution might be the establishment of a government-affiliated social service that would monitor and evaluate the progress of each child and his family once they are reunited.[141] This 'least-worst' option is fraught with problems and ultimately relies on good-intentioned guesswork. There is no adequate precedent to help evaluate if it is better to place a radicalized child in a foster care of questionable quality, or return it to its radicalized immediate family and hope they will all deradicalize together. As with many other facets of this initiative, what can be done will probably outweigh what is best.

Whatever the point of reinsertion into normal life may ultimately be chosen, this will be where the real reintegration efforts begin. Almost all available data indicates that success of reintegration depends mostly on whether the child will be able to find his place in the community. Children of school age should be provided with the opportunity to go back to

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Important Step Forward in Combating Violent Radicalization", *International Annals of Criminology* 56 (2018), pp. 1-20.) analyzing the importance of family in the process of radicalization prevention and deradicalization, though focusing primarily on families supportive of the deradicalization process. The challenges of reuniting children with families where members might hold on to certain radical views themselves is a complex and sensitive subject that merits further research and is beyond the scope of this article.

[139] Horgan et al. (2016), p. 15.
[140] Boothby (2006), p. 250.
[141] Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies (2016), p. 16.

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classroom. Given what is known about the schooling system in the IS, even those who have finished school might need additional education to become productive members of society, either in the form of regular classes or vocational training. For those who can adapt to a learning environment, it will not only provide them with skills needed to be able to take care of themselves, but also with a structure that might ease the transition to an everyday system of functioning. National school curriculum can be expanded to include classes promoting civic virtues, thereby countering radical ideologies.[142]

Children too old or otherwise disinclined to resume formal schooling should be assisted in starting a life of their own. This can be done through a combination of approaches already proven quite effective with child soldiers and deradicalized terrorists, including help in obtaining and maintaining gainful employment, providing micro loans and informal education, as well as requisite life skills they might be lacking. Supportive measures should be balanced between helping the individual child and helping the community he is reintegrated into, thereby promoting long-term development and avoiding feelings of resentment.

Throughout the duration of the physical reintegration effort, continuous attention will have to be paid to psychological state of returning children. While most children would likely be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, experience shows that placing too much weight on this aspect of their functioning might prove ineffective and even counterproductive due to the stigma accompanying Western concepts of trauma.[143] Psychological assistance will therefore have to be administered more subtly and indirectly, preferably by adequately trained locals.

The importance of considering the cultural context during the reintegration process cannot be overstated.[144] What is often viewed as self-evident in the context of international laws might not be evident at all in communities where value systems are strongly rooted in

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[142] Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies (2016), p. 17.
[143] Russell and Gozdziak (2006), p. 62.
[144] T. B. Zack-Williams, "Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone and the Problems of Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration into Society: Some Lessons for Social Workers in War-torn Societies", *Social Work Education* 25:2 (2006), p. 121.

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traditional beliefs, including those concerning the rights and role of children in conflicts.[145] It should not be taken for granted that all children will immediately come to view their separation from the IS and return to 'normal' life as a positive thing. Getting the child to accept the community he returns to might be even more of a challenge than getting the community to accept the child.

Even if reinsertion appears to satisfy all relevant criteria, it should not be assumed everything is well. Data on returning child soldiers in Congo suggests that the initial welcoming reaction might not be a reliable indicator of long-term acceptance. Once the immediate excitement of a reunion subsided, more than half of the children in question felt rejected by parents and close family, and were treated in a way that made them feel excluded.[146] Should the child come to feel rejected by his community, there is an increased chance he will reconnect with members of his former social circle, seeking security provided by group identity.[147] If the child's friends are behind him in the process of deradicalization, they might slow down his progress; on the other hand, many former child soldiers found that spending time with their friends helped dealing with upsetting memories.[148] A planned program of pairing a child in the process of reintegration with a successfully reintegrated peer might prove to be a good compromise, satisfying the child's need for companionship with those who shared his experiences while guarding against re-radicalization.[149]

While there are recorded instances of children abandoning radical beliefs as soon as they were removed from conflict environments,[150] generally there are no reliable 'quick fixes' for reversing an intense conditioning process that has taken place over a number of years.[151] Any reintegration initiative must be designed in a way that will enable its sustainability for

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[145] McKnight (2010), p. 126.
[146] Tonheim (2014), p. 637.
[147] Mink (2015), p. 63.
[148] Betancourt et al. (2008), p. 580.
[149] Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies (2016), p. 18.; McKnight (2010), p. 134.
[150] Loyd (2017).
[151] J. Horgan, "Deradicalization or disengagement? A process in need of clarity and a counterterrorism initiative in need of evaluation", *Revista de Psicologia Social* 24:2 (2009), p. 297.

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prolonged periods.[152] Often, people best suited to play a crucial role in such efforts are local teachers or religious leaders,[153] as their natural presence in the community keeps them in continuous contact with the children and their families, without appearing invasive or threatening. Civil society organizations also hold significant potential for long-term reintegration assistance.[154]

Establishing a structured reintegration program still does not guarantee that intended participants will actually make use of it. UN estimates that approximately 30 per cent of child combatants never enter formal disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs, either because they are unaware of that option, feel more protected elsewhere, or are deliberately excluded.[155] The ignorance factor might be counteracted by a continuous, long-term public information campaign aimed at raising awareness of the existence of the program, as well as dispelling common misconceptions about it.[156] The solutions to other reasons for non-participation will have to be more context-specific.

Ultimately, reintegration represents "an exercise in renegotiation ... of values, norms and attitudes"[157] which have been distorted over years of exposure to a culture exalting violence and intolerance. It is a complex, multi-faceted and demanding process. Ideally, it should be people-centred, flexible, accountable and transparent, nationally and locally owned, integrated and well planned, as well as gender sensitive.[158] Even such initiatives might have no discernible impact: some studies have suggested that DDR programs seem not to have any effect at all, and that those excluded from them appear to reintegrate just as well as those that

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[152] Betancourt et al. (2008), p. 581.
[153] UNICEF (1997), pp. 6, 11.
[154] C. Sumpter, "Countering violent extremism in Indonesia: priorities, practice and the role of civil society", *Journal for Deradicalization* 11 (2017), p. 120.
[155] UN (2006), p. 20.
[156] UN (2014), p. 26.
[157] A. Özerdem and S. Podder, "Mapping child soldier reintegration outcomes: Exploring the linkages" in Özerdem, A. and S. Podder (eds.) *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 313.
[158] UN (2014), p. 4.

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took part.[159] This might demonstrate the inherent resilience of communities and their "capacity and desire to protect their children."[160]

Conclusion

Reintegration of children involved in terrorism, especially in territories controlled by the IS for prolonged periods, is likely to take place within a community that is struggling to restore a functioning level of normalcy. Sectarian divisions will take continuous toll on intercommunal relationships, and most resources and efforts will probably be directed at establishing and maintaining security in the narrowest sense of the word. Objective constraints will make it nearly impossible to execute any single facet of the reintegration program as well as it is theoretically possible. The situation might dictate that a large number of individuals, radicalized to a greater or lesser degree, be reintroduced into society first, and any efforts at structured deradicalization and reintegration will have to catch up as best they can. This might be very disheartening. However, good results can still be obtained by approaching the problem from all available angles and making the most out of every one of them. This is why it is important to study both child soldier reintegration and terrorist deradicalization and rehabilitation, as the intersection of those two approaches holds some key points to keep in mind when designing and implementing a program aimed at reintegrating child members of a terrorist group.

There are other potentially promising yet understudied avenues of approach to dealing with child members of terrorist groups not addressed in this paper. These include lessons learned from studying rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents, especially those associated with gangs, cults or other tight-knit groups with distinctive ideologies. There might also be valuable lessons from work done in specialized shelters with children who were victims of domestic violence. Technology might be leveraged in the service of reintegration much like it

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[159] Humphreys and Weinstein (2007), pp. 549, 533.
[160] UN (2006), p. 25.

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was used by the IS for purposes of radicalization.[161] No approach with the potential of adding bits of pertinent knowledge should be overlooked; this problem is a puzzle, and the best way forward is putting as many pieces in place as possible, while constantly keeping the overall picture in mind.

The pace at which the events in Iraq and Syria are unfolding, combined with the difficulty of obtaining timely and reliable information from the region, will create and maintain a gap between the academia and practice that will be difficult to close. While striving to maintain a realistic view, this paper, like a lot of work dealing with the subject, still unavoidably addresses what the author believes could be done based on what has been done elsewhere and at some prior time. Still, even at this point, one can observe both promising and concerning trends. On the one hand, Iraqi authorities have initiated the process of registering children born in IS-controlled territories.[162] At the same time, there are reports of torture, arbitrary imprisonment and forced confessions of children suspected to be involved with the IS in some capacity by the governments of Iraq and Kurdistan.[163] Conditions in one major camp in Syria, reported to hold at least 7,000 children under the age of 12, are dire in every respect and deteriorating still.[164] While there is no shortage of ideas on how to approach the challenges of reintegration, it would be overly optimistic to assume those ideas will be applied consistently and with enthusiasm. Ultimately, future developments in the region will result in invaluable lessons, but these will come at a very high price. As one article put it, "Today's victims are tomorrow's terrorists, and no one will view them as victims anymore."[165] This is

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[161] G. Vale, *Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory* (2018), ICSR, https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-Cubs-in-the-Lions%E2%80%99-Den-Indoctrination-and-Recruitment-of-Children-Within-Islamic-State-Territory.pdf accessed September 3 2019, p. 4.

[162] K. al-Taie, "Iraq registers children born in ISIS-controlled areas", Diyaruna, 9 July 2019, https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2019/07/09/feature-01 accessed September 8 2019.

[163] Human Rights Watch, "'Everyone Must Confess': Abuses against Children Suspected of ISIS Affiliation in Iraq", Human Rights Watch, 6 March 2019, https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/06/everyone-must-confess/abuses-against-children-suspected-isis-affiliation-iraq accessed September 8 2019.

[164] Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects' Families", Human Rights Watch, 23 July 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/23/syria-dire-conditions-isis-suspects-families accessed September 8 2019.

[165] Dorell (2016).

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the tragedy the international community and local authorities should try to mitigate as much as possible. There are no easy answers or painless solutions but, given enough thought and effort, there just might be some promising endings.

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ISSN: 2363-9849

Editor in Chief: Daniel Koehler

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