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The Children in Daesh:

'Future Flag Bearers' of the 'Caliphate'

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Executive Summary

The outreach and recruitment strategies of Daesh are unprecedented. Daesh adopts approaches and propagates messages that are nuanced, multi-layered, and context-pertinent. A central recruitment methodology targets the mobilization, indoctrination, and training of children as young as eight years old. These child soldiers, proudly branded as the “cubs of the caliphate,”¹ are exploited to advance the organization’s various sociopolitical objectives. They play a consequential role in Daesh’s ideological and military agenda, yet, to date, policy discussions on Daesh’s use of child soldiers appear to be limited. This dissonance between ground realities and limited understanding of Daesh’s recruitment strategies at the policy level paves the way for ineffective and even counterproductive solutions.

To fill this vacuum, The Carter Center (TCC) has undertaken an in-depth analysis of Daesh’s complex tactics for recruiting children and the multiple roles played by children in its mission. The research includes a thorough investigation of *Dabiq*, Daesh’s primary print magazines for non-Arabic speakers, examination of over 90 videos that project children as central elements in propaganda narratives, and additional secondary references. This report captures the main findings of the analysis. In addition, it highlights the legal ramifications associated with children’s

¹ *Dabiq*, issue 8, *Shari’a Alone Will Rule Africa*, pg. 20

involvement in armed conflicts. It concludes with a series of recommendations, including a consideration of the elements necessary for practical approach to reintegrate returning children.

Rationale for Recruiting Children

Daesh's elaborate infrastructure for systematic and institutionalized recruitment of children suggests that it sees immense tactical value in investing resources for the preparation of its younger generation. Based on the depiction of children in its propaganda videos and literature, this seems to be the case for a variety of reasons, as explained below.

Children are a vital propaganda tool in Daesh's recruitment phenomenon. They have been used as supporting objects to substantiate a whole range of its narratives. For instance, visuals of children suffering as a result of western aggression are overwhelmingly shown to evoke feelings of anger and disgust. This, in turn, increases the emotional appeal of one of Daesh's predominant narratives, i.e. the humiliation and disgrace inflicted upon the Muslim *Ummah* (community) by the "tyrant" West. Similarly, to advance its narrative of a utopian "Islamic state" that offers the only path to righteousness, Daesh portrays children as the more fortunate beneficiaries of those blessings, because, unlike adults, they have not been severely contaminated by the vices of the West. In fact, of the videos analyzed for this report, almost 80% had children being used as key props to further such recruitment narratives.

Admittedly, however, Daesh's employment of children goes far beyond simply using them as propaganda instruments. They are, in fact, regarded as an important asset for the growth and long-term survival of the "caliphate." Recruiting and training children in large numbers not only allows Daesh to build its physical strength, it creates a strong safeguard against potential leadership deficit. Moreover, with unparalleled rate of child enrollment, the organization's ultimate purpose is to engender, validate, and solidify an intergenerational culture of violence and religious extremism.² This is fundamental to Daesh's long-term pragmatism, as it aims to prepare ideology-blinded acolytes who could outlive any political-territorial loss.

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Children, whose suggestibility renders them vulnerable to ideological conditioning, are an ideal target. Having less developed ideological and moral foundations, children are seen as subjects who can easily be manipulated into accepting violent messages without question. Daesh's propaganda videos frequently provide glimpses of children internalizing its doctrinal positions. Children, in these videos, are asked to recite selective verses from the Quran that emphasize the notion of military Jihad.³ They are shown pledging "to hear and obey" the authority of the imam with "selflessness" and an unquestioning attitude.⁴ Relatedly, children are encouraged to speak against and send warnings to the Kuffar (infidels): "I will be the one who slaughters you, O Kuffar. I will

² The Guardian, 'Raising Tomorrow's Mujahideen': The Horrific World of ISIS Child Soldiers, 03/10/2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/10/horror-of-isis-child-soldiers-state-of-terror>

³ Al Raqqah Media Center, *Die in Your Rage*, 05/27/2016

⁴ Al Hayat Media Center, *Eid Greetings From the Land of the Khilafah*, 07/20/2014

be a mujahid, insh'Allah," proclaimed Abdullah, aged 12, in an interview video.⁵ This illustrates how Daesh methodically exploits the innocence and malleability of young children to shape them in its mold and, in turn, lay the foundation for its long-term survival.

Lastly, the visual symbolism of having an organized army of young soldiers serves as a crucial element in Daesh's psychological warfare. The organization's frequent references to its young combatants as "the cubs of the caliphate," "tomorrow's mujahedeen," "the next generation," and "the future flag bearers" are meant to send a strong message to its adversaries that it is well-equipped and has an unmatched capacity. This is manifestly clear in a recent propaganda video, which shows young soldiers vehemently training as the following words are being sung in French in the background: "Beware, we have what we need to defend ourselves, well-armed soldiers are ready to kill you."⁶ This trend of dedicating entire propaganda videos to emphasize Daesh's resolute preparedness seems to have noticeably, although unsurprisingly, escalated in the wake of its recent territory losses. 62% of the 25 children-centered videos in TCC's database collected since the beginning of 2016 have portrayal of preparedness, both ideological as well as military, as a predominant theme.

Methods for Recruitment

Daesh's methodology for recruitment is far from being a uniform and one-dimensional process of outreach and indoctrination. Employing a hyperlocal approach, it fashions messages that speak directly to the pressing concerns of its target audience and offers empowering alternatives. Hence, a comprehensive analysis of Daesh's recruitment strategies necessitates deconstructing its varying messages with respect to the nature and contextual specificities of potential recruits.

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With regard to local recruitment, the process starts at a very young age when children attend Daesh-administered schools. The new curriculum by Daesh effectively abolished previously-existing secular syllabi comprised of subjects such as "drawing, music, nationalism, history, philosophy, and social studies."⁷ Instead, now in the gender-segregated classrooms, children are required to focus on religious studies, which entails mastering the Arabic language and memorizing the Quran and Hadith. School education is also used as a tool to expunge any notion of citizenship or nation-state building from the consciousness of these young students. The only form of communal identity they are trained to adopt unquestioningly is one that centers around the concept of a transboundary Muslim *Ummah*. Moreover, the curriculum emphasizes the need for physical training, which includes fighting drills and instructions on how to operate weapons. By standardizing school curriculum along its theological and strategic priorities, Daesh aims to ensure consent and allegiance for its ideas and practices. Eventually, such an intensive process of

⁵ Al Hayat Media Center, *Race Towards Good*, 11/21/2014

⁶ Al Hayat Media Center, *Blood for Blood*, 06/04/2016

⁷ Quilliam Foundation, *The Children of the Islamic State*, 03/2016 <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-children-of-islamic-state.pdf>

indoctrination breeds among children a favorable opinion of the organization and its violent disposition, and even generates motivation for voluntary participation.



Daesh's child militants burning their native passports, protesting notions of western citizenship and nation-state

In addition to schools, Daesh uses various public fora as avenues for mobilization of support. Representatives of the organization frequently go to mosques, town squares, and markets to mingle with children and normalize their presence in the society. Propaganda videos show middle-aged Daesh soldiers overseeing sports activities, distributing food, giving away gifts and toys, and organizing other public events where children are encouraged to recite Quranic verses, sing nasheeds, and wave Daesh's flag.⁸ Such amicable interaction makes Daesh an attractive entity for children.

Desensitizing children to violence is another one of Daesh's tactics for recruitment. Children, as young as four and five years old, are forced to witness public executions and torture.⁹ Moreover, they are encouraged to incorporate forms of violence in their everyday play activities, such as beheading stuffed toys or pretending to be militants with toy weapons. Based on the analysis of the data reviewed for this report, 36% of the videos had children carrying and flaunting weapons, while 27% of the videos had children as firsthand witnesses of killings and bloodshed. Having internalized violence as a way of life through such exposure and through the ongoing wars, joining Daesh's rank as a militant becomes a preference for many children.



Young boys cover their ears and are seen visibly shaken and frightened as they are coerced to witness a public execution

⁸ See, for example, Al Khayr Media Center, *Holiday Cheer in the State of Unification*, 07/23/2015; Al Fallujah Media Center, *And Exhort One Another with the Truth*, 02/15/2015; Al Halab Media Center, *Living in the Shade of the Khilafah*, 01/24/2015

⁹ Al Halab Media Center, *Establishment of the Limit Upon the Corrupt in the Land*, 02/07/2015

Daesh also employs more direct methods of recruitment, including recruiting by leveraging family and community ties. To enlist combatants, Daesh offers families cash payments, which could be as much as \$100 a month.¹⁰ Daesh also uses its influence through preachers and imams to condition parents to register their children voluntarily in Daesh's training camps. While education, indoctrination, and social mobilization are integral to Daesh's strategy for child recruitment and retention, it does not shy away from using coercive measures to expand its army. Explicit coercive actions include abduction and lethal threats to children and their families,¹¹ whereas implicit coercion manifests itself in the form of societal pressure and fear of being labeled a traitor or an apostate if one refuses to join Daesh's mission.

Recruitment of foreign children poses different challenges. Daesh cannot draw from a similar repository of resources and tactics. It does not have, for example, similar sites of mobilization and indoctrination, such as schools and public avenues, directly available in foreign countries. For this reason, in addition to tapping into its widespread relational networks, Daesh calculatedly uses the internet as its primary site of recruitment. In so doing, it promulgates narratives that capitalize on the grievances of its target audience and, therefore, tend to have strong personal resonance.

In general, a majority of messages directed at foreign audiences aim to highlight the "hypocrisy of the West" and to expose its "ulterior motive" of destroying the Islamic *Ummah*. The ultimate purpose is to entrench an "us" vs. "them" divide in the consciousness of the target audience and, in turn, provoke them to migrate so as to fulfill their moral duty of defending the *Ummah*. However, Daesh acknowledges that dependent foreign children cannot be recruited in isolation to their families. Keeping this in mind, messages of sociopolitical disillusionment are enveloped with the narrative of collective family participation, which specifies obligations on and roles for each of the family members. This narrative is then supplemented with testimonies from families who have migrated to Daesh. For instance, in a video titled *Eid Greetings from the Caliphate*, a Finnish Muslim sent the following message to his fellow Muslims: "I am calling on all Muslims living in the West, America, and Europe, and everywhere else to come ...with your families [emphasis added] to the land of Khilafah. Alhamdulillah, we live in the shades of this religion."¹²

Another recruitment narrative asserts that Muslim children growing up in the West are being brainwashed at the hands of the morally bankrupt *munafiqin* (hypocrites and non-righteous Muslims). Western secular education, it is argued, teaches Muslim youth "to accept all manner of religious deviance and social perversion."¹³ These statements are juxtaposed with descriptions and images of children in Daesh, who are portrayed in a very positive light as individuals that have been blessed with the right path and are being raised under the "shade of the Quran and Sunnah."¹⁴ Recruitment propaganda shows children learning Arabic, undertaking Shari'a studies, and

¹⁰ The Guardian, 'Raising Tomorrow's Mujahideen': The Horrific World of ISIS Child Soldiers, 03/10/2015

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/10/horror-of-isis-child-soldiers-state-of-terror>

¹¹ Daily Mail, 500 children kidnapped by ISIS are being brainwashed into becoming suicide bombers or child soldiers, 06/02/2015 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3107010/500-children-kidnapped-ISIS-brainwashed-suicide-bombers-child-soldiers-Iraqi-official-reveals.html>

¹² Al Hayat Media Center, *Eid Greetings from the Land of the Khilafah*, 07/20/2014

¹³ *Dabiq*, issue 12, *Just Terror*, pg. 34

¹⁴ Al Hayat Media Center, *Race Towards Good*, 11/21/2014

participating in numerous social and extra-curricular activities. The objective behind such imagery is to convince parents that migrating to the “caliphate” is the only way to shield their children from all immoralities of the “atheist and liberal” West.

Predictably, religious references are actively used for further justification. The historical episode of *hijra* (migration) from Makkah to Medina is frequently invoked,¹⁵ and Muslim families are encouraged to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. References are also made to stories from Islamic tradition that show child participation as the Sunnah (practice) of the Prophet.¹⁶ Finally, out-of-context Quranic verses and hadith, oriented around the subject of *jihad* and martyrdom, are strategically woven into the narratives to confer upon them religious legitimacy.

For older children, who can be recruited independently of their parents, Daesh offers a path to discover personal and social identity. Most of these children happen to struggle with reconciling their religious and national identities. This is exacerbated when they lack access to appropriate resources to undertake an informed study of their religion. In such situations, they are easily lured by feelings of pride, dignity, and empowerment evoked by Daesh’s appeals.

This idea of a post-racial, post-citizenship society resonates rather strongly with young individuals who are marginalized and discriminated against in their native countries because of the color of their skin and/or their heritage.

Coupled with this sentiment is the invocation of nostalgia for a utopian state for the entire Muslim community, regardless of one’s race, nationality, or socioeconomic status. Daesh is particularly interested in promoting this notion of a transboundary, pan-Islamic state where Muslims with diverse backgrounds live and thrive in harmony. Propaganda videos

successfully convey this message by showing clips of “brotherhood” between youths and adults of various nationalities, including, but not limited to, Belgium, France, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, the Philippines, Tunisia, and the United States.¹⁷ This idea of a post-racial, post-citizenship society resonates rather strongly with young individuals who are marginalized and discriminated against in their native countries because of the color of their skin and/or their heritage.

Once recruited, children (both local and foreign) are required to go through rigorous ideological and military training. As part of the process, they are enrolled in Shari’a camps where religious knowledge is imparted. Those who are not well-versed in Arabic are required to master speaking, reading, and writing skills. This exercise is important as it aims to create a shared singular identity among all its members that centers around the language of Islam. Additionally, the focus of instruction is on instilling children with manipulated interpretations of fundamental theological concepts.¹⁸ The next step in the training process entails physical drills at military camps. This includes training by an expert in urban warfare, self-defense, and the use of weapons. After basic

¹⁵ *Dabiq*, issue 12, *Just Terror*, pg. 33-35

¹⁶ *Dabiq*, issue 8, *Shari’a Alone Will Rule Africa*, pg. 21

¹⁷ Al Hayat Media Center, *Eid Greetings from the Land of the Khilafah*, 07/20/2014

¹⁸ Al Ninawa, *Course Graduation at the Islamic State Training Camp*, 11/24/2014

drilling, the trainees are assigned to special units, allowing them to focus on specific skillsets.¹⁹ Successful completion of these training programs is regarded as a rite of passage for young boys who are seen as having finally transitioned into manhood. In sum, these camps are used to romanticize the notion of armed jihad, normalize violence and synonymize it with masculinity, and engrain a sense of loyalty and pride in fighting for the “caliphate.”

Role of Children in the ‘Caliphate:’ From Auxiliary Support to Full-fledged Militancy

Given their physical-mental strength and specific individual skills, children are assigned different tasks ranging from routine support activities to full-fledged participation as frontline combatants.

Support Functions: Children work as spies who are instructed to report on anyone whom they suspect violating the laws of the “*Khilafah*.”²⁰ Escapee accounts further reveal that Daesh sends its children to join “sleeper cells” in government-controlled areas to gather information on the government’s strategies and operations.²¹ Other support functions include guarding checkpoints, transferring weapons, and performing various administrative duties in Daesh-controlled hospitals, courts, schools, and other social facilities.

Spokeschildren: Several propaganda videos depict children, both girls and boys, participating in public rallies and religious lectures, where they present speeches and songs eulogizing Daesh’s ideas and practices.²² Capitalizing on the emotional appeal children are able to generate, Daesh uses its most charismatic and well-versed children as preachers and recruiters.²³ Moreover, these spokeschildren are used as examples to guilt-recruit older men. The idea is to parade the courage and audacity of these kids to make the point that if young children can so selflessly and valiantly devote their lives to the cause of Allah, what are adults so scared of?



Left: a young girl is reciting nasheeds in praise of Daesh; *Right:* a young boy is preaching at a local mosque

¹⁹ Al Raqqah, *Institute for the Cubs*, 02/22/2015

²⁰ Foreign Affairs, *Cubs of the Caliphate: The Children of ISIS*, 07/21/2015
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-07-21/cubs-caliphate>

²¹ Human Rights Watch, “Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die” Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria, 06/22/2014 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/22/maybe-we-live-and-maybe-we-die/recruitment-and-use-children-armed-groups-syria>, pg. 20-25

²² Al Khayr Media Center, *Holiday Cheer in the State of Unification*, 07/23/2015

²³ Al Furat Media Center, *I am leaving Upon You a Clear Path*, 08/13/2016

Participants in Violence: Conscription of children by armed groups to use in wars is not a new phenomenon in itself. Conventionally, however, the use of children has been limited to fulfill supplementary war assignments or to fill the ranks of adult militants.²⁴ Daesh, on the other hand, regularly deploys children as main actors alongside their adult counterparts for intensely violent operations. In its propaganda media, Daesh proudly exhibits its children as shooters, executioners, suicide bombers, and soldiers on the battlefield.²⁵ Children are also trained as young officers responsible for punishing and torturing the “caliphate’s” prisoners and dissidents.



Child militants carrying out execution of Daesh’s enemies

Gendered-based roles: It is commonly believed that while young boys are trained to engage in military duties, young girls are simply relegated to their homes and are prepared to become obedient wives and mothers. This, however, is only partially true. A more nuanced and gender-conscious approach to understanding women and girls in Daesh reveals that their role is more complex than what appears on the surface. For example, just like young boys, girls are also brainwashed to carry out suicide attacks. A teacher from one of the Daesh-administered schools confessed that girls as young as 10 years old are being indoctrinated with violent ideology and trained to carry out explosive attacks.²⁶ Relatedly, young western girls, who do not migrate to Daesh’s territories, are encouraged to carry out solo attacks in their home countries.²⁷ Therefore, in order to find viable countermeasures, it is important that recruitment of children by Daesh is observed and analyzed through a gender-conscious lens.

Legal Ramifications and the Way Forward:

Children who return from armed conflicts confront a multitude of challenges, which include being able to obtain justice and reintegrate successfully into the mainstream society. Protracted exposure to brutal aggression and violence has a serious possibility of leaving lasting physical and emotional scars on the victims. Unlike adult ex-fighters who have seen an alternative way of life, child

²⁴ CNN, *How ISIS Recruits Children, Then Kills Them*, 02/22/2016 <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/19/middleeast/isis-child-soldiers/index.html>

²⁵ See, for example, Al Raqqa Media Center, *The Crumbling Nations*, 08/28/2016; Al Hayat Media Center, *Blood for Blood*, 06/04/2016; Al Hayat Media Center, *Uncovering an Enemy Within*, 01/13/2015

²⁶ Channel 4 News, *ISIS' children: soldiers trained to kill and die*, 01/10/2015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVxZfP1fC_I

²⁷ The New York Times, *Women’s Emergence as Terrorists in France Points to Shift in ISIS Gender Roles*, 10/01/2016 http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/womens-emergence-as-terrorists-in-france-points-to-shift-in-isis-gender-roles.html?_r=0

militants have been raised almost purely on the tenets of warfare and have zero to minimal perception of a world devoid of violence. This is especially true, as shown above, in the case of Daesh whose fundamental strategy is to indoctrinate systematically its younger generation to ensure the organization’s ideological survival. It is therefore extremely crucial to have carefully-planned programs that ensure proper recourse to justice and sensitive rehabilitation initiatives that respond to specific needs of the victims.

From a legal point of view, the use of children under the age of 18 is a violation of the United Nation’s Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts (2000)²⁸ and the Paris Principles (2007)²⁹. In addition, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court categorically states that “conscripting or enlisting children...into the national armed forces or using them to participate actively in hostilities” amounts to war crime.³⁰ It is the responsibility of the governments to ensure that those who abuse, manipulate, and recruit child soldiers are prosecuted and tried in a court of law.³¹ At the same time, for child soldiers who are implicated in criminal responsibility, it is vital that thorough investigation is undertaken to determine the circumstances under which the criminal acts were committed. Additionally, for fair proceedings, established international practice, as enumerated in Articles 3.6 through 3.10 of the Paris Commitments and Principles, must be followed.³²

In addition to ensuring the undertaking of legal proceedings, efforts should be made on behalf of the governments to implement meticulously-designed rehabilitation programs that respond to localized needs. Relevant governments must provide adequate legal services to returning Daesh child soldiers and their families. These efforts should draw on partnerships that engage government organizations and support groups, local community and religious leaders, and educational institutions and vocational training centers. Finally, it is critical to acknowledge and address the stigma associated with former members of violent extremist groups, which is of particular significance in the case of children. This is because placing them in hostile environments where they feel alienated and defenseless can substantially increase the risk of terrorist recidivism. Therefore, it is extremely important to devise collaborative approaches to deal with stigma in the most appropriate and constructive manner.

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²⁸ Office of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts*, 05/20/2000 <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/mandate/opac/>

²⁹ UNICEF, *The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, 02/2007 <https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf>

³⁰ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 07/01/2002 <http://legal.un.org/icc/index.html>

³¹ Article 3.5, *The Paris Principles*, <https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf>

³² Articles 3.6 to 3.10, *The Paris Principles*, <https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf>