

Children in Terrorism: Recruitment, Participation, and Prevention

A Whitepaper on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism.

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Child soldiers is not a new phenomenon, especially in countries struck by war and global terror organizations (GTO). Like all child soldiers involved with armed groups, children who are recruited into terrorist organizations are exposed to extreme forms of violence.

Literature and intelligence indicate that different groups have used women and children in different roles in their violent extremists' quests. The case of 19yr old Shamima Begum, who ran away from her home in London when she was 15yrs to join ISIS in Syria and was discovered, heavily pregnant, in an internally displaced persons camp early 2019, refocused attention on the issue of children who join terrorist organizations.

Terrorist groups have as such turned to use children in different capacities. They may bear arms and participate directly in hostilities, act as porters or spies, and be subjected to forms of sexual and gender-based violence such as sexual slavery and forced marriages.

Some use them directly as active militants in the frontline while others use children in supports roles like hospitality, entertainment, and self-defense roles within the outfits. Children have been known to plant explosive devices, act as human shields for the group, conduct localized assassinations and suicide attacks, and gather intelligence. In other cases, they provide domestic services such as cooking and keeping the camps clean and some girls were also forced into sexual servitude and forced early marriages that act as morale boosters for the fighters on the frontline.

Coercion is the major avenue employed by jihadists to conscript children into the GTOs and could appear in several forms. Some children are outrightly kidnapped and forced to fight, some are manipulated on religious grounds where they are duped to believe that the Muslims who are weak are being killed off and jihadism is the only savior. In other cases, they join as a consequence of the war between the terrorists and government which tends to leave their families unprotected leaving them with no option. Additionally, intimidation and out-and-out threats have prompted kids to join a GTO; often kids are threatened to fight by explicit threats such as "kill or we kill someone you love".

Reasons Why Terrorist Groups Use and Recruit Children

- Children are increasingly being used as currency both directly and indirectly where they have become a rich source of financing as they attract ransom payoff by both state and non-state actors. For instance, intelligence has indicated that Boko Haram received a substantial amount to release the Dapchi and Chibok schoolgirls.
- Children are projected to live longer than offensive against the terror organization, and as such, they are used to ensure the survival of the terror organization. It is especially true seeing as the lives of children are protected and they are often not killed by government troops in COIN operations.
- Children are vulnerable and gullible and as such can be indoctrinated easily as they have not yet formed their own opinions. The malleability of children allows for the molding of a very radical crop of terrorists who find it difficult to unlearn the extreme ideology and in turn expand the survivability of a terror outfit.
- War creates conditions for the kids to not require much indoctrination as they are firsthand victims and witnesses of the repercussions. Thus, the children having been exposed to violence at a young age, seeing their families torn apart are more likely to join the terror organizations to either rectify the situation or for a roof over their head, food, and semblance of stability.
- Oftentimes, terror groups kidnap and recruit children to use as human shields as security forces cannot shoot and or mount an attack with children present. This combat tactic has been used by the groups to advance into areas as well as retreat

when CT operations corner them. The children are sacrificed and at times, are used as propaganda material in the unfortunate event that the kids are collateral damage.

- The naivety and innocence of kids have been exploited by terror organizations where the kids are used as spooks. They use the kids as suicide bombers or spies as they are less suspicious and can blend well with the target as well as access places and people that adults cannot.
- Children are easily manipulated and can easily ape the actions of older terrorists making them more effective than training older individuals.
- Children seeking religious direction find the al Shabaab doctrines appealing especially through the propaganda on radio, flyers, and social media

Radicalization Prevention Measures, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Terrorists

Because of the innate vulnerability of children, international law dictates that irrespective of the roles the children have performed in the GTOs, they should above all be recognized as victims. This allows for the protection and rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Rehabilitation of children albeit delicate is also easier for the same reason that radicalization is easier, they are malleable and can unlearn faster than adults can. Rehabilitation is multi-faceted and can spread from treating already affected victims to erecting legal, cultural, and socio-economical frameworks that preempt and stop the recruitment and radicalization of innocent children altogether.

Therefore, enhancing the protection of children's rights, addressing young people and children's vulnerabilities while investing in education and social integration remains the most effective weapons to prevent and counter violent extremism. Governments and policymakers ought to address the growing phenomenon that GTO using to recruit, abduct, rape, subject children to forced marriage, sexual slavery, human shields for violent terrorists as well as commit suicide attacks.

Counter-radicalization

Defined by the UN as a package of social, political, legal and educational, and economic programs specifically designed to deter disaffected individuals from crossing the line and becoming terrorists. Counter-radicalization should target children in terrorist-prone regions to ensure that they are not lured to join the GTO and are also equipped to deal with attempts of recruitment.

De-Radicalization

It is also defined by the UN as programs that are directed against individuals who have become radical with the aim of re-integrating them into society or at least dissuading them from violence. It will ensure that radicalized children are taken care of in the community and do not rejoin the GTO later or as adults.

Security enhancement

The government ought to offer security at schools and villages where the GTOs are likely to recruit from which will ensure that the kids cannot be kidnapped or forced into terror activities. This is especially true in areas where the groups kidnap children from school like in Nigeria or threaten villagers and teachers with death if they fail to submit a certain number of children to the organization as is the case in Somalia.

Religious Measures

Jihadism has been thickly intertwined with religion and as such, it is only fair that religion and religious matters be at the forefront in deradicalization as well as in prevention. Religious leaders ought to step up to offer children a firm foundation that cannot be swayed by extreme propaganda views advanced by the GTOs. Children at a younger age need the right guidance and role models to ensure they do not stray. Madrassas should be equipped with a curriculum that leaves no room for the creeping of extreme ideologies that set the groundwork for easy radicalization. The community at large should be swift in creating acceptable parameters of religious ideologies as well as drive out radically-inclined teachers and religious guides.

Children protection

Governments, ought to step up their efforts in protecting children from exposure to violence and other hardships like war, drought, and famine that make them gullible and vulnerable sending them right into the hands of the GTO. It is paramount that children not be considered as small adults and not pay for the mistakes of the adults in their lives and they should be a top priority in times of crisis. When children are protected by the government from hardships and violent scenarios, they are not put in the unfortunate

position of joining a radical movement either to survive, protect their families or be the last line of defense in crises.

Education

It is most important that the government set up prerequisites of free and mandatory education for all children as it will be a crucial step in ensuring that children's knowledge consumption is monitored and controlled in line with counter-radicalization strategies. Civic education for parents and guardians is important to ensure that they are aware of the importance of children being protected and educated and the precedence of education, protection, and care of children in avoiding radicalization of a generation.

It is important to note that in order to successfully deradicalize children and prevent recidivism, children have to be separated from the families and communities that voluntarily offered them up to the terror organization which does not follow standard practice regarding the best interest of the child. The best interest of a child is dictated by a positive and supportive family setting that allows the child to thrive, and blossom into their own person who is a productive member of the community at large. However, in the war against terrorism; the reintegration of former child soldiers is an uphill battle that has no clear winners as the victims have already lost their innocence and have a high chance of going back to familiar habits which for most of the kids is the violence.