

## ISIS and Its Child Soldiers: When Victims Become Perpetrators

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### Abstract

As their appeal to the older generation weans and as recruiting becomes cumbersome due to tighter controls on the Turkish border, the Islamic State turns to children, who they believe are an impressionable and easy target. One of the six grave violations against children, the use of child soldiers is not an unfamiliar concept to the world community<sup>1</sup>. The World War, Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Uganda and now the Islamic State, are all examples of how children are gradually but definitively playing an important role in war and ideological warfare. What sets the Islamic State apart is their unique treatment of child soldiers; a closer look reveals an ideological and psychological propaganda aimed at creating a generation of Mujahideen, Islamic loyalists - 'Cubs of the Caliphate.' Since the start of 2015, Human Rights Watchdogs have approximated that over 400 children have joined the ranks of the Islamic State, finding part in the organization, either in the capacity of cooks, messengers or as suicide bombers, in combat or even as sex slaves. With a rising online social media presence and propaganda video streams, the extremist group is starting an upheaval and gradual takeover, building the perfect soldier. With a curriculum incorporating the Sharia and physical military training in boot camps, the Islamic State is in a systematic and organized manner leaving behind a legacy; a lost generation of brainwashed fighters fed on an appetite of violence and blind loyalty, those who know of no other reality than the one the Islamic State propagates.

What this paper seeks to address is the issue of child soldiers in the context of a new training method that uses psychological warfare and human conditioning. Potentially creating blind armies fed on extremist propaganda and blind hate, immune to feelings of empathy and independent thought. For, if successful, this could be the start of a multigenerational problem.

**KEYWORDS**-Child soldiers, Human Rights, Islamic State, Armies

### START OF A STORY

It is like an art of war from Hell. As the Islamic State's appeal to the older generation fails and recruiting soldiers becomes difficult, the Islamic State turns to children to start a new army of child soldiers.

Child soldiers is a term that is commonly used today for children below the age of eighteen who have been recruited as spies, fighters, cooks or porters and it's not an unfamiliar concept to the world community . During the two World Wars, and in war-torn Cambodia, Sierra Leone, and Uganda, children were used to play a definitive role

<sup>1</sup>As defined by the United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, for Children and Armed Conflict

in war and ideological warfare. However, what sets the Islamic State apart is their unique treatment of child soldiers, a closer look revealing an ideological and psychological propaganda programmed at creating a generation of Mujahideen, Islamic loyalists - 'Cubs of the Caliphate.'

According to a report by Human Right Watchdogs, since the start of 2015, over 400 children have joined the ranks of the Islamic State, finding part in the organization in the capacity of cooks, messengers or as suicide bombers, in combat or even as sex slaves. With a rising online social media presence and propaganda video streams, the extremist group is ideologically driven towards starting an upheaval and gradual takeover, towards producing the perfect soldier. With a curriculum incorporating the Sharia and physical military training in boot camps, the ISIS, in a systematic and organized manner, has delivered almost a generation of child soldiers fed on an appetite of violence and blind loyalty, who know of no other reality except the one the Islamic State propagates.

Until recently child soldiers were a by-product of war, but now play as instruments of war. What this paper seeks to address is this issue of child soldiers in the context of a new training method that uses psychological warfare and the aftershock that it leaves, potentially creating blind armies fed on extremist propaganda and blind hate, immune to feelings of empathy and independent thought. This could be the start of a multigenerational problem.

During the 2007 surge in Iraq, the world was witness to the defeat of the Al- Qaeda<sup>2</sup> by the US troops and allied Sunni militias. However what the world did not know at the time was that they only wounded the militant Islamist organization that only fueled blind hatred and religious fundamentalism. It was at this time that from within the ranks of the Al- Qaeda and other militant groups in and around Syria and Iraq, the group once known as the Al- Qaeda rebranded itself as the 'Islamic State of Iraq' and the 'Levant'. Two years on, the ISIS is a force to be reckoned with, not only for the immense influence it holds over Islamic extremists groups across the world but also at the rate at which their influence has grown. From a mere minor rebel troop, they have metamorphosed into what can only be seen as one of the most dangerous and successful terror extremist organization ever formed. With its announcement of the formation of its own Caliphate<sup>3</sup>, the ISIS, now the Islamic State<sup>4</sup>, aspires to building a single, global Islamic state.

ISIS's bid to establish the new Caliphate- a fully functioning Muslim community - world over is making its presence felt across the globe. It hasn't just stopped at the recruitment of men and women but it is engulfing whole families into what it calls 'the shade of the caliphate.' It is from within these families come the children of the Islamic State: the Cubs of the Caliphate.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>In the context of the Iraq War, the surge refers to United States President George W. Bush's 2007 increase in the number of American troops in order to provide security to Baghdad and Al Anbar Province.

<sup>3</sup>A caliphate refers to a form of Islamic Government headed by a Caliph, a person seen as the political and religious successor of Prophet Muhammad and leader of the Muslim community.

<sup>4</sup>The term 'Islamic State' and ISIS are interchangeable used in this paper and world over.

<sup>5</sup>Commonly used to refer to ISIS's child soldiers.

*A young boy drags around a kneeling handcuffed soldier. The soldier is a Syrian army captain. Clad in a camouflaging outfit and brandishing a knife, the boy jerks the man's head back by his hair and points a blade to his throat. Moments later we see the boy standing with the captain's severed head, a triumphant smirk on his face. This is a real story, a scene out of a propaganda film by the ISIS, filmed outside the Syrian city of Palmyra and it marks the first time the extremist group has publicized a child soldier carrying out a decapitation. Propaganda films and extensive media presence are an important aspect in understanding where the ISIS derives its strength in soldiers and followers. It extensively produces propaganda films to not only help train the child soldiers in religious extremist values but also to showcase the might and ferocity of its soldiers to the world.*<sup>6</sup>

It was in early December 2014 that the world was given a glimpse of what it meant to be living under the Islamic State. For the first time, the people, who had been fed on various twitter handles and high quality videos mirroring Hollywood previews, were privy to the kind of world that the ISIS planned to create for everyone. And amidst all this ominous scenarios came the alarming footages of more and more children, even babies, posing as soldiers with toy guns and yelling out, 'Allah Hu Akbar'<sup>7</sup>. The most disturbing were scenes of mothers and fathers proudly celebrating their children's fight as Mujahideens<sup>8</sup>. These images and videos are far from rare. ISIS members have been routinely posting images of children posing with severed human heads and patrolling and playing around streets, dismembered bodies splayed carelessly along the sidewalks.

The presence of child soldiers is not an entirely new thing, but it is now threatening to become something of a global phenomenon. This diabolic practice that began at the time of the First World War<sup>9</sup> has now spread like an infectious disease in the last 15 years to almost every region of the world. Increasingly, thousands of child soldiers are being used in combat and various other capacities, in Cambodia, Uganda and most recently Sierra Leone; the ISIS's child soldiers is only a new avatar of the old child soldier.

According to many experts and organizations such as the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, ISIS's treatment of child soldiers is quite different compared to the way child soldiers were used previously in conflict situations across the world. Recruitment of child soldiers in itself breaks a number of human right laws and countries and governments in the past have tried to bury this horrifying part of their past by making the presence of child soldiers statistically invisible, by way of downplaying or even denying their role in conflict situations. The ISIS on the other hand has been brazenly open and vocal about its use of child soldiers, to fulfill its vision, to 'Raise Tomorrow's Mujahideen.'

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<sup>6</sup>Lizzie Dearden, *Isis Video Shows Young Boy Beheading Syrian Soldier Near Ancient City of Palmyra*, THE INDEPENDENT (July. 17, 2015), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-video-shows-young-boy-beheading-syrian-soldier-near-ancient-city-of-palmyra-10397354.html>

<sup>7</sup>Allah Hu Akbar is an Islamic phrase called Takbir in Arabic, meaning God (Allah) is greatest/greater

<sup>8</sup>The modern term Mujahideen is used to refer radical Muslim guerilla type military outfits of those who commit Jihad, i.e., religious duty of all Muslims to maintain Religion.

<sup>9</sup>Though in a small capacity, children often enlisted as soldiers to avoid the dreary lives they had working in the British Industry.

A fundamental difference lies in the style of the indoctrination of children. Generally ISIS's child soldiers are not abducted from their families or drugged to make them more submissive, unlike the case in Sierra Leone and other wars. Rather, a majority of these children come from within the Islamic State. While some parents quite willingly send their children to train in military boot camps, there are those who follow the legacy left behind by their martyred father and then the others who seek fame and glory under the aegis of the Caliphate. Only a small percentage of children who are kidnapped are forcefully conscripted as child soldiers. The abandoned Yazidi boys<sup>10</sup>, housed in ISIS controlled orphanages, become child soldiers if only to survive.

It is well known today that the pedagogy of the extremist group is rooted in Islamic fundamentalism that is geared towards creating a new form of man, and a generation of militants who would come close to being the quintessential 'perfect soldier.' ISIS sets its views way beyond the battlefield, with an unwavering commitment to creating its army of children, a new generation of child militants who would be raised as the 'Cubs of the Caliphate'. They are creating groundwork for a new breed of child soldiers that are methodically and calculatedly being bred for the specific purpose of war.

### **ISIS'S GOAL AND METHOD**

ISIS's indoctrination of children is deeply embedded in its education system. The indoctrination and eventual transformation of its children starts at school. It strictly controls every school that comes under its conquered territory and has modified the curriculum to suit its radical needs, starting with Raqqa, the ISIS's capital city. History, art, science, sports and philosophy are all seen as incompatible with Islam and find no place in the education curriculum.

The curriculum is divided into two segments: a) Children under the age of fifteen are sent to a Sharia camp<sup>11</sup>, where they learn about their creed and religion, and become well versed in the Sharia and b) Where those over the age of sixteen are sent out to train in military camps and often even participate in military operations. They complete lessons on the Qur'an<sup>12</sup> and the Arabic language and then move onto physical and military training. A recent report by the SOHR states that regional headquarters of the 'Cubs of Caliphate' have opened up in several ISIS held Syrian cities.

These schools hope to inculcate not only prime values of Islam into the young minds, but also the traditional norms of good Islamic behavior. It is for this very reason that while young boys are groomed as good warriors, young girls are groomed for being the ideal wife and help in the advancement of the IS by way of raising a generation of god-fearing and faithful mujahideens.

There is a growing fear in the world today that ISIS's child soldiers are not what they seem, since it is difficult to assess the extent to which their minds are programmed and their probable propensities towards violence. In the last millennium, in conflicts

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<sup>10</sup>The Yazidis are a small community of people who live in the north of Iraq. Most recently they are being ruthlessly persecuted for not converting as according to the ISIS ideology of Islam.

<sup>11</sup>Sharia or the Sharia Law is the Islamic legal system derived from the religious precepts of Islam the Quran and the Hadith.

<sup>12</sup>The Qur'an is the central religious text of Islam, which Muslims believe to be a revelation from God.

across the world young soldiers were often given amphetamines, drugs and tranquilizers to dull their sensitivity to pain and make them courageous fighters. However ISIS goes a step further and is conditioning children to perpetual hostility, which in turn is creating a culture of violence not known to the world yet.

What ISIS follows is not the orthodox form of military training we get to see in other parts of the world. They start disciplining children from an early age in such a way that they know no other reality other than the society they live in, which is radical and regressive. The idea behind this is that children are more obedient and do not question orders. This has its basis in the psychological understanding that children are at a moldable age and are much easier to condition and brainwash. They can shape these children into perfect, deadly soldiers, who hold fervently on to their belief in supremacy and violence and can be turned into a lethal weapon to easily replace ISIS's fallen soldiers. The war which this starts is hard to end quickly for the child soldiers are born in a world where a small percentage of people hold fervently to their beliefs of violence and supremacy having no idea of the possibility of living differently, of living democratically in mutual cooperation, or of living in harmony and peace with people of other faiths.

These children are fed on an appetite of violence and radical teachings. They are trained in specialized boot camps, in warfare, firearms and are often deliberately brutalized in order to harden them into ruthless soldiers. They are subjected to videos of executions and war, a recurring process that desensitizes them to pain and violence that dull their ability to process or possess human emotions in their formative years. To display prowess, the ISIS showcase the training that these child soldiers undergo: military drills, firing weapons and reciting scriptures from the Quran, all part of 8-10 hours of daily training. At times, child soldiers are made to carry out public executions of anyone who is seen as an infidel, an enemy of the state. To make them efficient killers with no qualms, the children are given dolls with blonde hair and blue eyes, to practice beheading as part of their training.

After their training they are stationed off in different regions, where they may be used as human shields, or snipers, or even as blood donors. If a majority chooses to fight in the frontlines, a small-dedicated minority goes in as suicide bombers. Given their schooling in indoctrination-- giving up your life for the Caliphate is seen as the ultimate redemption—and peer pressure, it is not surprising when, say, a ten-year-old boy turns into a suicide bomber.

ISIS's strategy is simple, pragmatic yet diabolic. This new generation of child soldiers shall forward their legacy; ensure long-term loyalty to ISIS's ultra-hardline doctrine, and a cadre of fighters who shall see violence as a way of life. Costs of bringing up and maintenance of child soldiers are very cheap. They don't need to be paid much. They have an underdeveloped sense of danger and are easily expendable as scouts or decoys, or in the line of fire. The availability of small arms too helps, since they can be used without trouble or difficulty.

## **THE IDEA OF ONE ISLAM, ONE WORLD**

Child soldiers despite their use in war, play a larger role. The ISIS has been vocal about its vision of an Islamic World, and has long tried to appear formidable, portraying themselves as a conventional army and State, instead of a jihadist terrorist group. The control and monopoly of the ISIS as an organization over its members can

be seen to be exceedingly similar to Pol Pot's experiment in creating a utopia. The idea was to create an entirely new society that was uncontaminated. And as children were the purest and least corrupted, they were educated according to the ideology of a utopian society, something similar to what the ISIS propagates today. In the present condition, the presence of vast territories under the ISIS, entire families in allegiance to the State and an education system to bolster their ideology, all add up establishing its identity as a fully functioning State. This will only get bigger as the ISIS begins to take over and command larger swathes of areas, the child soldiers being the next in command.

## **RESPONSE TO FUNDAMENTALISM**

ISIS's child soldiers are not invincible. From the time of their conscription in the ISIS to the time they become full-fledged militants, these children are routinely maimed or killed. In Jan 2015, a battalion of 140 soldiers on the battlefield of Kobani lost 6 child soldiers and the SOHR<sup>13</sup> has since estimated that over 52 child soldiers have been killed so far, including suicide bombers. There are as many as 300,000 active child soldiers in conflicts worldwide but of all these, the ones employed by the ISIS pose a great danger at a fundamental level. Violence isn't inherent in any religion or race and a son does not need to follow the father. But in the orthodox Islamic State, violence is inherited and once born into a family that believes in aggressive chauvinism and martyrdom, the only way out, it seems, is death.

ISIS is no partisan, neither a follower nor a supporter of religious tolerance. Rather, they prosecute people across different sects and ethnicities, people who do not convert and adhere to their doctrine. ISIS's use of child soldiers is one effective way to forward and spread this Islamic agenda in the future. The military attempts made by the US led coalition to neutralize ISIS haven't helped to fight the disease. Rather it has only led to greater resistance and ISIS has gotten more desperate to fill the fallen ranks with child soldiers.

There is a growing worry in the world today as to the way this terrible malady needs to be addressed. Human rights advocates, psychologists and aid workers have no clear program or method to tackle this serious issue. They have admitted that the programs that had previously been used to rehabilitate child soldiers across the world are woefully inadequate to treat child soldiers under the ISIS. There are indeed many who believe that an entire generation of children might already been lost.

## **THE DILEMMA**

The trouble in rehabilitation arises due to the difference in situations. The fundamental issue here is whether to see these children as victims or perpetrators of war. And then the other important issue is with regard to the rehabilitation of these children. During conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leon, children were often abducted and forced to go to war for political causes. When it came to successful rehabilitation, the main concern had been child's return to its family and community.

ISIS's child soldiers happened because of their families and community they were born into. In other words, a great many of them come from families whose members

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<sup>13</sup>Syrian Observation For Human Rights

are themselves sympathizers or full-fledged members of the Islamic State, who, without any guilt or qualm, send their children to become Mujahideens and follow the honor of fighting. This is why rehabilitation becomes increasingly difficult, for reconnecting with the family becomes impossible when religious and moral values are in conflict. One another issue deals with the motivations of violence, while previously children in conflict were participants in a political conflict, ISIS's war is fought on hardline religious extremist grounds which makes it that much more difficult. To bring back children to the previous or pre-indoctrination state is what is generally expected from rehabilitation but in the case ISIS's child soldiers, there is no previous state devoid of hate and religious extremism that they can go back to. Leadership decapitation is also lower as every year they take in even younger recruits who adapt to discipline but also because in an organization like the ISIS, the leadership is often dynastical with the son taking after the son.

A case study of 300 Uganda child soldiers found that almost one third of those were diagnosed with (PTSD)<sup>14</sup> post-traumatic stress disorders. Most had, what was called, a 'moral injury,' they were mentally damaged after being executors of injury and violence or having failed to prevent it, and after being exposed to destruction death around them. Apart from depression and PTSD, signs resembling social boycott judging the atrocities they had committed also could be identified. However ISIS's child soldiers may not be a generation that would fall prey to these psychological traits in the aftermath of war or in rehabilitation. It is unfortunate that these child soldiers having been so deeply and radically indoctrinated and traumatized so much so that they are no longer susceptible to anything but their propagandized teaching. They are part of a generation that was born from the womb of violence, so to say. They are children of violence who cannot choose peace, because continuous extremist education and training has made them socially and psychologically almost beyond repair. And, it seems, desperately, like a dying man clutching at a straw, their inner self may cling to the identity, power and meaning to life deeply etched in their minds by the ISIS. But it needn't be so hopeless or pessimistic, for there certainly can be traces of sanity and innocence in them that can be recovered and nurtured.

The legal framework with regard to child soldiers is extremely convoluted and use of child soldiers is seen as one of the six grave violations against children. Under International Human Law<sup>15</sup>, are declared as the minimum age for recruitment and participation in a war. It also states that conscripting anyone under the age of 15, under the International Humanitarian Law would be seen as a war crime. Most governments since have kept the minimum age of conscription to eighteen. However, in 2000, in the case of Sierra Leone and Colombia, in the middle of a conflict, after the act of increasing the conscription age to over the age of eighteen, 600 children were discharged. But, unfortunately, despite armed groups also pledging to end the use of child soldiers, recruitment and use of children in the military capacity continues. With the ISIS the concept of underage terrorists and legal implications kept aside, are just one half of the story of a larger legal framework issue. All things considered, child soldier is a grave issue that needs all our attention to resolve it, for it

<sup>14</sup>A mental health condition, that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.

<sup>15</sup>As defined by the United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, for Children and Armed Conflict.

challenges our ethical values, poses a tremendous moral dilemma, for, child terrorists are not only victims of a heinous crime but at the same time they are also its perpetrators often using lethal force and weapons.

## **CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

At the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone, for the first time, international humanitarian law was applied to the issue of child soldiers. A trial court put to the table, the questions of recruitment and whether in respect to the crimes carried out by the child soldiers, they would be treated as war criminals. The special court then held that while principal leaders would be tried under a broad spectrum for illegal recruitment and forced conscription of children, the criminal culpability of child with respect to their crimes was one of intense debate. But across brutalized Sierra Leone grew a consensus that unless some children were put on trial, justice could not be served. The final agreement gave the court jurisdiction to try those between the ages of 15 to 17 years of age, but no jurisdiction over the younger children.

The child soldier crisis is a modern one and it has to be resolved with sensitivity and compassion. The issue is not so much about the number of children involved in war but that despite legal sanctions, children still account for a part of these conflict zones. Strong legal sanctions despite being essential are not absolute in ending child soldiering. Especially in the case of the ISIS, the usual methods long employed by countries across the world are quite inadequate. The 'name and shame policy,' which intended to call out violators for their use of child soldiers, fails in an extremist regime that publically announces the might of its army of young mujahideen. Rehabilitation of child soldiers poses a great problem when the children cannot return to their families whose members are still not out of the jungle of fundamentalism. So, the trickiest problem with ISIS's child soldiers in particular is one of disarmament and reintegration. Indeed, how do we disarm, demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers into a family or society where in actuality family structures have dissolved and a radical ideology been inculcated, generations trained for jihad, a holy war. Such a generation has not known a world of peace and has no skills for peacetime, for they are accustomed to getting their way through violence.

A recent report by UNICEF<sup>16</sup> accurately stated that the question of child soldiers was a problem created by adults, to be eradicated by the adults. However, there is a growing skepticism today that let alone the reintegration of these child soldiers, the world isn't even remotely ready for the challenge of de-radicalizing them. These children may not have the same destructive streak in them that is present in their fathers, but they are being brought up to believe so. They are being brought up to be someone they did not choose to be, or something beyond their control. We believe that because they come from a hopeless situation they are not capable of anything but violence. A better understanding of human nature and capability must prevail. Compassion is the need and change is possible. Replicate and give them stability and rare opportunities that are given to us and ask them what they want to do rather than tell them what they should do and we shall see that even though they are children that need to be helped, they are also children who can help their community. There are many who believe that before we judge child soldiers we must not forget that we are the ones on the other side of the gun they pull the trigger off. However we must also remember that children can change for good and in turn help their families to make the change over to a life of cooperation and peace. They are children of war, and for them to appreciate peace we must give them a chance at peace.

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<sup>16</sup>GraçaMachel, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: Children at Both Ends of the Gun*, UNICEF (1996), <http://www.unicef.org/graca/kidsoldi.htm>

ISIS's child soldiers need to be saved. As much as legal sanctions and talks of reintegration, rehabilitation and de-radicalization can help, the world community needs to answer the need of the hour. It is in times like these that you discover your humanity, your compassion, and it is in times like these that call for global alliance to heal. Even today, teenagers in black uniforms with logos of the Islamic Police<sup>17</sup> patched onto their left arms, may be seen carrying weapons and standing at checkpoints in Iraq's cities, but it's crucial to believe that such human aberrations can be changed for good, otherwise we will be reducing ourselves to being less than human. To call for a global coalition to liberate ISIS's child soldiers is not an obligation to them, but is a start of an oath we take that every child shall have their childhood.

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<sup>17</sup>Islamic religious police is the official police of some Islamic states, who on behalf of the state, disperses sharia-rules in respect to religious behavior (morality). The establishment of a religious police is considered justified with the Qu'ran doctrine, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong or promotion of virtue and prevention of vice.