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**THESIS**

**DERADICALIZING AND DISENGAGING THE  
CHILDREN OF THE ISLAMIC STATE**

by

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June 2019

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**DERADICALIZING AND DISENGAGING THE CHILDREN OF  
THE ISLAMIC STATE**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Thousands of ISIS fighters and supporters, over 4,000 children being among them, were displaced after the Islamic State's proclaimed caliphate collapsed in 2019. While some countries have been either ambivalent or completely against repatriating ISIS children, other countries have planned to accept them back. This leads to several questions: are current deradicalization and disengagement programs applicable to the children of ISIS? Would these programs help to reintegrate children back into society? Are different approaches needed? To better answer these questions, the research in this thesis extracts key themes present in current deradicalization and disengagement programs and compares those themes with the factors motivating children to join terrorist organizations. Through qualitative analysis, this thesis finds that current programs are largely prison-based and place heavy emphasis on addressing radical ideologies and providing social aid. Unfortunately, these programs are not suited for child reintegration and are unprepared to handle the unique cognitive and social aspects of adolescents. Therefore, this thesis recommends that current deradicalization and disengagement programs replace strategies that address ideology and provide untailored social aid with programs that address positive peer contacts, foster constructive social networking, and provide psychological counseling and guidance, so that the children of ISIS can be successfully reintegrated back into society.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

AIVD	Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service
CAR	Central African Republic
CUTA	Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (Belgium)
DDR	Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ELN	National Liberation Army
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighter
ICC	Interim Care Centres
ICSR	International Centre for Study of Radicalization
IPV	Interpersonal Violence
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IS	Islamic State
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PSP	Positive Street Project (Great Britain)
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNCCT	United Nations Centre for Counter Terrorism

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State (IS) or by the Arabic acronym Daesh, grabbed the attention of the world through its rapid expansion and gruesome, violent extremism. This group was able to seize and control territory inside Syria and Iraq the size of Britain that contained a population of eight million people.<sup>1</sup> Thousands of Muslims from around the world flocked to ISIS when it claimed to have established the caliphate under its leader and self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. During the height of its three-year rule starting in 2014, large swaths of followers including thousands of foreign citizens as well as children and adolescents traveled to Iraq and Syria in order to join ISIS and its attempt to rebuild the caliphate. Now that ISIS has experienced a loss of territory at the hands of an aerial campaign headed by the United States, foreign fighters are attempting to return to their host countries.

Unfortunately, many countries are ill-equipped to handle this group of former ISIS affiliates. While some countries refuse to repatriate their citizens altogether, other countries are accepting returnees on the condition that they be imprisoned and tried in court. Still, others may be forced or offered the opportunity to participate in deradicalization and disengagement programs. Especially alarming however, is the underestimation of children and the role they play in this extremist group. Hundreds of children were born inside the territory controlled by the Islamic State, while thousands more traveled to the region with their families in support of ISIS. These children, called “cubs of the caliphate” by ISIS leadership, are being exposed to gruesome conflict and suffering both physically and psychologically because of their association with the group. A PBS Frontline documentary interviewed children who escaped ISIS and learned that children are being indoctrinated to commit suicide attacks with a focus on Western targets.<sup>2</sup> Not only are children witnessing beheadings, torture, combat, and sexual violence; some are engaging in these atrocities

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel L. Byman, “Where Will the Islamic State Go Next?,” *Brookings* (blog), June 25, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/25/where-will-the-islamic-state-go-next/>.

<sup>2</sup> Public Broadcasting Station, “Children of ISIS,” YouTube video, 10:40, November 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0VPiJr3qBEc&t=11s>.

themselves. Videos released by ISIS show children undergoing militarized training such as handling weapons, movement under fire drills, and physical fitness testing.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this thesis is to determine whether the deradicalization and disengagement literature that describes and evaluates the rehabilitation of Islamic extremists is applicable to the children currently returning from ISIS.

## A. IMPORTANCE

In many cultures and throughout history, children came to be used in warfare. From the Roman empire, where children were used as messengers, and through both world wars of the 20th century, children have participated in military violence and war. In 1949, children younger than 15 were prohibited from being enlisted or used for military purposes by the Geneva Conventions. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court recognized these acts as war crimes.<sup>4</sup> Despite this effort to criminalize the use of children, they continued to be used in the 1980 Iran-Iraq war to clear minefields and act as the first wave of attacks to clear the path for Iranian militias.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, children today are still being used as soldiers in warfare, despite almost universal condemnation from the international community. Some evidence suggests that children under 18 are serving as combatants in 75% of the world's conflicts and 80% of these children are under the age of 15.<sup>6</sup>

Most recently, ISIS used children as weapons in its battle to establish a caliphate. These children were not just natives to Iraq and Syria, but had traveled from all over the world to join this extremist organization. A report from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization at King's College London confirms that "41,490 citizens from 80 countries travelled to Syria and Iraq, a quarter of which were women and minors" between

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<sup>3</sup> "ISIS' Children: Soldiers Trained to Kill and Die," YouTube video, 12:21, posted by Channel 4 News, October 1, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVxZfP1fC\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVxZfP1fC_I).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, "Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court," A/CONF.183/9 § (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 86.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Browne, "Children as Agents of Terrorism and Political Conflict," in *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, ed. Andrew Silke (London: Routledge, 2019), 135.



April 2013 and June 2018.<sup>7</sup> Of these citizens, 4,640 (12%) were minors. In July of 2017, ISIS had retreated from its stronghold in Mosul and continued to lose their proclaimed capital Raqqa in October of 2017, leaving Syria's Deir al-Zour and Iraq's Anbar Province as their remaining strongholds.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in March of 2019, U.S. backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) declared unilateral victory over ISIS when they militarily took back the last scrap of ISIS held territory in Baghouz.<sup>9</sup> This near complete defeat has created hundreds of displaced ISIS supporters who are looking to leave the Middle East and return home. Now that the proclaimed caliphate has collapsed, the children who were either brought by their parents to Syria/Iraq or traveled there on their own are beginning to or attempting to return to their host countries.

But how should receiving countries address this unique phenomenon? Practitioners and counterterrorism analyst are accepting a new consensus that believes “to defeat the threat posed by Islamic extremism and terrorism, there is a need to go beyond security and intelligence measures.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, counterterrorism efforts must actively prevent radicalization from occurring to begin with and adopt rehabilitative efforts for those individuals who have already embraced extremism. Several Middle Eastern, European, and Southeast Asian countries are already combining preventative measures with more kinetic aspects of counterterrorism.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the crisis of returning ISIS supporters can best be addressed through deradicalization and disengagement efforts. Unfortunately, many countries seem to overlook the importance of involving children in these efforts. This

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<sup>7</sup> Joana Cook and Gina Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Woman and Minors of the Islamic State” (King’s College London: ICSR, 2018), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Meko, “Now That the Islamic State Has Fallen in Iraq and Syria, Where Are All Its Fighters Going?,” *Washington Post*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/isis-returning-fighters/.m>

<sup>9</sup> “ISIS Loses Its Final Stronghold in Syria,” CBS News, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/isis-loses-its-final-stronghold-in-syria/>.

<sup>10</sup> Angel Rabasa et al., “Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010), xiii.; United Nations, Department of Public Information, *General Assembly Unanimously Adopts Resolution Calling for Strong Coordinated Action by Member States to Tackle Terrorism, Violent Extremism Worldwide*. GA/12035, June 26, 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/ga12035.doc.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Country Reports on Terrorism 2016, 22 C.F.R. §2656f (2017), <https://www.state.gov/documents/organizations/272488.pdf>.

new vulnerable group of children returning from ISIS will pose a unique challenge for countries who plan to accept them back. However, very few countries have agreed to repatriate the children of ISIS members. Nine countries including Russia who has returned 27 children to the Moscow region, France who recently returned three orphaned children to Paris from a Kurdish-camp in Syria, and Tunisia who has returned 9 children from camps in Libya, have initiated some repatriation efforts.<sup>12</sup> Other European countries and the United States are cautious to set such a precedent and remain firm in their decision to not accept returnees. As countries continue to debate and prolong the decision to repatriate these children, a vast majority will continue to be held inside refugee camps or detention facilities alongside hardline defiant ISIS supporters and without proper medical treatment. Footage by Quentin Sommerville from inside al-Hol internment camp in Syria shows children as young as two being held alongside ultra-extremists who continue to be spew malice laced with toxic ideology and call for the death of the United States while justifying the actions of IS.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, it is important to reconcile these gaps in order to effectively rehabilitate the younger generation of afflicted youth and stop them from becoming a model for radicalization of future generations.

## **B. CLARIFYING TERMINOLOGY**

While terminology such as radicalization, deradicalization, counter radicalization, and disengagement are used throughout the literature their true definitions are often not clear. Occasionally, the terms themselves are used interchangeably when in fact they are quite different. This thesis will establish basic definitions of commonly used terminology for clarity and consistency.

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<sup>12</sup> Elian Peltier, "France Repatriates Several Orphan Children Who Were Stranded in Syria," *New York Times*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/europe/france-isis-repatriates-children.html>.; Maxime Popov and Olga Rotenberg, "Russia Pioneering Return of 'ISIS Children,'" ABS-CBN News, last modified February 18, 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/overseas/02/18/19/russia-pioneering-return-of-isis-children>.; "Tunisia: Scant Help to Bring Home ISIS Members' Children," Human Rights Watch, February 12, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/12/tunisia-scant-help-bring-home-isis-members-children>.

<sup>13</sup> Quentin Sommerville, "The Women and Children No-One Wants," BBC, last modified April 12, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47867673>.

In line with John Horgan's definition, radicalization is "the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology. Radicalization may not necessarily lead to violence but is one of several risk factors required for this."<sup>14</sup> Thus deradicalization and disengagement should be used to describe the opposite processes of undermining and reversing the completed radicalization process. The term deradicalization "is cognitively oriented, encompassing the gradual dissolution of the extremist worldview that legitimizes and encourages terrorist violence."<sup>15</sup> Two terms often misused in place of deradicalization are disengagement and counter-radicalization. According to Naureen Fink and Ellie Hearne, disengagement is a behavioral change which can include altering one's role within a group or leaving it outright. Tore Bjorgo defines it as "getting individuals and groups involved in terrorism to give up their participation in such activities."<sup>16</sup> Thus, disengagement "does not necessitate a change in values or ideals but requires relinquishing the objective of achieving change through violence."<sup>17</sup> This lies in contrast with deradicalization which implies a cognitive shift in understanding. Therefore, radicalization into and engagement with terrorist groups is akin to radicalization in thought and in action.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the United Nations defines counter-radicalization as "deter(ing) disaffected (and possibly already radicalised) individuals from crossing the line and becoming terrorists."<sup>19</sup> Counter-radicalization strategies and policies focus on preventing an individual from reaching the point of radicalization.

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<sup>14</sup> John G. Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 152.

<sup>15</sup> Liesbeth van der Heide and Bart Schuurman, "Reintegrating Terrorists in the Netherlands: Evaluating the Dutch Approach," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 17 (December 2018): 198.

<sup>16</sup> Tore Bjorgo, *Strategies for Preventing Terrorism* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 87.

<sup>17</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Ellie B. Hearne, "Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and Disengagement from Violent Extremism" (New York, NY: International Peace Institute, 2008), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalkenko, "Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual From Radical Opinion to Radical Action," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 1 (January 2014): 69–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.849916>.

<sup>19</sup> Shandon Harris-Hogan, Kate Barrelle, and Andrew Zammit, "What Is Countering Violent Extremism? Exploring CVE Policy and Practice in Australia," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 8, no. 1 (2016): 6.

In short, disengagement includes changing individual or collective behavior or instruments from violent to nonviolent means whereas deradicalization points to a fundamental cognitive shift in belief.<sup>20</sup> Although some terrorist may wish to give up violence or their radical beliefs, a lack of disengagement opportunities leaves them stuck as members of a terrorist group. Hence, a terrorist can be deradicalized in thought but not inevitably disengaged in action. Fundamentally, reintegration (or rehabilitation) programs for terrorists strive for disengagement, deradicalization, or both. Programs will often facilitate deradicalization through ideological counternarratives put forth by credible religious leaders. On the other hand, disengagement efforts usually involve providing social aid, vocational training, or monetary support to help an individual meet basic needs and reintegrate into society. This thesis will fundamentally discuss both deradicalization and disengagement because although the two ideas are definitionally separate, they are connected. This author believes that when an individual decides to act, there are thoughts or cognitive ideas that support taking said action. For example, when an individual decides to radicalize and join a terrorist group there is a change in both the moral compass and the utility justification of violence or terrorism that allows them to justify doing so. Therefore, it is imperative to study both deradicalization and disengagement because the two are intrinsically connected.

The definition of a child can be biological, legal, and social in nature. Biologically, a child is a person that falls between the stages of birth and puberty.<sup>21</sup> Legally, the term child denotes a person below a set age limit. For example, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines child as “a human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”<sup>22</sup> As of 2005, 192 of 194 member countries have ratified the Convention. In the United States, Immigration Law

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<sup>20</sup> Anna Mühlhausen, “Conflict Management, Transitional Justice and De-Radicalization—Different, but Common Goals,” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 9 (2016): 267.

<sup>21</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “child,” accessed December 3, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/child>.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations G.A. A/RES/44/25, 61st Plen Mtg. (1989), <https://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/44/a44r025.htm>.

refers to a child as anyone who is under the age of 21.<sup>23</sup> Socially, the definition of a child can vary by culture, however there is a general agreement that childhood is a time or space distinguishable from adulthood. For this thesis, the term children/child will refer to those individuals ranging from ages 6–18. Those below the age of 6 will be considered toddlers and those above the age of 18 will be considered young adults. The term teenager or adolescent may be used to describe those children that fall between the ages of 13–18. The term minor may be used to describe any individual below the age of 18.

### C. FINDINGS

Children appear to be joining terrorist groups for multiple reasons, but studies about radicalization into violent extremism reveals three broad categories that contribute to this process, they are structural, social, and individual. Structural conditions influence the climate around which child recruitment occurs. Also known as the root causes of terrorism, these conditions include “state repression, relative deprivation, poverty, and injustice,” all which can make a person resort to violence.<sup>24</sup> Social factors include familial bonds or friendship networks that may influence a child’s decision to join extremist groups. Peer networks or social groups appear to be the most prominent explanation of why children join terrorist groups. There are also a large number of children who were brought to by family members or were born inside territory held by terrorist organizations. Individual factors are the unique psychological traits of each child that make them more susceptible to radicalization. At such a young age, children have certain personality traits (like the desire to engage in risky behavior) and psychological characteristics (like emotional instability and the need to obtain an identity separate from their parents) that increase their risk of turning to terrorist groups. Terrorist groups often attract children because they offer a sense of belonging and adventure, and give children the ability to stand for something greater than themselves. Because of this clear issue of children being radicalized and

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<sup>23</sup> Aliens and Nationality, 8 U.S.C. § 1101 (2016), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/8/1101>.

<sup>24</sup> Matteo Vergani et al., “The Three Ps of Radicalisation: Push, Pull and Personal: A Systematic Scoping Review of the Scientific Evidence about Radicalisation into Violent Extremism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (September 2018): 3.

joining terrorist groups, deradicalization and disengagement programs are beginning to receive more attention.

More and more countries are beginning to adopt deradicalization and disengagement policies as opposed to more kinetic options to help (ex-)terrorist become members of society once more. While an exact number of programs is currently unknown due to the secret and sometimes informal nature of them, the number of countries claiming to have some sort of deradicalization or disengagement policy in place is increasing. These programs are largely run by religious leaders, government officials, teachers, psychologist, security officials, therapist, and counselors. Although deradicalization and disengagement have received considerable attention, programs remain under researched, unclear, and contentious. The way in which they are designed, implemented, and practiced in the real world is difficult to assess and “their effectiveness has not undergone independent scrutiny and its degree is largely a matter of opinion.”<sup>25</sup> Two major themes that appear in the literature describing elements of deradicalization and disengagement programs are ideological counternarratives and social aid. Many deradicalization programs around the world focus largely on addressing radical ideological beliefs. The idea is to take a radicalized individual and subject him or her to moderate views through credible religious leaders, more often than not, through prison reform programs. Disengagement efforts largely incorporate social aid in the form of monetary support, vocational training, food and clothing, and workshops which are intended to provide a former terrorist with the basic skills to provide for his or her self and family, and to stay detached from the terrorist group. Many countries may use deradicalization as an umbrella term to describe their program when it in fact does foster disengagement through some type of social aid.

Overall, when considering how applicable and effective current programs will be for children, two big issues are present. First, programs fail to address the primary motivating forces that propel children to join terrorist groups, namely family, peer networks, and social identity. If these forces are not addressed, a child can end up being

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<sup>25</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski et al., “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism,” *Advances in Political Psychology* 35 (2014): 88.

influenced by the same original factors and return to affiliating with terrorists. Current programs put heavy emphasis on ideological strategies of deradicalization, and while ideology should not be completely ignored, it should not be the primary focus for children. Instead, programs need educational campaigns aimed at reducing the alienation and embitterment of diaspora youth.<sup>26</sup> Also, programs should address social networks by fostering positive intergroup contact and enhancing a child's sense of acceptance by their host societies. Second, current programs emphasize providing deradicalized individuals with social aid to help them reintegrate into society at the expense of psychological counseling and aftercare. Children experience unique social and cognitive psychological developments when compared to adults. Children are at a stage in their life where their decision-making skills are not fully developed and may influence their decision to join a terrorist group. Children are also more adversely affected by the gruesome results of terrorism. Therefore, deradicalization and disengagement programs for children should emphasize psychological counseling and address emotional trauma instead of teaching vocational skills and obtaining monetary support.<sup>27</sup>

#### **D. THESIS OVERVIEW**

This thesis relied on qualitative methods of analysis and secondary sources to answer several questions: What are the key characteristic of deradicalization and disengagement programs? Can current programs be applied to children? Why are children joining terrorist groups? How does terrorism effect the psychology of a child? Published sources that are publicly available such as government reports, books, scholarly articles, and Internet articles were used. The goal was to extract key themes present in current deradicalization and disengagement programs and compare those themes with the factors motivating children to join terrorist organizations. The intention of this thesis was to identify gaps in the deradicalization and disengagement literature when it is applied to children so that baseline solutions can be introduced and built upon in the near future.

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<sup>26</sup> Kruglanski et al., "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization," 13.

<sup>27</sup> Holmer and Shtuni, "Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative," 11.

The research in this thesis was applied to the children in Syria and Iraq as of May 2018 that had links to Belgium. The federal Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) in Brussels estimates 162 children are linked to Belgium, this includes “13 teenagers (aged 12–18 and thus listed as Foreign Terrorist Fighters).”<sup>28</sup> These children have at minimum one parent who was a citizen or resident of Belgium. Since almost 5,000 children are linked to ISIS, this thesis focused on this particular group of Belgian children because sufficient literature exists about who they are and why they joined ISIS. This thesis referred to an ethnographic study that focused on the families of Belgian and Dutch children who left for Syria in order to provide an in-depth look into the lives of those children who ultimately left Belgium to join ISIS. The study, conducted by senior researcher Marion van San, focused on what role the families of these children played in the departure decision and radicalization process of their children. While this thesis focused on a particular group of Belgian children, the data was overall limited. Therefore, the author relied on studies of children from countries outside of the caliphate such as Northern Uganda, Jordan, Yemen, Congo, Iraq, Nepal, and Gaza to illustrate the effects of conflict on children.

Chapter I of this thesis is a broad introduction of the topic. Chapter II reviews the conditions or motivating factors that propel children into terrorist groups. It also explores the different physical and psychological effects that terrorism and association with terrorist groups has on children. Chapter III examines the available literature on deradicalization and disengagement programs and extracts the main strategies being used to deradicalize and disengage Islamic extremists. It also discusses the claimed successes of these programs and highlights the questionable effectiveness of such strategies. Chapter IV compares what we know about children and why they join terrorist groups with the current strategies and practices of deradicalization and disengagement programs. The concluding chapter discusses the applicability and effectiveness of these programs when applied to children and offers suggestions on how best to fill the gaps identified.

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, eds., *Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them?*, vol. 101 (Brussels: Egmont—The Royal Institute for International Relations, 2018), 4.



## II. FACTORS THAT PROPEL CHILDREN INTO RADICALIZATION

The reasons that people have for joining terrorist groups are expansive and cannot be narrowed down to any single factor. An early hypothesis of the 1970s, that was centered around adults, believed terrorists suffered from personality disorders and displayed clinically psychopathic behavior.<sup>29</sup> This idea hinted at an element of madness among members. However, this claim of a terrorist pathology or profile fails to be backed by empirical evidence. In fact, psychologist Ken Heskino who studied the psychology of terrorism in Northern Ireland supports that most terrorists are not diagnosable psychopathic or otherwise clinically or emotionally disturbed.<sup>30</sup> Although studies often downplay psychological explanations of adult participation in terrorist groups, the psychology of children is uniquely different and plays a larger role in their decision to join a terrorist group. Laurence Steinberg, a psychologist that specializes in child and adolescent psychological development, claims that adolescents may engage in risky behavior because “they have not yet fully acquired the mental ability to curb impulsive behavior or to make entirely rational judgments.”<sup>31</sup> Research by developmental psychologist Erick Erickson emphasizes one of the most important social developments in youth is the search for identity and new attachments.<sup>32</sup> Erickson also points out that this search may lead youth to take on negative or undesirable identities. As undesirable as a terrorist identity may be, youth are experiencing intense exploration of personal values, goals, and beliefs, which may rationalize or make membership in a terrorists group appealing. Nonetheless, we can

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<sup>29</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski and Shira Fishman, “Psychological Factors in Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Individual, Group, and Organizational Levels of Analysis,” *Social Issues and Policy Review* 3, no. 1 (December 2009): 7.

<sup>30</sup> Rex A. Hudson, *The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?* (Library of Congress, 1999), 30.

<sup>31</sup> Laurence Steinberg, “Risk Taking in Adolescence: New Perspectives From Brain and Behavioral Science,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16, no. 2 (2007): 55–59.

<sup>32</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968), 88–89.

go beyond psychology to better understand what factors propel children into joining terrorist groups by using structural, social, and individual levels of analysis.

Studies about radicalization into violent extremism reveals three broad categories that contribute to this process, they are structural, social, and individual. Structural factors influence the climate around which child recruitment occurs. Social factors include familial bonds or friendship networks that may influence a child's decision to join extremist groups. Individual factors are the unique psychological traits of each child that make them more susceptible to radicalization. Social factors are different than individual ones because they include the relationships formed with other people and they explain how those external sources can put pressure on a child to radicalize, whereas individual factors are solely intrinsic to the individual themselves. These three categories encompass a number of risk factors that may increase the likelihood of a child being radicalized into violent extremism. Although no single component can explain why children join terrorist groups, when considered altogether, these risk factors serve as a baseline for understanding why children are radicalized.

This chapter will begin with a description of each propelling factor supported with real world examples. Next, some time will be devoted to exploring the reasons why a group of Dutch and Belgian youth made the decision to go to Syria and join ISIS. Then, the physical and psychological consequences or effects children face due to joining extremist groups will be discussed to highlight the multitude of complications they may encounter after leaving such groups. The goal of this chapter is to provide a basic understanding of the factors that push children into radicalization and the effects of joining extremist groups in order to later determine whether current deradicalization programs, which will be discussed in length in Chapter III, are effectively addressing these issues.

## **A. STRUCTURAL, SOCIAL, AND INDIVIDUAL FACTORS**

### **1. Structural**

Structural-level conditions create an environment that allows violent political actors to emerge and the recruitment of children into armed groups to occur. These conditions, also called the root causes of terrorism, may make people resort to violence and

include, marginalization, poverty, unemployment, economic underdevelopment, state repression, and injustice.<sup>33</sup> O’Neil and Broeckhoven argue, “it would be hard for children to engage in political violence without some larger political conflict—real or perceived—around which to orient their actions.”<sup>34</sup> When certain structural factors are in disorder or the country is in a state of war, the conducive and necessary environment for terrorist groups to thrive is created which ultimately puts children at risk for engagement with these groups. Structural-level issues can also contribute to a sense of grievance, grievances being among the longest-standing explanations when it comes to theorizing about why people revolt or engage in other acts of political violence, including terrorism.<sup>35</sup> These issues may influence the political or sociological conditions that give rise to radicalization. Examples of structural factors that may push children into radicalization include being subjected to and falling victim to hostile foreign policies from Western states, being victimized from civil war or deep-rooted conflicts, and being marginalized or socially excluded from society. A report published by Quilliam, a counter-extremism think tank based in London, describes how children of the Islamic State are pushed by the desire to escape difficulties as a result of insecurity and pulled by a promise of change, the ability to fight for a meaningful cause, and the chance to partake in adventure.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, structural-level conditions “serve as the backdrop in which child recruitment and use by armed groups occurs, creating additional pressures on civilians, exacerbating needs, and highlighting and amplifying existing societal cleavages and tensions.”<sup>37</sup> Muslim youth in the UK and the Netherlands provide an example of how social exclusion can lead to radicalization.

In the wake of the London underground bombing in 2005, London police documented a sudden increase in faith-based hate crimes and hostility towards Muslim

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<sup>33</sup> Matteo Vergani et al., “The Three Ps of Radicalisation: Push, Pull and Personal: A Systematic Scoping Review of the Scientific Evidence about Radicalisation into Violent Extremism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (September 2018): 8–9.

<sup>34</sup> Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, eds. *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, (New York: United Nations University, 2018), 43.

<sup>35</sup> Asta Maskaliunaite, “Exploring the Theories of Radicalization,” *Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 17, no. 1 (December 2015): 19.

<sup>36</sup> Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*, (London: Quilliam, 2016), 100.

<sup>37</sup> Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict*, 47.

communities, including physical and verbal attacks, property damage, and attacks on mosques.<sup>38</sup> When three of the four bombers were identified as British Muslims, the public began to focus on issues of integration, human rights, immigration, and multiculturalism. As a result, xenophobia began to rise based on the “assumption that terror can be a product of a specific culture within the greater European society.”<sup>39</sup> In return, some authors claim that British leaders began to place more emphasis on Islamic terrorism being a threat to the British culture and stressed the need for Muslims living in Britain to adopt British values.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the causes for radicalization were assumed by politicians and academics alike to be a result of British Muslim youth growing up in segregated communities. However, this explanation leaves out the victimization, threats to personal safety, poor relations with police, and purposeful exclusion by society these Muslims faced. The story of Maajid Nawaz, a Western-born Muslim of Pakistani background, is a testament to the struggle many Muslim’s face in Western societies. In his book *Radical*, Nawaz describes his journey out of radicalization, but starts by describing several instances in his childhood in Essex, England that contributed to his radicalization. While in primary school, Nawaz recalls being forced by the lunch lady to eat pork sausages despite his tear and pleas and he eventually vomited out of discomfort.<sup>41</sup> While he does not blame the lunch lady entirely, he felt there was a lazy cultural ignorance behind the incident and the woman never stopped to think that there may be a religious reason behind why he could not eat the pork. Also, when Nawaz was about ten or eleven, he remembers his friends began to define him by his skin tone, something they had never done before. “His kind” was blamed for AIDS and he was no longer able to play football at lunch because “this game’s not for Pakis.”<sup>42</sup> Overall

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<sup>38</sup> “The Impact of 7 July 2005 London Bomb Attacks on Muslim Communities in the EU,” European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, November 2005, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Katie Friesen, “The Effects of the Madrid and London Subway Bombings On Europe’s View of Terrorism,” *Human Rights and Human Welfare* 7 (2007): S11.

<sup>40</sup> Zara Akbar, “Why Join ISIS? The Causes of Terrorism from the Muslim Youth Perspective” (Master’s Thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2017), 8.

<sup>41</sup> Maajid Nawaz, *Radical: My Journey out of Islamist Extremism* (Guilford, Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2013), 13–14.

<sup>42</sup> Maajid Nawaz, *Radical*, 16.

it was this early rejection by peers and exposure to racism and indifference that soiled his childhood innocence and contributed to his radicalization.

Additionally, inside of the Netherlands, a negative climate towards Islam and Muslim communities increased after the 9/11 attacks and the murder of film maker Theo van Gogh. This caused Dutch society to socially exclude and polarize their views towards Muslims while increasing the number of attacks on mosque and Islamic communities. This exclusion has particularly affected second and third-generation Muslim youth of Moroccan decent who have a 40% unemployment rate and whose youth crime rates reach 50%.<sup>43</sup> According to the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) these youth are especially vulnerable to resorting to violent jihad due to a lack of integration, perceived threats to the group, low economic status, being socially excluded, and experiencing inequality.<sup>44</sup> As a result of this marginalization and failure to peacefully mix with host societies cultural values, some Muslim youth may have turned to Islam in an identity crisis and subsequently become radicalized by other extremists.<sup>45</sup>

## **2. Social**

Social factors, including ideology, group belonging, and group mechanisms, are the aspects that make extremist groups and their particular lifestyle attractive to some people. According to Vergani et al., group dynamics such as the direct influence of peers, the development of robust bonds with like-minded people, and the influence of family and kinship ties are cited 35% of the time as pull factors relevant to radicalization.<sup>46</sup> The networks that children form with their peer's help facilitate and make the initial steps to radicalization less challenging. This idea is similar to what has been demonstrated in the literature concerning juvenile gang membership. Various aspects of childhood and early

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<sup>43</sup> Soeren Kern, "Dutch Jihadists in Syria Pose Threat to the Netherlands," Gatestone Institute, last modified May 15, 2014, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4308/dutch-jihadists-syria>.

<sup>44</sup> Maria Komen, "Homegrown Muslim Extremism in the Netherlands: An Exploratory Note," *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 1 (March 2014): 47–48.

<sup>45</sup> Kristin Archick, John Rollins, and Steven Woehrel, *Islamist Extremism in Europe*, CRS Report No. RS22211 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2005): 5–6.

<sup>46</sup> Matteo Vergani et al., "The Three Ps of Radicalisation," 10.

adolescence push individuals into gangs including delinquent peers and aggressive friendships.

According to a U.S. Department of Justice bulletin on juvenile gangs, adolescence is a time where peer relations fluctuate often and commitments to both gangs and peers within it are often transitory. However, becoming a member of a gang is more likely if an individual “associates with peers who engage in delinquent behavior” such as underage drinking, use of illicit drugs, truancy from school, theft, and sexual activity .<sup>47</sup> Another risk factor for gang membership includes a sustained pattern of bellicose friendships, especially childhood friendships that continue into adolescents, among youth who are antisocial and truculent themselves.<sup>48</sup> This “association with aggressive peers during childhood and early adolescence” is one indicator of future association with gangs “as is the experience of having been rejected by peers.”<sup>49</sup> In essence, one can think of peers as the gateway into gangs or violent extremist groups. As children seek to define their identity and strengthen their peer relations, they succumb to the pressure exercised within these tightly knit groups of close friends. Friends tend to join a cause together, and if that particular cause supports the activities of a gang or terrorist group, the individuals within are at a higher risk for joining or radicalizing into those organizations. The emphasis here is on the group dynamics of peer networks, which are highly influential in a child’s connection with terrorist groups. That is to say, “spontaneous group interaction with one’s peers rather than planned systematic brain-washing and indoctrination” is a vital component in becoming a terrorist.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> James C. Howell and Arlen Egley, “Moving Risk Factors into Developmental Theories of Gang Membership,” *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 3, no. 4 (October 2005): 342.

<sup>48</sup> J. B. Kupersmidt, J. D. Coie, and J. C. Howell, “Building Resilience in Children Exposed to Negative Peer Influences.,” in *Investing in Children, Youth, Families, and Communities: Strengths-Based and Policy*, ed. B. J. Leadbeater et al. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2003), 251–68.

<sup>49</sup> Wendy M Craig et al., “The Road to Gang Membership: Characteristics of Male Gang and Nongang Members from Ages 10 to 14,” *Review of Social Development* 1, no. 11 (2002): 53–68. ; Benjamin B. Lahey et al., “Boys Who Join Gangs: A Prospective Study of Predictors of First Gang Entry,” *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 4, no. 27 (1999): 261–76. ; D. Huizinga and P. Lovegrove, *Summary of Important Risk Factors for Gang Membership* (Boulder, CO: Institute for Behavioral Research, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Sam Mullins, “Terrorist Networks and Small Group Psychology,” in *The Faces of Terrorism: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. David Canter (John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2009), 138.

According to the anthropologist Scott Atran, “about three out of every four people who join Al Qaeda or ISIS do so through friends, most of the rest through family or fellow travelers in search of a meaningful path in life.”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the theory of terrorism put forth by Marc Sageman called “a bunch of guys” maintains that the decision to join a terrorist group “is based on pre-existing friendship ties” and “that the evolving group of future perpetrators seemed more akin to” such connections “than a formal terrorist cell, with well-defined hierarchy and division of labour.”<sup>52</sup> His theory affirms the role that friendship and peer networks play in inspiring individuals to become Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF). To gather further information on the motivations of FTFs, the United Nations Centre for Counter-Terrorism (UNCCT) alongside participating UN member states, directly interviewed 43 returnees from the conflict in Syria involving ISIS. When questioned about the role of friends and social networks in the radicalization process, 32.5% of respondents claimed they were directly motivated by their peers or relatives to leave for Syria. Of these, two individuals insisted the encouragement by their friends was “very important,” and for 12 other individuals it was “extremely important.”<sup>53</sup> While this ratio is not as high as Atran’s, it clearly shows that peer pressure and social networks are influential in a person’s commitment to become a FTF. This same study shows that social networks, or being inspired by other members within a peer group to become a FTF in Syria, is especially prominent among Europeans when compared to their Arab counterparts who they claim are usually motivated by regional or domestic factors and are less dependent on others to reach conflict zones due to geographical proximity and knowledge of local culture.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Greg Downey, “Scott Atran on Youth, Violent Extremism and Promoting Peace,” *Neuroanthropology* (blog), April 25, 2015, <https://blogs.plos.org/neuroanthropology/2015/04/25/scott-atran-on-youth-violent-extremism-and-promoting-peace/>.

<sup>52</sup> Marc Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (September 2014): 567.

<sup>53</sup> Hamed el-Said and Richard Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria” (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2017), 34.

<sup>54</sup> Hamed el-Said and Richard Barrett, “Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist,” 33–34.

Donatella Della Porta's study on underground political groups found that cliques of friends or family dynasties motivate an individual to join radical groups.<sup>55</sup> Her research was conducted in 1992 and was based on multiple case studies that consisted of in-depth interviews with former or current members of underground organizations. She found that eventually these underground political friendship networks became so strong that they cut off communication with outsiders and drove their moderate stances into more radically political ones. Similarly, in 2004, Marc Sageman attempted to understand terror networks by conducting research on Salafi jihadist members using public documents like court transcripts, government documents, scholarly articles, and internet resources. Although he admits his resources are not completely representative of the global Salafi jihad, which leave out children, his research on the social backgrounds of new global Salafi Mujahideen fighters found that 68 % of Mujahideen members joined due to preexisting friendship bonds.<sup>56</sup> He also noted that many members joined in small clusters of friends.

Finally, one should understand the importance of family. Sageman research points out that kinship bonds and family involvement with the terrorist group influenced 14% of fighters to join. Rona Fields's psychometric assessment of children in Northern Ireland found that exposure to terrorism as a child can lead to a proclivity for terrorism as an adult.<sup>57</sup> Thus, a child growing up with family members who are members of a terrorist group or who support the activities of a terrorist group, are more likely to join themselves. Also, a child who is trying to escape a lack of positive relationships among family members may become vulnerable to extremists group membership. More examples of peer networks leading to radicalization can be found in the United States and different parts of the UK.

In 2015, U.S. Minnesota federal officials arrested six young men between the ages of 19–21 who planned to join ISIS in Syria. In an interview, the United States attorney for

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<sup>55</sup> Donatella Della Porta, "On Individual Motivations in Underground Political Organizations," in *Terrorism Studies: A Reader*, ed. John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 10.

<sup>56</sup> Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 112.

<sup>57</sup> Hudson, "The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism," 29.



Minnesota, Andrew Luger, is quoted saying “this circle of friends recruited each other.”<sup>58</sup> It was the sense of camaraderie, the collective radical ideology, and the guidance they received electronically from one of their friends who joined the Islamic State in 2014 that pushed these youth to join ISIS. Another example of peers joining ISIS includes the six young men ages 19–31 who called themselves the Britani Brigade Bangladeshi Bad Boys. Each of these young men came from the same neighborhood in Portsmouth, England and had a pre-existing network from frequenting the same Islamic groups and mosques.<sup>59</sup> More recently, news has brought global attention to a girl by the name of Shamima Begum who is attempting to return home after supporting ISIS.

Shamima (age 15) traveled with two peers, Kadiza Sultana (age 16) and Amira Abase (age 15), from Gatwick, England to join ISIS in 2015. All three of the girls (also known as the Bethnal trio) were following the footsteps of their friend Sharmeena Begum (age 15) who traveled to Syria four months before them. The Bethnal trio are reported to have been recruited by Scottish-born Aqsa Mahmood (age 21 in 2014), one of ISIS most successful female recruiters and first to voluntarily slip into Daesh territory, through the social media platform Twitter.<sup>60</sup> This may not be surprising given that children are more vulnerable to predatory behavior than adults on social networking sites.<sup>61</sup> Mahmood is a key figure online and in the al-Khanssaa brigade. This all-female brigade is based in al-Raqqa and is responsible for enforcing ISIS version of Sharia. Concerning the trio’s whereabouts, Shamima believes that Sultana, who married an American ISIS fighter, was

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<sup>58</sup> Scott Shane, “6 Minnesotans Held in Plot to Join ISIS,” *New York Times*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/21/us/6-somali-americans-arrested-in-isis-recruiting-case.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Jason Burke, “Who Were the Al-Britani Brigade Bangladeshi Bad Boys?,” *The Guardian*, July 27, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/27/who-were-al-britani-brigade-bangladeshi-bad-boys>.

<sup>60</sup> United Nations, “Aqsa Mahmood,” United Nations Security Council, September 28, 2015, [https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list/summaries/individual/aqsa-mahmood](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/aqsa-mahmood).

<sup>61</sup> Lauren A. Spies Shapiro and Gayla Margolin, “Growing Up Wired: Social Networking Sites and Adolescent Psychosocial Development,” *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 17, no. 1 (March 2014): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-013-0135-1>; Elina Mir and Caroline Novas, “Social Media and Adolescents’ and Young Adults’ Mental Health,” *National Center for Health Research* (blog), August 10, 2018, <http://www.center4research.org/social-media-affects-mental-health/>; American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, “Social Networking and Children,” February 2017, [https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-and-Social-Networking-100.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-and-Social-Networking-100.aspx).

killed after her house in Raqqa was bombed and Abase, who married an Australian ISIS fighter, is still alive in Baghouz. However, neither report on these girls has been confirmed. Days after arriving in Syria, Shamima married a Dutch convert to Islam by the name of Yago Riedijk. According to interviews, Shamima stated that she does not regret joining ISIS and claims that she did not do anything dangerous or create propaganda for the group but simply stayed a housewife and took care of her husband.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, her husband Riedijk admitted fighting for ISIS and said “he attended the stoning of a woman for ‘fornication,’ saw piles of dead bodies in the city and lost an infant daughter to malnutrition” while living under ISIS control.<sup>63</sup> Recently, an article has revealed that Shamima was actually a member of Hisba, the most well-known and feared morality police units in the self-proclaimed caliphate. Backed by Western intelligence and an organization dedicated to documenting the violations of extremist in Syria (Sound and Picture), Shamima is accused of cruelly enforcing Sharia including the dress code for woman and attempting to recruit other girls including teenagers in Australia.<sup>64</sup> Complicating matters further in regard to Shamima’s return is her infant son Jarrah, born in Syria in February of 2019, who officials say has a right to British citizenship despite his mother’s actions. Unfortunately, Jarrah died in a refugee camp in Syria in March of 2019 due to health issues, but the complicating question of what to do with the children of known foreign ISIS supporters still remains. While not exhaustive, these stories shed light on the prominence of peer networks in pushing young individuals to link up with terrorist organizations.

### **3. Individual**

Some people are more receptive than their peers, despite similar circumstances, to radicalization. This is because their individual factors or personal characteristics are

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<sup>62</sup> Frances Perraudin and Vikram Dodd, “Isis Briton Shamima Begum Pleads to Return to UK after Giving Birth,” *The Guardian*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/feb/17/shamima-begum-who-fled-uk-to-join-isis-has-given-birth-say-family>.

<sup>63</sup> Quentin Sommerville, “Shamima Begum: ‘We Should Live in Holland’ Says IS Husband,” BBC, last modified March 3, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-47431249>.

<sup>64</sup> Josie Ensor and Robert Mendick, “Shamima Begum Was Cruel Enforcer in Isil’s Morality Police, Say Syrian Witnesses,” *The Telegraph*, April 13, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/04/13/shamima-begum-cruel-enforcer-isils-morality-police-say-syrian/>.

different. Individual factors may include distinct psychological susceptibilities independent of structural and social factors such as “mental health conditions, depression, trauma, personality traits such as narcissism and impulsivity, and individually-specific demographic characteristics” such as sex, age, education level, and income, that “constitute subjective states that make the individual more vulnerable to extremism.”<sup>65</sup> Once again, a comparison can be drawn to personal factors that push children into gang membership. Youth who are victims of abuse or neglect, exhibit antisocial behavior, and engage in different forms of delinquency like alcohol and drug use, are considered to be at a higher risk for joining a gang.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, children can be pulled toward terrorism if they perceive the need to obtain an identity or status, have certain personality traits, or have traumatic life experiences.

Terrorist organizations often offer a child a sense of community, ambition, and the promise of acknowledgement and status if they work on the group’s behalf.<sup>67</sup> Gangs mirror this experience by offering youth who lack acceptance and direction in their lives a community to turn to. Gangs tend to be at the centerfold of social life offering opportunities to interact with peers under an umbrella of perceived security.<sup>68</sup> The gang itself establishes an identity for youth to buy into whether it be clothing, symbols, or tattoos. This unique identity fosters connectedness and individuals can act in the name of the collective.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, achieving a legitimate social identity is especially difficult for Muslim youth who are forced to “negotiate their religious identity and religious practice in a context that includes explicit or subtle themes of misunderstanding, fear, and marginalization.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Matteo Vergani et al., “The Three Ps of Radicalization,” 5–6.

<sup>66</sup> James C. Howell, *Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Program*, (DIANE Publishing, 2011), 6.

<sup>67</sup> Sarah Lyons-Padilla et al., “Belonging Nowhere: Marginalization & Radicalization Risk among Muslim Immigrants,” *Brookings Institution Press* 1, no. 2 (2016): 2.

<sup>68</sup> James C. Howell, “Menacing or Mimicking? Realities of Youth Gangs,” *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* 58, no. 2 (April 2007): 43.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Fox, “Examining Gang Social Network Structure And Criminal Behavior” (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2013), 34.

<sup>70</sup> Pam Nilan, *Muslim Youth in the Diaspora: Challenging Extremism through Popular Culture* (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 2.

Feelings of social isolation or disenfranchisement by Muslim youth in the diaspora can create a loss of significance within the community at large. In different contexts, terrorist organizations can offer these youth forms of protection, mechanisms of revenge, or an escape from forms of physical, verbal, and mental abuses. Terrorist groups appear to be inclusive and understanding while offering a marginalized individual a chance to create a strong sense of self.

Some children have personalities that desire to engage in risky behavior and experimentation. A study in the *Frontiers in Psychology* journal reveals that “young children show the strongest preference for risky compared to sure bet options of equal expected value, adolescents are intermediate in their risk preference, and young adults show the strongest risk aversion.”<sup>71</sup> In general, experimental studies find that children and adolescents are likely to take more risks than adults.<sup>72</sup> While some risk-taking behavior is natural, other times it can be problematic and lead youth to engage in delinquent acts with harmful consequences such as joining extremist groups. Let it be clear however, that personality traits alone cannot predict an individual’s propensity to join a terrorist group. In fact, research has shown that many terrorists are “normal” and generally do not exhibit psychological abnormalities or personality deficiencies.<sup>73</sup> However, the personality and level of maturity of a child is vastly different than that of an adult and may offer further explanations of radicalization. A study in the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* explains how children between the ages of 10–15 move from being simple observers and

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<sup>71</sup> David J. Paulsen et al., “Decision-Making Under Risk in Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 2, (April 2011): 1–2.

<sup>72</sup> See William T Harbaugh, Kate Krause, and Lise Vesterlund, “Risk Attitudes of Children and Adults: Choices Over Small and Large Probability Gains and Losses,” *Experimental Economics* 5, (2002): 32.; Irwin P Levin et al., “Stability of Choices in a Risky Decision-Making Task: A 3-Year Longitudinal Study with Children and Adults,” *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 20, no. 3 (2007): 241–52.; Stephanie Burnett et al., “Adolescents’ Heightened Risk-Seeking in a Probabilistic Gambling Task,” *Cognitive Development* 25, no. 2 (April 2010): 183–96.; Tim Rakow and Saleema B. Rahim, “Developmental Insights into Experience-based Decision Making,” *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 23, no. 1 (2010): 69–82.

<sup>73</sup> John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), 61.

nonparticipants of sectarian violence to potential victims and or perpetrators.<sup>74</sup> For a child's emotional security about their community, violence is ventured to be a more striking threat because of "the presumed meaning this violence holds for the identity and well-being of the child in the community."<sup>75</sup> Therefore, if a child's physical and psychological feelings of safety are put at risk, they are more likely to adopt overly aggressive, troubled, or even hazardous regulatory responses to conflict.

Furthermore, children are more susceptible to being pulled toward radicalization through violent coercion by radical militants because they are easy to manipulate and control. In these cases, children join terrorist groups out of fear or through abduction. Examples include the thousands of children in northeastern Nigeria that have been captured by Boko Haram amidst frequent attacks on schools.<sup>76</sup> In more recent times, ISIS has been responsible for abducting hundreds of children in order for them to become the next generation of fighters. A Frontline documentary called *Children of ISIS* interviews former ISIS child fighters who describe they joined ISIS because members threatened to kill their families, amputate their limbs, or murder them for resisting.<sup>77</sup>

## **B. RADICALIZING CHILDREN INTO ISIS: A BELGIAN CASE STUDY**

Although citizens from many different European countries have traveled to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State, Belgium has taken an overwhelming role in providing fighters to the Middle East. Pieter Van Ostaejen, an analyst of the conflict involving foreign jihadist in Syria, claims up to 450 fighters are directly from Belgium.<sup>78</sup> While this number seems insignificant compared to countries like France where over 800 people have

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<sup>74</sup> Mark E. Cummings et al., "Longitudinal Pathways Between Political Violence and Child Adjustment: The Role of Emotional Security about the Community in Northern Ireland," *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 39, no. 2 (February 2011): 215–216.

<sup>75</sup> Mark E. Cummings et al., "Longitudinal Pathways," 215–216.

<sup>76</sup> "More than 1,000 Children in North-East Nigeria Abducted by Boko Haram since 2013," United Nations, April 13, 2018, <https://www.un.org/victimsofterrorism/en/node/5025>.

<sup>77</sup> *Children of ISIS*, directed by Evan Williams (2015; Los Angeles, CA: Frontline PBS, 2015), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/children-of-isis/transcript/>.

<sup>78</sup> Andrew Higgins, "Belgium Confronts the Jihadist Danger Within," *New York Times*, January 24, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/25/world/europe/belgium-confronts-the-jihadist-danger-within.html>.

joined ISIS, it is still a very sizeable cohort for a country of roughly 11 million people. This number is even more significant considering Belgium's Muslim community makes up only 7.6% of the population.<sup>79</sup> According to Ostaeyen's numbers and compared to other European countries, Belgium has averaged the most fighters per capita to the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Unfortunately, this number also includes children.

These children are identified as having links to Belgium through direct citizenship or they were born under ISIS to at least one Belgian parent. In 2016, AIVD estimated a total of 70 Dutch children were in ISIS-controlled territories.<sup>80</sup> In 2018, the federal Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) in Brussels estimated 162 children linked to Belgium, counting 13 teenagers (aged 12–18 and thus listed as Foreign Terrorist Fighters), were under ISIS control.<sup>81</sup> The exact number of Belgian children born in ISIS territory is not known for certain; however, available data estimates “at least 730 infants from 19 countries have been born inside the caliphate” while “unverified estimates have suggested up to 5,000 children were born to foreign parents.”<sup>82</sup> According to a study by Cook and Vale through the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), 70% of Belgian minors (105 people) were born inside of ISIS territory.<sup>83</sup> This is more than double the number of children and teenagers (45 people) that traveled to ISIS territory. There are also children of foreign nationalities being held inside refugee camps like the al-Hawl camp in Syria, where as many as 30,000 people have arrived from Baghouz including

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<sup>79</sup> Conrad Hackett, “5 Facts about the Muslim Population in Europe,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), November 29, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/29/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/>.

<sup>80</sup> Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (September 2016): 851.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet, eds., *Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them?*, vol. 101 (Brussels: Egmont—The Royal Institute for International Relations, 2018), 4.

<sup>82</sup> Joana Cook and Gina Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Woman and Minors of the Islamic State,” (Kings College London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2018), 30.

<sup>83</sup> Joana Cook and Gina Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora,’” 30.

3,000 children.<sup>84</sup> Also, there are children being held alongside their mothers who are in detention camps or prison awaiting to be tried for supporting the Islamic State.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, it is safe to say an exact number of foreign children in the region may be unknown at this time, but it is clear that this number contains children from many European countries including Belgium.

An ethnographic study conducted in 2016 by Marion van San helps illustrate why Belgian children decided to join ISIS. As a sociologist and criminologist, van San has focused most of her recent research on radicalism and extremism from a pedagogical perspective.<sup>86</sup> In her study, she interviewed 26 different Dutch and Belgian families (16 with immigrant backgrounds) with at least one child (under the age of 24) who has left for Syria to join ISIS and their armed struggle, to understand the family circumstances of these youth and to what extent the parents influenced their decision to depart and, therefore, radicalize. Even though each of these children lived in Belgium or the Netherlands, their families and backgrounds were unique.

The familial and socio-economic situations of each family were relatively different. Some had financial problems in the past, and others had issues with alcohol and drugs. Some families reported incidents of domestic violence. Many were not very religious. Others grew up in single parent households, while one had experienced the death of a parent. The education levels varied from not finishing school to completing a higher secondary education. The occupations of the parents also varied from teacher to civil servant to health care assistants. Overall, van San concludes that most families did not actively push their children into leaving for Syria, but many were unaware, did not understand, or possibly denied the clear signs of radicalization before their children's

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<sup>84</sup> Martin Chulov, "Up to 3,000 Isis Children Living in 'Extremely Dire Conditions,'" *The Guardian*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/13/up-to-3000-children-born-to-isis-families-housed-in-dire-conditions>.

<sup>85</sup> Ruth Sherlock, "Thousands Of ISIS Militants' Family Members Are Being Held In Syrian Detention Camps," NPR, audio recording, 4:22, November 27, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/27/671285295/thousands-of-isis-militants-family-members-are-being-held-in-syrian-detention-ca>.

<sup>86</sup> For more information on Marion van San see "Dr. M.R.P.J.R. (Marion) van San," Risbo, accessed April 9, 2019, [https://www.risbo.nl/uk/r\\_medewerker.php?mw=14](https://www.risbo.nl/uk/r_medewerker.php?mw=14).

departure. Many children exhibited signs of isolation, became more religious and embraced traditional Islamic values, and/or networked through friends and organizations like Sharia4Belgium.

Looking back in hindsight, when several parents were interviewed after their child had left for Syria, they recalled their child becoming more isolated from their families and society. One child is quoted saying “mum I don’t belong here, I belong there [Syria]” while another child tells her parents “she wanted to leave for Syria because she felt unhappy in the Netherlands.”<sup>87</sup> More parents observed their children locking themselves in their rooms and not partaking in family events while becoming more involved with what was going on in the Middle East. This may not be surprising considering many of the subjects were young adolescents who may have been seeking to break away from the identity of their parents or authority figures and find a new sense of self. ISIS ended up offering an attractive alternative for these children.

Another factor several parents remembered was that their children became more involved with religion. For example, the mother of a girl named Sandra claimed her daughter became so devout that the family was no longer able to watch television, smoke, or go out to socialize because Sandra’s religion (Islam) forbids it.<sup>88</sup> Sandra also frightened her mother to the point of fleeing their home because she called her mother a non-believer and claimed that she would burn in hell. Other children started wearing a niqab and got into conflicts at school when they were obstructed from practicing their religion as they desired. The school teacher of a boy named Adil recounts how after demanding he be allowed to pray at school, claimed “he had no ambition to continue studying, because he wanted to give up his live for the sake of Allah.”<sup>89</sup> It should be stressed that religion itself was not the sole driving factor that pushed these children to join ISIS. Instead, it was one

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<sup>87</sup> Marion van San, “Belgian and Dutch Young Men and Women Who Joined ISIS: Ethnographic Research among the Families They Left Behind,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 1 (January 2018): 46.

<sup>88</sup> Marion van San, “Belgian and Dutch Young Men and Women,” 50.

<sup>89</sup> Marion van San, 49.



of several risk factors that presented itself before their departure that should have alerted their parents.

Finally, almost all of the children in this study had connections to peers or well-known associates in organizations that supported the armed struggle in Syria. In one case, the mother of a boy named Samir admitted that her son started to create close contacts with a prominent member of Sharia4Belgium, a radical Salafist organization that calls for Belgium to convert itself into an Islamic State.<sup>90</sup> This prominent member's name was Ibrahim and he met his sister and her husband in Syria a few months before Samir arrived. Ibrahim, Samir's neighbor and friend, played an important role in convincing and facilitating Samir's travel to Syria. Other parents recall their children connecting to other like-minded people through meetings, demonstrations, mosque, or social media. These networks helped influence almost every child's decision to leave Belgium behind and join ISIS.

All in all, the factors that pushed these Belgian and Dutch children to radicalize and join the armed conflict in Syria coincide with the structural, social, and individual factors mentioned earlier in this chapter. Immigrant youth from second generation backgrounds felt marginalized from Belgian society or that they did not belong. They began to associate with like-minded peers and became increasingly connected through group meetings and activities. These groups gave these youth a unique sense of identity and purpose, their purpose being to support their Islamic "brothers" and "sisters" in the armed struggle in Syria. Although this sample is small, it provides a deeper understanding as to why children ultimately decide to join ISIS.

### **C. THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD ASSOCIATION WITH TERRORISTS GROUPS**

When looking beyond radicalization factors to the impacts of being a member of or associating with a terrorist group, it is clear that the life trajectories of children and child soldiers are adversely affected. Children, who depend heavily on parental care, can be

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<sup>90</sup> Marion van San, 48.

stripped from families and lose their loved ones, leaving an unstable emotional void. Children can also lose out on a formal education and become displaced inside refugee camps. They may become disabled or potentially die as an outcome of warfare and suffer psychologically from traumatic events. While this research does not attempt to go into depth on the multitude of effects that conflict as a result of being part of a terrorist group can have on children, it will separate them into two categories: physical and psychological. Having earlier established the factors that can propel children into radicalization, it is important to now reflect on the effects that conflict can have on them. The goal of this section is to provide insight into the types of events children may face or fall victim to as a result of joining extremist groups or associating with them because these events represent the obstacles children will face once they leave extremists groups, and if children are going to be deradicalized, disengaged, and reintegrated back into society, these effects must be properly addressed.

## **1. Physical**

The physical impacts of war on children can potentially include the following:

### ***a. Death***

According to a 2018 UN report, over 10,000 children died worldwide from conflict in 2017 alone.<sup>91</sup> This is an overall rise compared to the previous year, with the culprits mainly being non-state actors in Syria, Central African Republic (CAR), South Sudan, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Myanmar. In 2017, the Syrian Network For Human Rights reported that ISIS and other extremist group forces killed 283 children below the age of eighteen, 258 in 2016, and 149 in 2015.<sup>92</sup> Inside of a Kurdish-run internment camp, one Iraqi boy who survived the fighting in Baghouz exclaims that “in one day, at least 2,000 people were killed”; this included children, due to

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<sup>91</sup> “Rise in Number of Children Killed, Maimed and Recruited in Conflict: UN Report,” UN News, March 2, 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/06/1013232>.

<sup>92</sup> “10,204 Civilians Killed in Syria in 2017,” Syrian Network For Human Rights, February 14, 2018, [http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/10,204\\_civilians\\_killed\\_in\\_2017\\_en.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/10,204_civilians_killed_in_2017_en.pdf).

ISIS setting off car bombs.<sup>93</sup> The total number of children killed is likely to be much higher, considering that ISIS and the Syrian regime do not publicly release or record the total number of people killed.

**b. Injury/ Disability**

Children suffer a variety of war injuries. According to the *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, in contrast to adults, children are far more likely to be killed or suffer serious injury from landmine explosions or IEDs.<sup>94</sup> In Syria and Iraq, ISIS has used landmines for diversion operations and attacks, which have inflicted numerous casualties involving severe burns, deep cuts and abrasions, and limb amputations.<sup>95</sup> ISIS is also notorious for cutting off the limbs of infidels, or those they define as unbelievers. Frontline reporter Evan Williams interviewed 14-year-old Omar, a child ISIS attempted to recruit, who explained how ISIS cut off his hand and foot to show other children what happens when you refuse to support the cause of the Islamic State.<sup>96</sup> A six-year-old girl by the name of Nour, whose family stayed dedicated to ISIS till the final battle in Baghouz, was shot in the face by snipers and still had not received treatment 15 days after the shooting.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, of the millions of children who will be incapacitated by war, many will have little to no access to rehabilitation services such as prosthetic limbs, physical therapy, mobility programs, and speech therapy.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Quentin Sommerville, “The Women and Children No-One Wants,” BBC, last modified April 12, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47867673>.

<sup>94</sup> J. Pearn, “Children and War,” *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* 39, no. 3 (April 2003): 166–68.

<sup>95</sup> Feras Hanoush, “The Legacy of ISIS-Manufactured Mines in Raqqa,” *Atlantic Council* (blog), January 5, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-legacy-of-isis-manufactured-mines-in-raqqa>.

<sup>96</sup> *Children of ISIS*, directed by Evan Williams (2015; Los Angeles, CA: Frontline PBS, 2015), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/children-of-isis/transcript/>.

<sup>97</sup> Quentin Sommerville, “The Women and Children No-One Wants.”

<sup>98</sup> Joanna Santa Barbara, “Impact of War on Children and Imperative to End War,” *Croatian Medical Journal* 47, no. 6 (December 2006): 891–92.

**c. *Illness***

War can severely limit the maintenance of a child's health by impacting housing, water sanitation, access to immunizations and health facilities, food supply, and nutrition. A family who fled the heavy violence in Deir Ezzor, who are now trapped inside Eko refugee camp in Greece, anxiously talk to CNN correspondents about their 6-year-old son Alyaman Daar who suffers from muscular dystrophy and is slowly dying because they do not have access to proper medical equipment to provide him with oxygen, fluids, and food.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, Syria has been responsible for the largest number of refugees since WWII starting at the onset of its civil war in 2011. Many of these refugees, which include over 1,000 children, are forced to live in unsanitary camps. Hundreds of images scattered over social media sites and the Internet reveal the horrific conditions of many children displaced by the collapse of the Islamic State. Many children appear severely malnourished, unkempt, and living among large heaps of garbage and waste. A study in the *Canadian Journal of Infectious Diseases & Medical Microbiology* revealed that the displaced population in Syria has shown high pervasiveness of chronic diseases including measles, tuberculosis, cutaneous leishmaniasis, and polio.<sup>100</sup> If left untreated, these conditions will have devastating effects.

**d. *Sexual Exploitation***

Children are at risk, especially females, for being raped or prostituted. A U.S. State Department report on trafficking persons declared that “the government of Syria does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so” and the government did not “protect and prevent children from recruitment and use by government and pro-Syrian regime affiliated militias, armed opposition forces, and designated terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq

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<sup>99</sup> Atika Shubert, Bharati Naik, and Bryony Jones, “Trapped and Dying: No Help for Syrian Boy,” CNN, last modified May 27, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/27/health/syrian-boy-dying-in-refugee-camp/index.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Nabil A. Nimer, “A Review on Emerging and Reemerging of Infectious Diseases in Jordan: The Aftermath of the Syrian Crises,” *Canadian Journal of Infectious Diseases & Medical Microbiology*, (May 2018): 4.

and Syria.”<sup>101</sup> Unsurprisingly, ISIS has publicly established instructions on how to hold female slaves against their will and abuse them sexually. Testimony from Iraqi Yazidi children reveal ISIS fighters would auction them off as sex slaves to other fighters who would then rape or force sexual encounters on them including violent bondage or marriage.<sup>102</sup> Other girls recall the transactions of the slave market and describe how militants would touch their legs and breasts like they were animals, and gravitate toward the girls they considered virgins.

*e. Education and Occupation*

In combat zones or territories where armed groups like the Islamic State rule, access to formal education is limited if not completely nonexistent. When child soldiers are compared to other children not involved in conflict, it is clear that the former are experiencing large gaps in education including literacy skills, life skills, and vocational training. Blattman and Annan conclude that “especially traumatic experiences during abduction had an adverse impact on education, less years of schooling, greater reading problems, lower occupational functioning, and lower work quality later in life” for Ugandan youth.<sup>103</sup> Also, those children who are indoctrinated into armed groups at a younger age have a lower chance of returning to education after conflict.<sup>104</sup> Therefore, a child’s ability to acquire basic vocational skills and maintain an occupation are damaged, which can lead to problems during reintegration.

**2. Psychological**

Being constantly subjected to violence in a war-affected environment can harm children’s mental health, leading to disorders like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),

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<sup>101</sup> “Trafficking In Persons Report,” U.S. Department of State, June 28, 2018, 405–406.

<sup>102</sup> Foundation Scelles, Charpenel Y. (under the direction of), *4<sup>th</sup> Global Report: Prostitution–Exploitation, Persecution, Repression*, Economica Ed. (2016), 3–4.

<sup>103</sup> Christopher Blattman and Jeannie Annan, “The Consequences of Child Soldiering,” *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 92, no. 4 (July 2010): 889–90.

<sup>104</sup> Theresa S. Betancourt et al., “High Hopes, Grim Reality: Reintegration and the Education of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone,” *Comparative Education Review* 52, no. 4 (November 2008): 565–67.

or severe personality changes. PTSD is a mental health condition that can be prompted by undergoing or observing a frightening event. Symptoms include “eating and sleeping problems, increased autonomic arousal (sweating, raised heartbeat, and concentration difficulties), foreshortened sense of future (small children can express hopelessness in relation to ever growing up), recklessness and risk-taking behavior, hyperactivity, withdrawal, defiance, aggression, and also numerous psychosomatic complaints.”<sup>105</sup> Additional symptoms include recollections of traumatic events, distressing dreams or nightmares and, in extreme cases, psychosis.

Schubert and Elbert found through diagnostic interviews or therapeutic work with previously captured children and child soldiers in Northern Uganda and the DRC, that PTSD victims have developed a “fear network, composed of interconnected, trauma-related memories, in which even only peripherally related trauma stimuli can cause a cascading fear response with flash-back properties.”<sup>106</sup> They also claim that repeated exposure to trauma incidents can predict mental health issues. Children who participate in warfare may experience torment, fighting, gunfire, kidnapping, exploitation, rape, death, hunger, unsanitary conditions, and more. The probability of developing PTSD increases with the number of distressing events experienced, which is especially true among child soldiers who are usually victims of multiple traumatic events. For example, Derluyn and colleagues reported a 97% prevalence of clinically significant posttraumatic stress reactions in former child soldiers, among which “39% had to kill a person themselves and 77% had witnessed killings while in captivity.”<sup>107</sup> Additionally, Ovuga, Oyok, and Moro used a Harvard Trauma Questionnaire alongside the Hopkins Symptom Check-List for Depression and discovered out of 102 former Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) child soldiers, “eighty-nine children (87.3%) reported having experienced ten or more war-related traumatic psychological events; 55.9% of the children suffered from symptoms of

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<sup>105</sup> Elisabeth Schauer and Thomas Elbert, “The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering,” in *Trauma Rehabilitation After War and Conflict*, ed. Erin Martz (New York, NY: Springer, 2010), 324–25.

<sup>106</sup> Elisabeth Schauer and Thomas Elbert, “The Psychological Impact,” 321.

<sup>107</sup> Ilse Derluyn et al., “Post-Traumatic Stress in Former Ugandan Child Soldiers,” *THE LANCET* 363, no. 9412 (2004): 861–63.

post-traumatic stress disorder; and 88.2% experienced symptoms of depressed mood.”<sup>108</sup> Lastly, 239 children in Gaza ages 6–11 were subjected to the Gaza Traumatic Event Checklist and the Child Post Traumatic Stress Reaction Index. Thabet and Vostanis found that “174 children (72.8%) reported PTSD reactions of at least mild intensity, while 98 (41%) reported moderate/severe PTSD reactions.”<sup>109</sup> The authors of these studies emphasize that the best forecaster of PTSD rates and severity in children is the number of traumatic and distressing events they have experienced.

Taking the information provided in these studies, one can predict that the children who were either born in or brought to ISIS territory have a high risk for developing PTSD.<sup>110</sup> Known for its brutality and violence, ISIS has subjected many children to the horrors of warfare. Of course, the likelihood of developing PTSD will be tailored to each individual and depend on the number and severity of traumatic incidents he or she has faced. Still, deradicalization and disengagement strategies for these children will absolutely need to include psychological treatment measures. Even once violence has fully ceased, a child’s ability to fully function and develop in a healthy manner can be disrupted. The following includes other damages besides PTSD, although some are linked to it, that a child soldier can face.

**a. *Depression and suicidality***

A child participating in warfare is more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression and suicidality. In 2007, Anvita Bhardwaj and colleagues asked 258 former child soldiers from the People’s War in Nepal to take part in longitudinal study lasting over 5 years. The goal of the study was to determine if the child’s feelings of suicide were influenced by the interpersonal violence (IPV) they experienced as being soldiers in the war. Of the 258

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<sup>108</sup> Emilio Ovuga, Thomas O Oyok, and EB Moro, “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among Former Child Soldiers Attending a Rehabilitative Service and Primary School Education in Northern Uganda,” *African Health Sciences* 8, no. 3 (September 2008): 136–38.

<sup>109</sup> Abdel A. Thabet and Panos Vostanis, “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Reactions in Children of War: A Longitudinal Study,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 24, no. 2 (February 2000): 291–94.

<sup>110</sup> A current study shows severe PTSD among Syrian schoolchildren (age 12–18) refugees in Jordan was 31% see Othman Beni Yonis et al., “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among Syrian Adolescent Refugees in Jordan,” *Journal of Public Health* (March 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdz026>.

children, “1 in 5 (19%) reported suicidal ideation, 5.2% (n = 15) reported plans of suicide, and 4.1% (n = 12) reported a suicide attempt.”<sup>111</sup> Ultimately, the prevalence of suicidal ideations among child soldiers who were victims of IPV was 24.7%; this is 12.2% higher than the control group of civilian children interviewed. Another study conducted by Pfeiffer and Elbert in 2007 revealed similarly high rates of suicidality among former child soldiers in Northern Uganda. Their study included 1,114 children of which 34% exhibited a risk of suicidality and of those 17% were at clinically high risk. The children who were held captive for the longest were classified separately and they raised the initial rate of 34% to 37%, of those 25% became classified as high risk.<sup>112</sup> Former child soldiers may experience this due to a lack of adequate coping or interpersonal skills. Oftentimes, they are unable to communicate frustration, anger, and sadness and may have a hard time placing trust in supportive relationships with adults.

**b. Disassociation**

Disassociation occurs when individuals experience a discontinuity in normal psychological functions such as memory, motor control, perception, and identity. While researchers have provided different explanations of disassociation, one point that remains clear is that trauma-related PTSD increases the likelihood of disassociation, perhaps because disengaging from the external world is a quick and effortless response to the agony of trauma.<sup>113</sup> Children will struggle to handle minor stresses if disassociation is their learned coping mechanism because disassociation disconnects them from reality and can impede their ability to overcome life’s continual and unexpected challenges. If the children currently displaced by ISIS eventually become repatriated with their host countries, those

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<sup>111</sup> Anvita Bhardwaj et al., “Interpersonal Violence and Suicidality Among Former Child Soldiers and War-Exposed Civilian Children in Nepal,” *Global Mental Health* 5, (February 2018): 5.

<sup>112</sup> Elisabeth Schauer and Thomas Elbert, “The Psychological Impact,” 322–323.

<sup>113</sup> See Barbaros Özdemir, Cemil Celik, and Taner Oznur, “Assessment of Dissociation among Combat-Exposed Soldiers with and without Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 6 (April 2015): 2.; J. D. Bremner and E. Brett, “Trauma-Related Dissociative States and Long-Term Psychopathology in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 10, no. 1 (January 1997): 37–40. ; Jon D. Elhai et al., “Clinical Presentations in Combat Veterans Diagnosed with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 59, no. 3 (March 2003): 385–90. ; Sharain Suliman et al., “Predictors of Acute Stress Disorder Severity,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 149, no. 1–3 (July 2013): 277–79.



that exhibit dissociative behavior will continue to interact with other children in inconsistent and unresponsive ways, which may induce harmful action.

*c. Anti-social and Disruptive Behavior*

Even after violence has ceased, children continue to exhibit complications in regulating aggressive urges and handling life without resorting to violent means. In his book *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, Wessels shows that children who have been relocated to their homes can continue to display hostility towards their communities or families.<sup>114</sup> This may be because both unforgiving home and communal environments, created by the isolation and condemning of former child soldiers, are linked to the initiation of antisocial tendencies in youth.<sup>115</sup> For example, children in Iraq who are suspected of having links to ISIS are arrested and detained by Kurdish forces who proceed to torture or coerce confession out of them. A boy of 17 voiced to Human Rights Watch, “You have many kids detained based on fabricated testimonies. Once they are released, maybe they will take revenge on the government and the people who took them to prison.”<sup>116</sup> There is also a link between child soldiers experiencing and perpetrating more types of violence than adult former combatants that consequently increases their appetitive aggression.<sup>117</sup> The longer a child is exposed to extreme violence and grows up with an armed group, the more their perception of violence can shift to favor it as an acceptable way to achieve their goals or interact with others, limiting their ability to reintegrate successfully.

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<sup>114</sup> Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 181–92.

<sup>115</sup> Rebecca Waller, Frances Gardner, and Lucie Cluver, “Shared and Unique Predictors of Antisocial and Substance Use Behavior among a Nationally Representative Sample of South African Youth,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 19, no. 6 (2014): 629–30.

<sup>116</sup> “‘Everyone Must Confess’: Abuses against Children Suspected of ISIS Affiliation in Iraq,” Human Rights Watch, March 6, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/06/everyone-must-confess/abuses-against-children-suspected-isis-affiliation-iraq>.

<sup>117</sup> Katharin Hermenau et al., “Growing Up in Armed Groups: Trauma and Aggression among Child Soldiers in DR Congo,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 4 (November 2013): 5–6.

*d. Transgenerational Effects*

Children are also indirectly affected through a parent's exposure to trauma or PTSD. Studies on combat veterans in the Vietnam era disclose that their offspring will have immoderate levels of behavioral issues because combat veterans who experience war-zone related PTSD may rely upon emotional numbing strategies to detach themselves from reality, thus diminishing family relationships and meaningful involvement.<sup>118</sup> This can ultimately drive the children of the veteran into cycles of frustration, withdrawal, and avoidance. Furthermore, a child's gene expression, brain development, hippocampal plasticity volume, responses to stress, and endocrine development can be altered, depending on the quality of attachment to their mothers and how well she cares for them.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, maternal behavior can also impact how fearfulness and nurturance are transmitted amongst generations.<sup>120</sup> Therefore, living in a war zone can cause parents to develop post-traumatic signs of emotional numbing, which in turn can inhibit their ability to provide their children with secure attachments and emotional closeness. Thus, not addressing the situation of the parents as well as child soldiers themselves can inadvertently pass on post-traumatic symptoms for generations.

**D. CONCLUSION**

This chapter has highlighted the numerous factors that can propel children into radicalization and that using children in armed conflict can induce a myriad of complications for them. Whether children face structural-level issues, are pressured socially through group mechanism, or make the individual decision to join violent extremist groups, children eventually face the second-order effects of joining such groups. From physical health and psychological wellness to education, children are particularly at

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<sup>118</sup> Melissa Pearrow and Lisa Cosgrove, "The Aftermath of Combat-Related PTSD: Toward an Understanding of Transgenerational Trauma," *Communication Disorders Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (February 2009): 77–78.

<sup>119</sup> Joan L. Luby et al., "Preschool Is a Sensitive Period for the Influence of Maternal Support on the Trajectory of Hippocampal Development," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 20 (2016): 5743–46.

<sup>120</sup> Carine Parent et al., "Maternal Care and Individual Differences in Defensive Responses," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14, no. 5 (2005): 230–31.

risk for suffering. There is no question that the children of ISIS have been subjected to traumatic experiences; therefore, it is highly likely that they will exhibit multiple problematic symptoms if not addressed. This means that the countries who plan to accept these children back, and attempt to deradicalize them, will have to draft specifically tailored programs in order to address their unique needs. These issues will be touched on again in Chapter IV when a connection is drawn between the effectiveness of deradicalization strategies and the propelling factors of radicalization for children.

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### III. AN ANALYSIS ON DERADICALIZATION AND DISENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

At no time in the past five decades has there been more focus on deradicalization and disengagement programs than today. The goal of deradicalization is to get an individual to change his or her mindset about supporting terrorism and relinquish his or her radical ideological beliefs. The goal of disengagement is to get an individual to shift their behavior away from supporting or actively participating with terrorist groups. Although terrorism and the study of it existed before September 11th, this monumental event turned terrorism studies into an industry. An article done by Andrew Silke in 2009 reveals the enormous increases in funding and number of researchers the discipline of terrorism studies received after 9/11. For example, the number of books published with the word “terrorism” in the title went from less than 50 per year to 300, the percentage of collaborative research went from 14% to 26%, and the percentage of literature focusing on al-Qaeda and militant Islamist groups went from 23% to 58%.<sup>121</sup> Now that foreign fighters are returning home (or attempting to) from Syria and Iraq equipped with the rudimentary skills to conduct terrorist attacks at home, studies on deradicalization and disengagement have become increasingly relevant. The new emphasis given to deradicalization and disengagement is part of a larger effort by states to undermine the appeal of terrorist groups and delegitimize their violent tactics and rhetoric while limiting the pool of potential recruits for these organizations.<sup>122</sup> Also, these avenues have become an option for states to offer extremists, as opposed to kinetic options that rely on killing and incarcerating terrorists.<sup>123</sup> Depending on the country, different professionals or entities will be in charge of running these

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<sup>121</sup> Andrew Silke, “Contemporary Terrorism Studies: Issues in Research,” in *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*, ed. Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (London: Routledge, 2009), 35–42.

<sup>122</sup> Lindsay Clutterbuck, “Deradicalization Programs and Counterterrorism: A Perspective on the Challenges and Benefits,” in *Understanding Deradicalization: Pathways to Enhance Transatlantic Common Perceptions and Practices* (Middle East Institute, 2015), 12.

<sup>123</sup> Andrew Silke, “Disengagement or Deradicalization: A Look at Prison Programs for Jailed Terrorists,” *Combating Terrorism Center* 4, no. 1 (2011), 18.

programs. Unfortunately, research on deradicalization and disengagement programs is still minimal, and a concrete number of current programs is not available. Furthermore, although these efforts have received considerable attention, programs remain under researched, unclear, and contentious. The way in which they are designed, implemented, and practiced in the real world is difficult to assess and “their effectiveness has not undergone independent scrutiny and its degree is largely a matter of opinion.”<sup>124</sup> Nonetheless, more and more people are beginning to look to deradicalization and disengagement programs as the new tools of counterterrorism, especially in light of the hundreds of returnees from ISIS.

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the literature currently available on deradicalization and disengagement programs to provide a solid foundation of knowledge for the reader. Simultaneously, a critical analysis of these programs is necessary to identify inconsistencies and gaps within the current research. This chapter highlights the key elements of these programs so that chapter four can assess whether they are adequately addressing the motivating factors and effects of violence on children and young adults discussed at length in Chapter II.

This chapter will start by discussing what types of people run deradicalization and disengagement programs and further discuss why it is difficult to obtain a concrete number of how many programs exist. Next, it will discuss the two broad themes within these programs which are ideological counternarratives and social aid. Finally, the chapter will conclude by discussing evaluations of the effectiveness of these programs. It will argue that the effectiveness of deradicalization has been overstated and that the research in this particular subject still lacks rigorous scholarship.

#### **A. KEY ELEMENTS OF DERADICALIZATION AND DISENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS**

It is important to note that not all countries use deradicalization in congruence with disengagement. For some, the ideologies of radicals are never addressed, and social aid is

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<sup>124</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski et al., “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism,” *Advances in Political Psychology* 35 (2014): 88.

given to those who surrender or turn in weapons. This is the case in Colombia where reintegration and demobilization efforts do not have a specific politico-ideological component to them because participation in insurgent groups, mainly the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), is not necessarily ideological.<sup>125</sup> The Colombian approach allows former insurgents the chance to enroll in “reincorporation programs” only after they have turned themselves into a government entity (police, military, justices) and are approved by an interagency committee (CODA). Upon approval, they can receive a pardon for their crimes, healthcare coverage, stipends, free education for 18 months, and up to eight million pesos to start a micro-enterprise.<sup>126</sup> This example illustrates that not all programs subject members to deradicalization before receiving social aid for reintegration. Some program will even give social aid alongside the deradicalization process. This is the case in Saudi Arabia where the families of detained terrorist going through prison deradicalization programs are delivered food, social services, and granted loans.

Nonetheless, each country that uses deradicalization or disengagement programs will have them tailored to the goals they are trying to achieve with extremists, including who manages or runs the programs. Despite the small differences, many initiatives or programs are managed by committees of religious leaders, doctors, psychologists, government officials, and security personnel who are responsible for their element of the program whether that is moderating radical religious beliefs, providing psychological counseling, maintaining physical security inside detention facilities, or providing access to government funding. Teachers are also incorporated into these programs and offer “classes and counseling on sharia law, psychology, vocational training, sociology, history, Islamic culture, art therapy, and athletics.”<sup>127</sup> The UK government’s official counterterrorism strategy states that disengagement programs will provide “mentoring, psychological

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<sup>125</sup> Marcella Ribetti, “Disengagement and Beyond: A Case Study of Demobilization in Colombia,” in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, ed. Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan (London: Routledge, 2009), 152–69.

<sup>126</sup> Ribetti, “Disengagement and Beyond,” 157.

<sup>127</sup> Marisa Porges, “The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment,” Council on Foreign Relations, last modified January 22, 2010, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/saudi-deradicalization-experiment>.

support, theological and ideological advice” through the expertise of “mentors, family support groups, and other personnel.”<sup>128</sup> In Sri Lanka, programs involve nongovernmental organizations, corporate and private sector cooperation, and mentoring programs featuring successful Tamil actors, businesspeople, and athletes.<sup>129</sup> The UK counterterrorism efforts also involve the authorities and community representatives, such as police, social workers, and educational providers. In the Netherlands, a specialized disengagement and reintegration initiative run by “team TER” (Terrorism, Extremism and Radicalization) within the Dutch Probation Service (*Reclassering Nederland*) involves law enforcement, AIVD security officials, public prosecuting authorities (*Openbaar Ministerie*), and mental healthcare providers to help individuals with jihadist backgrounds during detention and after release to ensure successful reintegration back into society.<sup>130</sup> Saudi Arabia’s prison based deradicalization program, which Assistant Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef introduced in 2004, is run by Islamic clerics, psychologists, prison staff, therapist, and family support groups.<sup>131</sup> It has been much easier for scholars to obtain information on who is running these programs; however, the number of programs currently operating worldwide is up for debate.

While no definitive number exists, according to a survey conducted by the Counter Terrorism Implementation Task Force in 2009, at least 34 out of 192 United Nation member states claimed to have some sort of deradicalization or disengagement policies in place during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>132</sup> This includes Muslim majority

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<sup>128</sup> Jamie Grierson, “Extremists Living in UK under Secretive Counter-Terror Programme,” *The Guardian*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/apr/05/extremists-living-in-uk-under-secretive-counter-terror-programme>.

<sup>129</sup> Spandana Singh and Elena Souris, “Want to Deradicalize Terrorists? Treat Them Like Everyone Else.,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), March 8, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/23/want-to-deradicalize-terrorists-treat-them-like-everyone-else-counterterrorism-deradicalization-france-sri-lanka-pontourny-cve/>.

<sup>130</sup> Liesbeth van der Heide and Bart Schuurman, “Reintegrating Terrorists in the Netherlands: Evaluating the Dutch Approach,” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 17 (December 2018): 204.

<sup>131</sup> Andreas Casptack, “Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study,” in *Understanding Deradicalization: Pathway to Enhance Transatlantic Common Perception and Practices* (Middle East Institute, 2015), 2.

<sup>132</sup> Hamed El-Said, “Deradicalization: Experiences in Europe and the Arab World” (European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2017), 93.



countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Malaysia, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Yemen, and Morocco. It also includes Muslim minority countries such as Singapore, Austria, Norway, Belgium, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, United States, and the UK. Since 2009, the number of countries claiming to have adopted these policies and programs has increased. However, the reason the finite number of programs is not known is because many programs exist in secrecy.<sup>133</sup> Some are the innovations of individuals hoping to positively manage a group of terrorists for the sake of doing good, while others consist of entrepreneurial individuals working creatively within prison or police settings. On the other hand, there are programs that allow journalist to chat with “model” prisoners or academics to take tours of the facility. These programs are usually extensive across-the-board and receive adequate amounts of funding (more often than not by governments).<sup>134</sup> Still, other programs can hardly be considered formal at all and may be run by locals within the same village. Future research should attempt to create a database to track the number of programs in each country because this can improve the ability of operators and responders to detect and assess deradicalization and disengagement efforts.

## **1. Ideology**

The most prominent theme that appears in the literature describing elements of deradicalization and disengagement programs is ideological counternarratives. The idea of ideological counternarratives is to take a radicalized individual and subject him or her to more moderate views through credible religious leaders working in conjunction with therapist, social workers, healthcare providers, and mentors, more often than not, through prison reform programs. These religious leaders engage the extremists in dialogue to provide them with different truths that undermine terrorist ideologies and get the individual

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<sup>133</sup> John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, “Rehabilitating the Terrorists?: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-Radicalization Programs,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 2 (March 2010): 279.

<sup>134</sup> John Horgan, “What Makes a Terrorist Stop Being a Terrorist?,” *Journal for Deradicalization* 1 (2015): 1.

to abandon their radical views all together. Countries like Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Great Britain offer a few examples of how this is achieved.

Yemen's dialogue committee enlists the help of trusted Islamic scholars (ulema) who use the Quran to delegitimize the ideas of detained radicals. The ulema teach detainees that killing other Muslims or innocent people is forbidden by God, that a democratically elected president is in line with the Islamic religion, and that the legislation of Yemen follows Sharia.<sup>135</sup> In Saudi Arabia, clerics promote peaceful interpretations of Islam through structured lectures supplemented by Quran recitations.<sup>136</sup> They also engage detainees in open debate about religious issues to re-educate extremists and allow them to repent and abandon terrorist ideologies through limited psychological counseling. However, those terrorists with blood on their hands are not released from the program. In their study of deradicalization programs and how they impact Muslim majority states, Hamed El-Said and Jane Harrigan explain how Bangladesh uses a mixture of propaganda, television programs, and newspapers to put out peaceful messages, sermons, and counter extremism narratives to madrassa students and to those individuals the authorities believe are prone to radicalism.<sup>137</sup> Although these programs have an intended target, the propaganda, seminars, and workshops are open to the public. Often times the events are disguised as innocuous topics like Islam and peace when the actual focus is on the negative characteristics of terrorism. Back in 1997, Egypt used religious intermediaries scholars from Al Azhar University and from the Muslim Brotherhood to convince leaders of the largest armed Islamist movement (al-Gama-al-Islamiyya) to give up violence, halt terrorist activity, and promote deradicalization.<sup>138</sup> It was not until 2003 that the leaders of this terrorist organization were able to reestablish, rewrite, and publish new ideological

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<sup>135</sup> Hamed El-Said and Jane Harrigan, eds., *Deradicalising Violent Extremists: Counter-Radicalization and Deradicalization Programmes and Their Impact in Muslim Majority States* (London: Routledge, 2013), 248–249.

<sup>136</sup> Christopher Boucek, "Extremist Re-Education and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia," in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, ed. Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 213–214.

<sup>137</sup> El-Said and Harrigan, *Deradicalising Violent Extremists*, 63–83.

<sup>138</sup> Zeynep Kaya, "Letting Go: De-Radicalization in Egypt," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 6 (2016): 92–94.

literature that focused on rejecting violence and abandoning jihad, that members of this terrorist group began to comply with deradicalization efforts.

In Great Britain, the objective of one element of the governments over-arching counterterrorism strategy CONTEST is to challenge the ideology that supports terrorism and those who promote it. This element is called “Prevent,” and attempts to address ideology by disproving the claims made by terrorist groups and challenging terrorist and associated extremist narratives “through projects in education, communities and the criminal justice system (prison and probation); and through support for experts where ideology misrepresents theology and requires a detailed response.”<sup>139</sup> For example, the Positive Street Project (PSP) created a drop-in center for youth where local Imams and Muslim leaders helped guide youth away from radical ideologies and taught moderate interpretations of Islam through coordinated debate about hot topics and controversial ideas the youth were facing.<sup>140</sup>

The overall goal of including ideological counternarratives into deradicalization and disengagement programs is to get the radicalized individual to discontinue supporting and engaging in violence based on extremist interpretations of religion. Ideological deradicalization is especially important to maintain disengagement from a terrorist group because there is ultimately a link between radical thoughts and action. Once an individual makes the decision to minimize the means and opportunities to actively engage in terrorist groups (they leave the group), moderate ideology can help create and maintain separation from radical groups. Creating that cognitive shift in ideas through deradicalization minimizes the chances that an individual sympathizes with or justifies terrorist activities. Also, when enough individuals renounce a radical ideology, the groups that continue to adhere to this ideology are largely discredited.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> “EX POST PAPER: UK Prevent Strategy,” Radicalisation Awareness Network, June 16, 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-papers/docs/ran\\_study\\_visit\\_uk\\_prevent\\_strategy\\_16-17\\_062016\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_study_visit_uk_prevent_strategy_16-17_062016_en.pdf).

<sup>140</sup> Christopher Baker-Beall, Charlotte Heath-Kelly, and Lee Jarvis, eds., *Counter-Radicalisation: Critical Perspectives*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 125.

<sup>141</sup> Angel Rabasa et al., “Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists,” xiv.

## 2. Social Aid

A second aspect of many deradicalization and disengagement programs is social aid. Social aid refers to state sponsored assistance in the form of monetary support, guidance, vocational training, food, clothing, and more such as, arranging marriages and paying dowry, that is intended to help an individual meet their basic needs. This aid is given to former detainees once they have gone through deradicalization efforts (although this is not always the case) and are assessed to be successfully rehabilitated. How then is ideology connected to social aid? Before an extremist can receive aid from the state, the state must ensure that the individual will not abuse that aid and defect to supporting terrorist organizations. Therefore, upfront efforts are aimed at delegitimizing radical ideologies and promoting more moderate ones. Once an individual accepts and demonstrate adherence to moderate views, social aid is offered to help the individual reintegrate economically and socially back into society. By doing so, the individual is less likely to resort to terrorism if basic needs such as food, shelter, and monetary support are guaranteed. However, middle-aged individuals who are career terrorist are at a higher risk of re-engaging in terrorism despite social aid because they possess strong ideological commitments, have limited alternatives outside of the terrorist group, or have acquired “sunk costs” due to prolonged involvement in these groups.<sup>142</sup> These risk factors make it more difficult for these particular individuals to stay disengaged from terrorism, but the goal remains the same.

The overall goal of these programs is to help a former detainee with social and economic reintegration. For example, Saudi Arabia’s approach to this aspect of deradicalization has gained global attention, even the United States has described the program as “the best role model for detention facilities.”<sup>143</sup> The program delivers food and clothing, distributes loans, supports marriage ceremonies, and offers amnesty to former

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<sup>142</sup> Mary Beth Altier, John Horgan, and Christian Thoroughgood, “Returning to the Fight: What the Literature on Criminal Recidivism Can Contribute to Our Understanding of Terrorist Recidivism” (Master’s thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 2012), [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/942\\_OPSR\\_TP\\_Returning-to-Fight\\_Literature-Review\\_508.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/942_OPSR_TP_Returning-to-Fight_Literature-Review_508.pdf).

<sup>143</sup> Marisa Porges, “The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment,” Council on Foreign Relations, last modified January 22, 2010, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/saudi-deradicalization-experiment>.

detainees and their families.<sup>144</sup> The idea being once an individual has renounced extremist views and has adopted moderate ones, social and economic reintegration should reduce the likelihood of returning to terrorism. Other deradicalization and disengagement programs in Sweden, Norway, Bangladesh, and Malaysia offer former fighters social aid in the form of vocational workshops or educational classroom activities that help sustain an alternative lifestyle conducive to preventing recidivism.<sup>145</sup> For example, in Bangladesh, madrasa students who are having a hard time finding employment are offered vocational training in areas like mechanics, air conditioning mechanics, and plumbing.<sup>146</sup> In Exit Sweden, youth attempting to separate themselves from the White Power scene are linked with a former neo-Nazi who then helps that individual establish a “normal life” by engaging in joint activities with other youth from mainstream backgrounds.<sup>147</sup> This is usually done in a classroom setting and the goal is to help the separating youth stay disengaged from crime and violence by rebuilding stable social networks and trust with authority.

## **B. MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DERADICALIZATION AND DISENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES**

This thesis does not focus on creating a framework in which to evaluate the effectiveness of deradicalization or disengagement programs. This would entail creating empirically valid metrics to measure behavioral changes in people or the effects of long-term intervention and deciding which external entity will conduct evaluations and how much transparency and access to information they will receive. Still, it is still important to address the perceived successes of these programs. Most countries that implement these

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<sup>144</sup> El-Said and Harrigan, *Deradicalising Violent Extremists*, 207–208.

<sup>145</sup> Edwin Bakker, “Radicalization and Jihadism in Netherlands,” in *Understanding Violent Radicalisation: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp (Routledge, 2012), 181; Christopher Boucek, “Extremist Re-Education and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia,” 214–217.

<sup>146</sup> El-Said and Harrigan, *Deradicalising Violent Extremists*, 63–65.

<sup>147</sup> Tore Bjorgo, Jaap van Donselaar, and Sara Grunenberg, “Exit from Right-Wing Extremist Groups: Lessons from Disengagement Programmes in Norway, Sweden and Germany,” in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, ed. Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 135–51.

efforts claim that their programs are effective, however little empirical support follows these claims and a clear picture of what constitutes success is not available.<sup>148</sup>

For example, Yemen's dialogue committee was initiated to create a forum for radicals to discuss topics with clerics who attempted to get these radicals to moderate their extremists' views. However, little data existed on the characteristics or demographics of those radicals going through the program, which made evaluating it harder.<sup>149</sup> Also, Yemeni officials claimed that the country saw a decrease in violent terrorist attacks from 2002, the start of the program, to 2006. However, Yemen saw a resurgence of terrorist activity during 2006 which brought the criteria being used for judging the successes of their programs into question. Yemeni officials assumed their deradicalized and disengaged program participants were not returning to militancy despite a lack of tracking data. Saudi Arabia's counseling program is another example of a program with questionable success rates. While Saudi officials claim a 90% success rate, the empirical evidence to support this number does not exist, which makes the number seem largely overestimated. The kingdom has not allowed outside officials to conduct separate evaluations of their program and they admit that they do not have full accountability of the detainees they release.<sup>150</sup> This suggest that it is possible some former detainees returned to militancy and that the program is unsuccessful. In Bangladesh, the governments criteria for success takes into account the quantity of terrorist attacks, the degree of violence within local communities, and the amount of individuals being recruited into religious-based extremism.<sup>151</sup> While the government has claimed each of these has declined, it is difficult to determine whether that is due to the implementation of deradicalization and disengagement efforts or the hardline policies the government has taken, such as the use of force to apprehend terrorist or the enactment of the death penalty as a deterrent. Furthermore, the entire operation of the program is extremely covert and almost no Bangladeshi citizens know it exist and there is hardly any public information available via the Internet. The little information that is

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<sup>148</sup> Rabasa et al., "Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists," xvi.

<sup>149</sup> El-Said and Harrigan, *Deradicalising Violent Extremists*, 249.

<sup>150</sup> Rabasa et al., "Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists," 75–76.

<sup>151</sup> El-Said and Harrigan, *Deradicalising Violent Extremists*, 67.

made available is usually by the entities running the program, so the claimed successes of their program have not been externally validated.

In the UK, officials have received massive public scrutiny about the Prevent strategy because of the second and third-order counterproductive impacts it has created. This sits in contrast to security minister Ben Wallace's comments that the program is helping "save lives" and has seen "real results" in helping channel individuals away from terrorism.<sup>152</sup> However, the public believes it unfairly stigmatizes Muslim populations as communities of suspicion, disincentivizes sharing information with the police, and alienates the very people it was designed to help.<sup>153</sup> For example, in 2015 under Prevent the government introduced a statutory duty on state employees (teachers, local authorities, medical personnel, law enforcement) to report any suspicions or apprehensions about people they feel may be at risk for turning to extremism or radicalization. This led to multiple cases of children being reported by teachers for wearing T-shirts with slogans mistaken as ISIS propaganda, for wearing "Free-Palestine" badges, or for reading books with the word terrorism in the title.<sup>154</sup> Overall, it has left Muslim parents and children alike feeling alienated and scared to express themselves, practice their religion, or trust those around them especially the security apparatus.

Although these are not the only programs facing these issues, they highlight the questionable success rates of deradicalization and disengagement programs. Of course, the authorities who manage these programs continue to make unwavering claims of success; however, many of these claims are grounded on questionably low recidivism rates. This is problematic because calculating the recidivism rates of former terrorists who have been released from detention is tremendously difficult since "there are no national databases that

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<sup>152</sup> Casciani, Domonic, "Prevent Scheme: Anti-Terror Referrals for 2,000 Children," BBC, last modified November 9, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-41927937>.

<sup>153</sup> Chris Graham, "What Is the Anti-Terror Prevent Programme and Why Is It Controversial?," *The Telegraph*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/anti-terror-prevent-programme-controversial/>.

<sup>154</sup> Jamie Grierson, "'My Son Was Terrified': How Prevent Alienates UK Muslims," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jan/27/prevent-muslim-community-discrimination>.

record such information or any baseline measure to which one can actually compare,”<sup>155</sup> and as pointed out by Marsden, “lack of recidivism should not automatically be taken to mean that the intervention has been influential.”<sup>156</sup> Ascertaining whether these programs are successful and why will be challenging for the following reasons: (1) initiatives have not adopted clear criteria’s or benchmarks for success, (2) data linked to these initiatives is scarce making it difficult for authentic independent sources to validate, and (3) the scholarship dedicated to these programs lacks methodical, organized, and collective study efforts.<sup>157</sup>

Unfortunately, many deradicalization and disengagement strategies lack scientific evaluation and formal comparison on top of questionable claims of success. Allard R. Feddes and Marcello Gallucci attempted to highlight this issue by conducting a literature review on 55 manuscripts with over 135 samples that included qualitative or quantitative evaluations on programs intended to prevent (further) radicalization or carry out deradicalization. Their review revealed that the data within the manuscripts was regularly anecdotal (49%) in which “no explicit reference to theory and no empirical quantitative or qualitative data was reported.”<sup>158</sup> Only 16 out of 35 samples (12%) presented either numerical or characterizing raw data from first-hand sources. Looking beyond Feddes and Gallucci’s sample, terrorism studies as a whole lack evaluations based on theory, empirical data collection, experimental research designs, objective goal testing through control groups, and multiple-instrument hypothesis testing. Research of this sort is abundant in terrorism studies, making it weak from a methodological standpoint and behind current

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<sup>155</sup> Adrian Cherney, “Evaluating Interventions to Disengage Extremist Offenders: A Study of the Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM),” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (July 2018): 4.

<sup>156</sup> Sarah V. Marsden, “Conceptualising ‘Success’ with Those Convicted of Terrorism Offences: Aims, Methods, and Barriers to Reintegration,” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 7, no. 2 (May 2015): 143–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2014.1001421>.

<sup>157</sup> John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, “Rehabilitating the Terrorists?: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-Radicalization Programs,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 2 (March 2010): 286.

<sup>158</sup> Allard R. Feddes and Marcello Gallucci, “A Literature Review on Methodology Used in Evaluating Effects of Preventive and De-Radicalisation Interventions,” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 5 (2016): 17.



standards in other social sciences. Marc Sageman goes so far as to claim, “academic terrorism research has stagnated for the past dozen years because of a lack of both primary sources and vigorous efforts to police the quality of research.”<sup>159</sup> Evaluations of deradicalization and disengagement strategies should do the following: (1) utilize a mixed-method approach that collects and integrates qualitative and quantitative data, (2) create hypotheses so they can be tested empirically, and (3) use multiple data collection tools such as surveys, observations, interviews, focus groups, and experiments. Still, on a positive note, the creativity that led to these initiatives cannot be lost and this literature review has hopefully shed light on areas where more empirical analysis can be done.

### C. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the literature on deradicalization and disengagement programs is focused around two major themes, ideology and social aid. Heavy emphasis is put on the ideological aspect of the programs, which usually consist of religious personnel engaging in dialogue with radical individuals in order to get them to abandon terrorist ideologies and adopt more moderate views. While not all programs offer social aid, the ones that do aim to diminish the barriers individuals face when exiting an extremist group and foster the social reintegration of these individuals back into society. Unfortunately, deradicalization and disengagement strategies continue to be questioned and current programs continue to provide less than concrete results of success.

While the number of programs appears to be increasing around the world, there appears to be a disjuncture between the very affiliative factors—social networks, kinships ties, the search for an identity, and the psychological characteristics of adolescents—that research suggests, are highly influential in a child’s decisions to join such organizations and the design and implementation of current programs.<sup>160</sup> Chapter IV will further explore the efficacy of current programs and begin to question whether they can successfully be

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<sup>159</sup> Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,” 8.

<sup>160</sup> Madeline Morris et al., “Deradicalization: A Review of The Literature With Comparison to Findings in The Literatures on Deganging and Deprogramming” (Institute for Homeland Security Solutions: Duke University of Law, 2010), 5.

applied and offered to the children currently attempting to return home from the former territory of the Islamic State. Based on the factors that motivate children to join terrorist organization and the design, implementation, and outcomes of current programs, the likelihood that they can effectively deradicalize and reintegrate children is unlikely.

## **IV. DERADICALIZATION AND DISENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS APPLIED TO CHILDREN**

This thesis has sought to answer the following questions: are current deradicalization and disengagement programs applicable to the children of ISIS? Would those programs help to reintegrate children back into society? Is a different approach needed? This thesis began by exploring why children join terrorist groups to begin with, and the consequences of such actions. It also looked at the literature describing deradicalization and disengagement programs to deduce what strategies or policies are being used to reintegrate former combatants into society. Based on this information, it appears that current programs would most likely be unsuccessful or at best partially successful, in effectively deradicalizing or disengaging children from ISIS. This is not to say that the ideological and social aid aspects of current programs should be completely tossed, however programs must reconsider the importance they place on these two aspects and adopt tailored responses for the unique needs of children. This final chapter will borrow heavily from the analysis of earlier chapters to help determine whether current programs are applicable to the children currently returning from ISIS.

### **A. CAN CURRENT PROGRAMS HELP CHILDREN?**

The question of whether current programs can effectively deradicalize, disengage, and reintegrate children remains. Based on what we know about current programs and why children get involved and the consequences of that involvement, this thesis contends that current programs are largely ineffective for children. Because they are largely prison based, place heavy emphasis on ideology, and provide untailored aid to participants, the design and implementation of current deradicalization and disengagement programs are ignoring the very affiliative factors—social networks, the sense of community and belonging, and psychological characteristic of adolescents—that research suggests are immensely influential in a child’s decision to join extremist groups. They also ignore the unique effects that involvement with terrorism has on children.

## 1. Aspects of Deradicalization and Disengagement Programs Applicable to Children

For starters, not all aspects of deradicalization and disengagement programs are ineffective. The agreement that counterterrorism efforts need to go beyond traditional intelligence and security measures to fight Islamic terrorism suggest that having these programs in the first place is a step in the right direction. They address the growing consensus that efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate former terrorists is just as important as kinetic responses to terrorism. The collapse of the caliphate has brought this idea to the forefront since large numbers of men, women, and children are seeking to return to their host countries. For children, the need for deradicalization, disengagement, and reintegration is even more urgent since they are at such a pivotal development stage in their lives and require unique types of care when compared to adults. For children, the availability of such programs will be crucial to improve their chances of being able to live a normal life, particularly as many are orphans because their parents are dead or imprisoned.

Second, it is clear through propaganda, media coverage, and interviews that the children of ISIS have been socialized in multiple ways into the group's radical ideology and methods of violence. In 2015, ISIS developed a new curriculum for school age children that focused heavily on religion. The syllabus focused on reading the Quran, promoting the Islamic caliphate, and Sharia and military training such as weapons handling, ammunitions, and fighting tactics.<sup>161</sup> NBC News interviewed a former IS teacher who stated "I was teaching them to become a young terrorist. I was simply brainwashing them."<sup>162</sup> The goal of this new K-12 education was to incite violence and extremism by radicalizing young minds and indoctrinating them into the ideology of ISIS early on. Beyond school, children are exposed to brutal physical training meant to deepen their loyalty through hardships,

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<sup>161</sup> Kinana Qaddour, "Inside ISIS' Dysfunctional Schools," *Foreign Affairs*, October 13, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-13/inside-isis-dysfunctional-schools>.

<sup>162</sup> Ammar Cheikh Omar and Saphora Smith, "Generation ISIS: When Children Are Taught to Be Terrorists," NBC News, last modified October 21, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/generation-isis-when-children-are-taught-be-terrorists-n812201>.

sacrifice, and discipline.<sup>163</sup> Therefore, programs for children will still need to address radical ideologies and attempt to delegitimize the teachings of the Islamic State. The same goes for social aid. Most forms of aid will be critical to the survival of children. For example, food, water, shelter, and clothing will be key to fulfilling an individual's hierarchy of needs. Other forms of aid like education or life-skills workshops will help with the reintegration processes later down the road. Nonetheless, programs are still designed and implemented in ways that are not conducive for the reintegration of children.

## **2. Aspects of Deradicalization and Disengagement Programs Inapplicable to Children**

While many can agree youth should be held accountable for their actions, it must be done so in a developmentally appropriate way that considers their young age as well as their individual characteristics and behaviors. Putting aside the argument of whether juvenile prisons are just, it has been demonstrated that prisons can facilitate the adoption of extreme or radicalized beliefs and open the door to recruitment into violent groups. While the risk of this occurring is often overstated, it still stands that “prisons may serve as locations in which violent extremism can thrive” and where prisoners can be “radicalized to violence or where violent extremist prisoners who are co-located can form closer relationships, more cohesive networks and mutual reinforcement of violent extremist beliefs.”<sup>164</sup> While imprisoned, youth may experience crises of self-understanding, feelings of rejection by native or host society, and may be integrated into new, delinquent and defensive, group identities.<sup>165</sup> Therefore, subjecting radicalized young adults to prison environments where they are physically and psychologically in danger may compound their vulnerability to further radicalization or engagement with terrorist groups.

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<sup>163</sup> Mia Bloom and John Horgan, *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism* (London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 140–141.

<sup>164</sup> “Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons,” (United Nations, 2016), 107.

<sup>165</sup> Greg Hannah, Lindsay Clutterbuck, and Jennifer Rubin, *Radicalization or Rehabilitation*, Report No. TR571 (Europe: RAND Corporation, 2008), 14–15.

Furthermore, current programs place a heavy emphasis on addressing ideology. While ideology is important, it is only one of many risk factors that contribute to radicalization. Research has shown that ideology alone is not the strongest motivating factor for joining extremist groups. Peter Neumann states “While extremists can find potent motivation at the nexus of grievance and ideology, taking the step from mere radicalism to violent extremism is much more difficult without the aid of social structures and groups.”<sup>166</sup> People who harbor radical ideas seldom act on them and even militant jihadists have cursory understandings of the radicalized ideology they represent and are not considered especially “pious.”<sup>167</sup> For youth, social structures, peer networks, and family ties contribute the most to the radicalization process. Youth who associate with peers who engage in delinquency or exhibit patterns of aggressive and antisocial behavior are at higher risks for joining criminal groups like gangs or terrorist groups. Once these friendship networks hit a peak of cohesion, they cut off communication with outsiders and turn inward to radicalize even further. Moreover, children who are exposed to terrorism at a young age, whether that be through family members who are members of a terrorist group or through those that support terrorist activities, are more likely to join themselves. Thus, programs should consider substituting strategies that address ideology for ones that address positive peer contacts and networking.

Although social aid is vital to disengagement and reintegration, for children it is coming at the expense of psychological counseling, guidance, and aftercare. We know that children experience unique social and cognitive psychological developments when compared to adults. Children are at a stage in their life where their decision-making skills and ability to think rationally are not fully developed. In general, youth take more risks than adults which can lead to harmful consequences, especially since youth are more likely to adopt overly hostile, distressing, or even dangerous responses to violence that threatens

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<sup>166</sup> Peter Neumann, “Combating Violent Extremism: The Counterradicalization Debate in 2011,” The Washington Institute, audio recording, 11:56, January 7, 2011, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/combating-violent-extremism-the-counterradicalization-debate-in-2011>.

<sup>167</sup> Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2012): 30.

their physical or psychological well-being.<sup>168</sup> For example, children whose risk-taking behavior exposes them to physical, emotional, or sexual forms of violence are more likely to adopt responses where they avert physical touch, attempt suicide or self-mutilation, lash out through aggressive tantrums or rages, refuse to eat, withdraw themselves from social activities, or begin to abuse illegal substances.<sup>169</sup> Youth are also experiencing intense explorations of self-identity, personal values, goals, and beliefs. Youthful rebellion, impulsive curiosity, identity quarrels, and estrangement from parents are the characteristics of young people that terrorist organizations seek to take advantage of. This cognitive stage of adolescents allows terrorist groups to offer youth a sense of community and camaraderie, and the chance to be recognized giving them a perception of significance. Therefore, disengagement programs should emphasize offering advice and guidance to youth from within a framework of their unique religious and cultural backgrounds.

We also know that children and child soldiers are more adversely affected by the gruesome results of terrorism and association with terrorist groups. Because children rely on parental care, being stripped from their families and loved ones can create unstable emotional voids. Children are also prone to losing out on a formal education and becoming displaced inside refugee camps alongside their parents. Even after violence, children find it harder to control their aggressive impulses because early on they disassociated themselves to cope with trauma, making minor stressors and life activities much harder to deal with. Thus, social aid such as vocational workshops, loans, business partnerships, and marriage arrangements are not helpful to children when they need the empathy and attachment of their parents and early forms of formal education to develop, and lack the ability to socialize or cope with minor stresses.

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<sup>168</sup> See William T Harbaugh, Kate Krause, and Lise Vesterlund, "Risk Attitudes of Children and Adults: Choices Over Small and Large Probability Gains and Losses," *Experimental Economics* 5, (2002): 32.; Irwin P Levin et al., "Stability of Choices in a Risky Decision-Making Task: A 3-Year Longitudinal Study with Children and Adults," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 20, no. 3 (2007): 241–52.; Stephanie Burnett et al., "Adolescents' Heightened Risk-Seeking in a Probabilistic Gambling Task," *Cognitive Development* 25, no. 2 (April 2010): 183–96.; Tim Rakow and Saleema B. Rahim, "Developmental Insights into Experience-based Decision Making," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 23, no. 1 (2010): 69–82.

<sup>169</sup> Abdulaziz Al Odhayani, William J. Watson, and Lindsay Watson, "Behavioural Consequences of Child Abuse," *Canadian Family Physician* 59, no. 8 (August 2013): 832–34.

### 3. How to Improve Deradicalization and Disengagement Programs for Children

Programs designed for children should consider alternatives to detention and imprisonment. The World Bank has attempted to address this issue by setting guidelines for Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs where “child soldiers must be separated from military authority and protected through the establishment of special reception centres during demobilization, as long as their stay prior to being reunited with their families and communities is as short as possible.”<sup>170</sup> For example, some DDR programs have Interim Care Centres (ICC) for children that are run by both local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).<sup>171</sup> Likewise, special efforts should be made to reach out and release those children inside detention facilities who are being held alongside radical ISIS supporters since they are vulnerable to recruitment.<sup>172</sup> These special centers create an age-appropriate environment for children to disengage from terrorism.

It is clear that programs are failing to address the primary motivating forces that propel children to join terrorist groups, namely family, peer networks, and social identity. Take the case of Belgian children for example. They started feeling marginalized from their host society, turned to like-minded peers who gave them a unique sense of identity associated with the Islamic struggle in Syria, and eventually made the decision to join ISIS through their peer networks. If these forces are not addressed, these children, and many others, can end up being influenced by the same original factors and return to affiliating with terrorism. This is especially true in the age of social media where connecting with peers and associating with delinquent groups is even faster and easier than ever before. Therefore, programs should address social networks by fostering positive intergroup

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<sup>170</sup> Mark Knight and Alpaslan Ozerdem, “Guns, Camps and Cash: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertion of Former Combatants in Transitions from War to Peace,” *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 4 (July 2004): 507.

<sup>171</sup> Lysanne Rivard, “Child Soldiers and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programs: The Universalism of Children’s Rights vs. Cultural Relativism Debate,” *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (August 2010). <https://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/772>.

<sup>172</sup> Haid, “Reintegrating ISIS Supporters in Syria,” 17.



contact. One way to do this is to create spaces for dialogue at the most basic level of activity. Emilia Aiello and colleagues suggest that this grassroots dialogue can be most effective if it adopts the following four elements: “providing guidance to being safe in the exploration of extremist messages and violent radicalization; the rejection of violence; that dialogue is egalitarian; and that relationships in these spaces for dialogue are built on trust so that adolescents and young adults feel confident to raise their doubts.”<sup>173</sup> This dialogue can be a part of deradicalization and disengagement programs, but also target youth at large to prevent radicalization from occurring. Additionally, disengagement programs should afford peer groups, especially marginalized groups, the opportunity for civic engagement. Children who joined the Islamic State were pushed by a desire to escape structural difficulties and pulled by the chance to partake in adventure and be a part of a larger cause. Integrating civic participation into current disengagement programs would allow youth to create positive relationships with their communities, foster adult partnerships with youth leaders, and address structural disparities.<sup>174</sup> Youth civic engagement can also give individuals a meaningful sense of agency and stake in political activities. The intention here is to create positive intergroup contact and give peer groups healthy outlets of expression.

Although psychological explanations have been downplayed when considering why adults join terrorist groups, the psychology of children is vastly different and plays a much larger role in explaining their decision making. At such a young age children have not yet developed the mental capacity to suppress impulsive behaviors or make rational judgements. This, paired with the fact many youth experience intense explorations of self, may make terrorist groups appealing. In the context of Islam, youth may be interested in learning more about their heritage, becoming closer to their religion, and understanding how to interact with non-Muslim counterparts in a religiously diverse environment. Radical Islamist or terrorist groups should not be the only sources of guidance where “young people

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<sup>173</sup> Emilia Aiello, Lidia Puigvert, and Tinka Schubert, “Preventing Violent Radicalization of Youth through Dialogic Evidence-Based Policies,” *International Sociology* 33, no. 4 (July 2018): 442.

<sup>174</sup> Mindy Romero, Jonathan London, and Nancy Erbsstein, “Opportunities and Challenges for Youth Civic Engagement” (Working Paper, UC Davis, 2010), 3.

are receiving guidance calculated to disrupt integration, foster hostility and make their own lives more difficult.”<sup>175</sup> While going through a program, credible religious leaders, counselors, and peers should be utilized to guide youth through day-to-day activities and through a positive self-identification process. This will help address the individual factors such as mental health conditions, depression, trauma, and personality traits that originally made these children vulnerable to radicalization.

Lastly, it has been documented that child soldiers are at a very high risk of developing PTSD due to the traumatic experiences they faced while being a part of a militant group. This mental health issue can cloud children with guilt, hostility, hypervigilance, nightmares, and more like unwanted thoughts or self-destructive behavior.<sup>176</sup> While some forms of aid will be vital such as food, clothing, and shelter, psychologically and physically children suffer differently than adults so more emphasis should be placed on counseling, therapy, socialization, and education instead of teaching vocational skills and providing monetary support.<sup>177</sup> For example, in Sri Lanka, one pillar of their six-pronged approach to rehabilitation involves educational programs for combatants that offer formal schooling where general certificates can be obtained or advanced certificates which include examinations and language training.<sup>178</sup> Additionally, since children need parental support during development, efforts should be made to reconnect them with family members throughout the disengagement process, similar to what is done in Saudi Arabia, to ease the tension of resocialization. Most importantly, programs for youth need to consider the types of violence these children experienced and support sustainable and effective responses to their mental health needs. This psychological adjustment will be crucial to their reintegration into society.

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<sup>175</sup> Cheryl Benard, “A Future for the Young: Options for Helping Middle Eastern Youth Escape the Trap of Radicalization” (Working Paper, RAND, 2005), 92–93.

<sup>176</sup> Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), “Understanding the Impact of Trauma, Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP),” Publication No. (SMA) 13–4801 (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US), 2014), 61–63.

<sup>177</sup> Holmer and Shtuni, “Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative,” 11.

<sup>178</sup> Ruwan B. Ehelepola, “Reintegration of Former Combatants in Sri Lanka” (Master’s thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2012), 15.

## **B. ADDITIONAL AREAS OF CONCERN**

It has been established that current programs should discard prison-based facilities, abandon ideological counternarratives in favor of promoting positive outlets for peer networks, and shift from providing untailored social aid to providing psychological/trauma counseling and guidance. Still, there are several other areas of concern that programs can address to increase the likelihood of success when applied to children.

First, make sure the people are ungrudgingly ready to accept and integrate these children back into the folds of society. Even if a child has gone through a deradicalization or disengagement program, a hostile community can drive them back to isolation and into the cycle of terrorist affiliation once more. A study conducted by Theresa Betancourt, at Harvard's School of Public Health, asserts that "community acceptance was an important predictor of reduced depression" among former child combatants over time "as well as improvements in prosocial attitudes and confidence."<sup>179</sup> These findings speak to the heightened importance of educating the community on the sensitivity of child soldiers returning home and how constructive community acceptance can lead to positive future outlooks for the children.

Second, children will need to delegitimize their old way of living, which can be achieved through creating new bonds of friendship and community ties. Therefore, avenues must be created for children to socialize through legal means during the disengagement process. For example, allowing kids to participate in sports teams can provide them with opportunities to work together but also keep them away from violent narratives and social isolation. This has been the case for former child soldiers in Sri Lanka where respect, trust, and team building is facilitated through playing, coaching, and watching cricket.<sup>180</sup> The path to rehabilitation cannot merely focus on changing a mindset of an individual, it must foster positive social relationships and shift personal circumstances.

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<sup>179</sup> Theresa S. Betancourt et al., "Sierra Leone's Former Child Soldiers: A Follow-up Study of Psychosocial Adjustment and Community Reintegration," *Child Development* 81, no. 4 (2010): 1077–95.

<sup>180</sup> Suzanne Davey, "In Sri Lanka, Cricket Leadership Programme Helps Former Child Soldiers," UNICEF, last modified September 8, 2018, [https://www.unicef.org/sports/sri\\_lanka\\_53617.html](https://www.unicef.org/sports/sri_lanka_53617.html).

Third, in the age of technology, future programs should consider offering outlets for youth to socialize and engage other like-minded youth through social media sites. Since adolescents can be easily manipulated through the Internet, it would be wise to fund and expand professional chat rooms, news commentaries, and political forums dedicated to youth. Not only would this help those going through a program establish solid bases of information, it would also work beyond the immediate confines of the program to create an environment conducive for fostering successful reintegration. These efforts would be part of a larger educational campaign aimed at reducing the isolation and embitterment of diaspora youth.<sup>181</sup>

Finally, seeing as ISIS was labeled as one of the most brutal and extreme terrorist groups to this day, special attention should be focused on trauma counseling and medical treatment for these returning children. Sadly, they have been exposed to the gruesome realities of conflict and have witnessed brutality on an unprecedented scale. Some children have fallen victim to these tragedies, which include being beaten, raped, maimed, shot, forced to use drugs, and exposed to diseases. Before a child can go through any sort of deradicalization or disengagement, they must regain their physical and mental health. Medical services need to be provided to address the injuries children may have received and therapy should be available for children to disassociate with conflict and regain control of their fate. Mental health interventions can be simple like the ones used in Northern Uganda for former child soldiers. Here, narrative exposure therapy (where a child gives a therapist an autobiography of their experiences as child soldiers) was implemented by therapists who had no formal mental health or medical background and it resulted in significant reductions of PTSD symptoms and related behaviors like depression, suicide, and stigmatization.<sup>182</sup> This study highlights that mental health services can be community-based and provided despite low levels of funding or medical professionals.

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<sup>181</sup> Kruglanski et al., “The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization,” 13.

<sup>182</sup> Verena Ertl et al., “Community-Implemented Trauma Therapy for Former Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda: A Randomized Controlled Trial,” *JAMA* 306, no. 5 (August 2011): 510–512.

## C. CONCLUSION

The research conducted in this thesis has highlighted the shortcomings of deradicalization and disengagement programs when applied to children. Future policies should keep in mind the unique psychological and physical distinctions of children and create programs tailored to their specific needs. Programs still remain unclear, understudied, and contentious despite claims of success that are not externally validated or empirically backed. Needless to say, further research and evaluation must be done on deradicalization and disengagement programs to truly evaluate their success rates and implementation strategies. From there, it can be determined whether to further expand and fund current programs or restructure/reorganize them all together in search of new solutions. This thesis is produced at a time of great uncertainty. Hundreds of men, woman, and children are being displaced from the collapse of the proclaimed caliphate and their futures remain unknown. Very few countries have plans to accept former ISIS supporters back, let alone provide children with special care. However, I hope this thesis has provided some baseline understanding of the issue's children are facing when it comes to involvement with terrorism and how current deradicalization and disengagement programs are ill-equipped to reintegrate the children of ISIS. As for those countries that do plan to repatriate these children, I urge them to keep the information presented here in mind when they create policies that will affect a generation of youth.

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