Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State

John G. Horgan[a], Max Taylor[b], Mia Bloom[c], and Charlie Winter[c]

[a]Global Studies Institute & Department of Psychology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA; [b]Department of Security and Crime Science, University College, London, UK; [c]Department of Communications, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA

ABSTRACT

Using the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) as a case study, we explore the process by which children evolve from novice recruits to fully fledged members of a violent extremist movement. From currently available data, we propose six stages of child socialization to ISIS—*Seduction, Schooling, Selection, Subjugation, Specialization*, and *Stationing*. Furthermore, we explore this process in the context of "Community of Practice" (COP) as developed by Wenger and Lave. COP models highlight how newcomers learn and pass through degrees of involvement from the periphery of an organization to the inside. In subsequent research, Hundeide highlighted how "contracts of deep commitment" and "conversion" constitute important social and psychological elements of communities of practice. We regard such qualities as intrinsic to children's involvement in ISIS. We conclude with implications drawn from the disengagement and reintegration experiences of former child soldiers in other contexts.

Max Taylor prefaced his 1988 book *The Terrorist* with a poem. Drawing on imagery depicted in James Simmons's *Ballad of Claudy* (about the 1972 Irish Republican Army [IRA] bombing of a Londonderry village in which three children, aged 8, 15 and 16, were killed), Taylor suggested that the poem helps us "form an impression of a terrorist bombing … in a way that pictures … can never convey."[1] This stands in stark contrast to the way in which terrorism today is depicted. If we briefly consider the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, or Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant [ISIL], "Islamic State," or "Daesh"), we have easy access to what they do (via online social media), what they say while doing it, how they justify their actions, and what their supporters, recruits, participants, and audience think and feel about it. From the stylized, often clichéd choreography, sadistic grandiosity, and morbid pomp of its "snuff" videos, the enslavement and rape of young girls and women, to its execution of gay men, in which the Islamic State's (hereafter ISIS) militants warmly embrace their victims in their final moments, ISIS has made twenty-first-century "tricoteuses" of us all.[2]

Yet despite the wide-ranging nature of its activities and associated propaganda, the greatest sense of hopelessness for its worldwide audience is caused by ISIS's exploitation of

children. How children are affected by terrorism has been previously explored.[3] One major contribution from psychology[4] is research on the impact of living under, and coping with, the threat of terrorism. More recent research has begun to examine why children are targeted, and not only as victims, but as potential participants in violence that increases the likelihood of their own victimization. Children now routinely feature in ISIS propaganda, including photosets eulogizing them as martyrs and widely circulated videos of young boys executing (via shootings or beheadings) prisoners accused of being spies or captured Syrian regime troops.[5]

This article forgoes macro-level questions and instead sheds light on how children learn to be participants in violence, and how that process unfolds at the micro and meso levels; specifically how children learn to be effective and fully committed members of ISIS. We take the view that understanding *how* people learn—specifically how they are transformed from peripheral observers to what Hundeide[6] and others have called "committed insiders"—is a useful conceptual and theoretical anchor for understanding child socialization into terrorism. After describing the mechanisms through which ISIS socializes children, we explore how the concept of "Community of Practice" is relevant for understanding this transformation.

Child Victimization in Conflict

A report released by the Oxford Research Group in 2013 revealed that over 11,000 children had been killed during the Syrian conflict.[7] The highest rate of child death was reported in Aleppo, where over 2,000 children died. Many of the deaths and injuries sustained by children were the result of shelling and bombing. However, the report revealed that almost 400 young children had been deliberately targeted by pro-regime snipers.

Taylor and Horgan predicted in 1996[8] that the deliberate victimization of children could become a major future direction in violence by state and non-state actors. They characterized it as a willingness to broaden the acceptable limits of terrorism in order to maintain the overall climate of fear; it reinforced a message that a group was willing to prolong a campaign of violence or, escalate the severity of violence. Many cases have borne out this prediction. In response to the 2014 massacre of 132 schoolchildren in Peshawar, a Pakistani Taliban spokesman admitted: "We targeted the school [on purpose] because the Army targets our families. We want them to feel our pain."[9]

If anything, the deliberate targeting of children has become routine. In a report by the Human Rights Council released in February 2015, the UN documented attacks against schools in over 70 countries from 2009–2014, with over 3,000 attacks against schools, teachers, and students in 2012.[10] United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) declared 2014 a "devastating" year for children,[11] noting that 15 million children worldwide are directly affected by violent conflicts from Palestine, Syria and Iraq, to the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan: "Children have been killed while studying in the classroom and while sleeping in their beds; they have been orphaned, kidnapped, tortured, recruited, raped and even sold as slaves." UNICEF found that in the CAR, approximately 10,000 children were recruited by militant groups by 2014 and a further 12,000 children used by armed groups in South Sudan. In Gaza, 538 children were killed by Israel's military response to Palestinian militants launching missiles into Israel. In addition to Syria's

1.7 million child refugees, UNICEF "verified at least 35 attacks on schools in the first nine months of the year, while killed 105 children and injured nearly 300 others."[12] In 2014 UNICEF found that 700 Iraqi children were "maimed, killed or even executed."

Children as Participants

The history of children in warfare was documented in Singer's *Children at War*.[13] Singer's catalog includes conflicts in "Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico (Chiapas), Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru" (p. 16), "Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Iran…, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, Tajikistan, and Yemen" (p. 21). The Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) comprised almost exclusively child combatants (p. 20) as did the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone. Several thousand children (all under 14) took part as in the Rwandan genocide (p. 20), while approximately one hundred thousand "boy soldiers" were killed during the Iran-Iraq war, and another hundred thousand children are estimated to have fought during Sudan's civil war (p. 24).

In North America, boys younger than 16 fought with George Washington,[14] with some, according to Stover[15] as young as 7 serving in auxiliary functions. Stover documents how during the American Civil War (1861–65), seven children all under 16 received the Medal of Honor for heroism; the youngest ever recipient of the Medal was 11-year-old Willie Johnson. Stover cites estimates compiled by David Rosen (and others by Burke Davis) suggesting that between 250,000 and 420,000 "boy soldiers" served in the Civil War (p. 19), whereas on the Union side: "200,000 … [were] 16 or under; about 100,000 … [were] 15 or under; 300 were 13 or under …; 25 were 10 or under."[16] Singer explains that while U.S. Army regulations from 1802 specified that "no person under the age of twenty-one could enlist without his parents' permission, there was *no minimum age* [emphasis ours] if the child had his parents' consent" (p. 13). As a result, young boys served in a variety of roles, ranging from "musicians, powder monkeys, and midshipmen (teenage gentlemen officers in training)."[17]

It is important to define "child soldier." In 2007 the UN in the *Paris Principles on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* defined children in combat: "A child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes."[18] It further states that that "recruiting and using children under the age of 15 as soldiers" is considered a war crime by the International Criminal Court.[19]

In our analysis here, we follow the UN in taking 18 as the broad age cutoff point for the end of childhood. We also accept, as the UN does, that local social and legal provision may alter that view. We recognize that this may be contentious and that there is a fuzzy area where, conceptually and practically, childhood and adulthood merge. In the British Army, for example, a youth of 16 can join with parental consent; the age of sexual consent varies from country to country (in some places as low as 12), as does the age of criminal responsibility. All of these indicate a point at which adulthood in some sense is realized. Likewise, physical and psychological maturity may or may not be congruent with an individual's chronological age. Establishing 18 as a cutoff point seems a high barrier, but the point at stake is one of protection from exploitation. From that perspective alone, 18 seems a reasonable if arbitrary point of reference.[20]

In the context of non-state groups, contemporary terrorist movements are replete with examples of child soldiers. Multiple child suicide bombers[21] were recently deployed by the Nigerian militant group Boko Haram, which, as "West Africa Province," is now nominally affiliated with ISIS. In fact, one of every five suicide bombers deployed by Boko Haram in the years 2014–2016 had been a child, and usually a girl.[22] In March 2015, Human Rights Watch highlighted the increasing recruitment and deployment of children in Yemen by both Al Qaeda and Houthi militants.[23] An estimated 140 children, mostly between 14–16, were recruited in a single month (March–April 2015), and UNICEF reported that several were 7 years old. The *Washington Post* reported that children might constitute nearly a third[24] of the 250,000-strong Houthi force.

While the media brims with examples of the growing use of children in conflicts throughout the Middle East, perhaps the most obvious use of children in contemporary militant contexts emerges from African countries where child soldiers were routinely involved in both state and non-state violence beginning with the 1991 conflict in Sierra Leone. Throughout the 1990s, the use of children spread to virtually every conflict on the continent. In May 2015, UNICEF reported that over three hundred and fifty children were released by several armed groups in the CAR as part of a UNICEF-brokered agreement to help end the recruitment of children by these groups.[25] The LRA operating on the border between Uganda and Sudan is estimated to have abducted 25,000 children since the mid 1990s,[26] many of whom have served as soldiers, while the girls were used in domestic service or as "bush wives" (i.e., for sexual purposes).

Why Use Children?

The Militants' Perspective

The use of children by non-state militant actors has never been adequately explained. Singer lamented in 2005 that there was little more than "peripheral" scholarship on the issue (reiterated by Wessells[27] in a study published four years later).[28] Unsurprisingly, existing studies offer opposing, sometimes contradictory, interpretations: Singer suggests, for example, that "the majority … [of child soldiers] participate in combat" (p. 76) while Wessells argues that "many child soldiers never fight, and many neither carry their own weapon nor know how to use one" (p. 71). Wessells summarizes factors leading to recruitment as "convenience, low cost, and impunity" (p. 33) whereas Singer suggests that children join "simply because they are kids, and the slightest of whims or appeals may suffice to impel them to enter war" (p. 68) whether escaping the "daily grind of life" or boredom.

A close inspection of any conflict involving child soldiers reveals a confluence of contributing factors. Present-day Yemen, where "worsening poverty … [is] a major reason children are joining armed groups," serves as a prime example.[29] The conflict "forced most schools to shut down, which in turn has enlarged the pool of potential child recruits." Teenagers interviewed by journalists pointed to recruitment as an attempt to relieve boredom or "because their friends [joined]."[30] According to human rights activist Jalal al-Shami, children's involvement is sometimes predicated on their ability to earn money for the family. Because of a "grievance trap" that may be at work, whereby the additional financial resources the children can contribute to the family, this can incentivize family members to support and encourage participation.[31]

Militant groups' decisions to engage children directly may be a function of organizational pressure to replenish ranks[32] and/or ensure long-term survival.[33] In the context of northern Uganda, Blattman[34] argued that adolescent recruits yielded "the largest expected net gain" to militant leaders and were enlisted because of their impressionable nature and staying power (p. 1). Whatever the combination of reasons, militant groups struggle to convey the logic of child recruitment to external audiences. Responses range from acknowledgment, and even pride, to expressions that are awkward, evasive, and outright denial. A Houthi political spokesman acknowledged that young boys were in fact being used to "operate checkpoints," but flatly denied children were engaged in battle. He justified his position, "We are very careful when it comes to recruiting our fighters."[35] Similarly, a 2014 Human Rights Watch report notes that the Kurdish PYD in Syria "deployed boys and girls at checkpoints and bases" as part of its Asayish police forces, yet claims to have "prohibited children under age 18 from participating in the YPG" (p. 27).[36] Nevertheless, Bloom, Horgan, and Winter found that at least seventy youth were eulogized on Kurdish militant websites for having been martyred in Syria.[35]

ISIS has received much criticism for its brazen exploitation of the young, and not just from international organizations and the news media. Indeed, on occasion, other violent extremist organizations have been overtly critical of its use of children. In 2015, for example, Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, the Nusra Front, disseminated an anti-ISIS propaganda video featuring an interrogation of two of its pre-adolescent fighters that had been captured in the Qalamun area of Damascus Governorate.[38]

The use of children in general signals the existence of a variety of simultaneous objectives. Nicholas Pelham of the Institute for Palestine Studies suggested that Hamas used children to build tunnels because like "in Victorian coal mines, they are prized for the nimble bodies."[39] Singer explains that in Colombia, child soldiers are known as "little carts" because of their ability to sneak hidden weapons through military checkpoints without arousing suspicion (p. 16). According to Singer, an additional function of using female recruits is "while [girls] may be expected to perform the same dangerous functions as boy soldiers, many are also forced to provide sexual services" (p. 33).

The Child's Perspective

If it is challenging to verify and validate reconstructed accounts of involvement of adult militants, it is even more challenging to reliably infer motivation behind children's involvement in organized violence. Children interviewed by journalists offer little insight other than the fact that militants emigrate with their children, or that parents might allow, encourage or even coerce their children to make public statements, which ostensibly serve a different audience. Jamie Paulin-Ramirez, the Colorado woman imprisoned in connection with the case of Colleen LaRose (a.k.a. "Jihad Jane") brought her 6-year-old son with her to Ireland as part of her alleged mission. There, Ramirez videotaped the child "reciting inflammatory verses and thrusting a toy weapon."[40] In July 2014, *Newsweek Pakistan* interviewed the family of an Uzbek national who moved along with his family to North Waziristan "after he joined Al Qaeda." When the man was killed in a drone strike, *Newsweek* interviewed his 8-year-old son who declared: "My father is a martyr who sacrificed his life in the path of Allah. America is the enemy of Muslims. … I will also fight against them."[41]

Limited, although valuable, insights come from failed bombers who either change their minds at the last moment—surrendering to authorities—or whose devices do not detonate.

In 2014, Usaid Barho, a 14-year-old Syrian boy recruited by ISIS, was driven to the Shi'ite al-Bayah mosque in Baghdad. His handlers pointed out the entrance to the mosque, and instructed him "not to detonate until [they were] far enough away."[42] As Barho approached, a policeman began to search him. The boy cried: "I'm a suicide bomber. I'm a Muslim and don't have any intention to kill Muslims. I want to go back home to see my mother. Can you help me?"[43] Barho's subsequent testimony intimated that recruits were given the choice to either become a fighter or a suicide bomber. He calculated that he had a better chance of survival as a suicide bomber because: "I'd be able to hand myself in to the authorities without having to face the risk of being killed. As a fighter, I wouldn't get such a chance."[44]

Wessells characterized militancy as being "attractive to children because it provides meaning, identity, and options [that] civilian life does not afford."[45] But even in cases whereby children state that they want to join a violent extremist movement,[46] their capacity to make this choice is specious. Wessells clarifies: "the realities of children's lives in war zones blur the boundaries between choice and coercion … their decisions reflect a complex interplay of perceived or real necessity, obligation, hardship, and agency."[47] When it comes to children, compliance and the issue of what constitutes voluntary engagement are enormously challenging concepts to disentangle. The UN specifies, "regardless of how children are recruited and of their roles, child soldiers are victims."[48] In the same vein, McMahan[49] writes that "in many or most child soldiers, the capacity for moral agency is absent or has been systematically subverted" (p. 32). A 2016 report by *Child Soldiers International*[50] encapsulates this view, noting that some cases of youth recruitment "may be unforced" yet "often not meet the criteria of being genuinely voluntary" (p. 17). That classification is also obvious in non-conflict zones from where many of these children emigrate to ISIS.

Although children's involvement in militancy has generated intense interest, firm conclusions are difficult to draw from individual cases. Undoubtedly, any account is specific to that child and his/her situation. Presumably the role of the child's principal caregiver is critical, but age, maturity, socioeconomic circumstances, and level of cognitive development are also critical factors. There are grounds for supposing that emotions that lie behind moral behavior like empathy (which might be relevant) are present in very early life, but this is tempered by subsequent experience. Initial work in this area, such as Kohlberg[51] and Piaget,[52] suggested that early moral beliefs are orientated towards authority and power, and therefore have absolute qualities. As children grow, however, so they learn that both social values and people can change and temper these absolute qualities. Kohlberg suggested that moral development can be seen as a progression through six stages, focused initially on self-interest, through social approval to abstract ideals. Not everyone equally (or even necessarily) progresses through these stages. While the processes that might lie behind these changes may be idiosyncratic and varied, what is clear is that peer group, authority and social pressure are critical variables in this process.

There is an enormous volume of research on the effects of growing up in distressed and violent environments in terms of psychological trauma and its moral sequelae, but little is known about normative development. Posada and Wainryb[53] explored judgments of survival and revenge among Colombian children growing up in distressed and violent circumstances. They emphasize the capacity of children to reflect on the intrinsic harm to others, but noted the potential vulnerabilities in the children's moral lives (and behavior) related to survival, which prevailed over other moral considerations. Even more important in tempering moral direction, however, were notions of revenge, which the authors felt might give rise

to cycles of violence. They suggested that: "The long term developmental implications of this pattern of vulnerabilities might also hinge on how children make sense, as a whole, of the political conflict within which their moral lives, and unique moral conflicts, are embedded" (p. 896). Clearly exposure to distressed and violent environments changes children in negative ways, but in ways that may be unclear and specific to both the individual and social context.

In what follows, we present what is currently known about children's socialization into the militancy and terror of ISIS. Though current accounts are both limited and piecemeal, there is sufficient information to begin the development of a working model of socialization or apprenticeship into ISIS for children, from which we then explore the relevance of a Community of Practice framework.

"Lion Cubs of the Caliphate": A Case Study

Singer describes three phases of children's involvement in terrorism as selection, mental preparation (or indoctrination), and action.[54] A close examination of ISIS suggests the existence of not just these phases but much more in an elaborate, institutionalized effort that is both highly structured and efficient. Given that much of what we are able to access regarding this issue is propagandistic in nature, it remains difficult to verify accounts, and until additional data emerge, the information provided here must be treated as both descriptive and exploratory, open to interpretation as well as correction.

ISIS demonstrates no hesitation in recruiting, training and deploying children in its ranks. Immediate proof of this comes from supporters and participants in ISIS's propaganda campaign who post photographs, videos, and testimonies to social media. A distinctive characteristic of their use of children compared to child soldiers in African and Asian conflicts is that, according to Child Soldiers International, "ISIS is showing us exactly how it's done."[55] Western reporters have interviewed individual children recruited by ISIS[56] and, in some cases, non-governmental organizations (e.g., Human Rights Watch) have likewise interviewed dozens of children recruited by ISIS and other extremist groups.[57] Others, like the Quilliam Foundation, have focused instead on analyzing the ISIS administrative documents on children and youth that are available in Aymenn al-Tamimi's online archive of translations.[58]

At the time of writing, it is impossible to know how many children are involved in ISIS. While the actual number of children fighting in Syria is unknown, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documented 1,100 Syrian children under 16 who joined ISIS, 52 of whom were killed in fighting, including eight suicide bombers. Bloom, Horgan, and Winter's study of children and youth eulogized in ISIS propaganda cataloged 89 adolescent and pre-adolescent deaths (in a variety of circumstances) between January 2015 and January 2016.[59] In June 2015, the United Nations reported 271 boys and seven girls recruited by groups affiliated with the various militant groups in the country including the Free Syrian Army, Kurdish People's Protection Units, ISIS, and al-Nusra Front. In 77 percent of these cases, children were armed or used in combat. Almost one-fifth of them were under the age of 15.[60] As the conflict progresses the children will age, perhaps becoming tomorrow's (adult) terrorists.

Age estimates vary. German children confirmed to have *emigrated* with their family to Syria are reportedly "as young as 13."[61] Not all children will necessarily engage in violence—at least not right away—but reports confirm children as young as 12 engaging in military-

style training[62] and of 14 year-old suicide bombers. In March 2015, a French 13-year-old was reported to have died fighting for ISIS in Syria and, in January 2016, a German youth, Badruddeen, was eulogized as a martyr by official ISIS outlet, the Furat Media Center. Additionally, accounts exist of very young children (8 years old) engaged in executions in some form,[63] with, for example, the then 7-year-old son of Australian Khaled Sharrouf photographed holding up the decapitated head of one of ISIS's victims.[64] Perhaps more shocking was British 4-year-old Isa Dare, who appeared to detonate a car-load of explosives in a video from January 2016, killing three men accused of espionage.[65] ISIS's mobilization of child soldiers is not limited to Syria and Iraq—for example, in a February 2016 report on Libya,[66] the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that 85 boys below the age of 16 had "graduated" as ISIS "Cubs" in the city of Sirte (p. 13). As part of the same investigation, two boys aged 10 and 14 were interviewed. They reported that they had been forcibly recruited and compelled to "undergo religious and military training and to watch videos of beheadings. They were also sexually abused" (ibid).

Whatever their role and location, we are confident that children become involved with ISIS from at least five distinct sources:

- Children of internally displaced people and foreigners (including foreign fighters) who travel to ISIS-controlled territory.
- Children volunteered by local fighters and civilians.
- Children recruited from local orphanages.
- Children involuntarily taken from their parents (i.e., through abduction and/or slavery).
- Children, many of whom are runaways, who volunteer.

The involvement of children from abroad is characterized by the child traveling to the region accompanied by an older sibling, parent, or an entire family. Four-year-old Isa Dare was taken to Syria by his mother, Grace. The 7-year-old son of Khaled Sharrouf went there with his father, mother, older sister, and younger brother in 2013. Thirteen-year-old Younes Abaaoud, from Belgium, traveled to Syria with his 27-year-old brother Abdelhamid (the ringleader of the Bataclan Paris attacks) in 2014.[67] Teenage girls from France and Canada left together in small groups,[68] and in several European cases, authorities were approached by distraught parents upon realizing their children had gone missing.[69] In many cases, adolescents decide to join ISIS seemingly of their own accord. However, for much younger children, what they say and do is little more than a reflection and parroting of what their parents are instructing them to do, as demonstrated in a *Vice News* interview with ISIS fighter Abdullah al-Baljiki (aka "Abdullah the Belgian") and his young son: "Abdullah asks his son, 'Why do we kill infidels? What have the infidels done?' 'They kill Muslims.' The boy says, looking to his father, as if to say, 'Did I say the right answer?'"[70]

It is often not until the older children reach Syria that they contact their families back home to inform them of their whereabouts,[71] in some cases, for young girls, after they have been married off to male foreign fighters.[72] Birke[73] summarizes the combination of factors that gave rise to the unprecedented scale of foreign mobilization in Syria. In part, she argues, it is because of "unprecedented use of social media to attract people, the relative ease of getting to and living in Syria, and coming at a time at which governments in the region and in the West lack convincing ideologies and are seen as corrupt by their inhabitants, Muslim or otherwise." Lured by perceived benefits, supporters of all ages and both sexes expect ISIS to

allocate housing to them, and some accounts suggest that "widows receive welfare benefits based on how many children they have."[74]

It is difficult to say how much time passes between the arrival of the children and their engagement in focused activity for ISIS. Stoter suggests that "not all foreign children undergo military training immediately,"[75] adding that there would appear to be at least some period of adjustment and socialization.[76]

More is known about local recruitment. Human Rights Watch's Fred Abrahams summarizes child recruitment to ISIS as: "twisted, pressured and forced."[77] Abu Ibrahim Raqqawi, of the activist group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently,[78] points to some basic mechanisms through which children are formally lured to ISIS. Some, he says, actively seek out involvement with the militants. In many cases this is "spurred by poverty." Others are incentivized to engage with the group through Qur'an memorization contests or public religious celebrations, at which toys and sweets are routinely passed round. Yet others are "kidnapped off the streets," while some parents choose to enroll their children in ISIS-run schools because they receive financial compensation for every child they put under ISIS's care (allegedly up to $200 for each participating child). There is an expectation that many of these children will then progress to "Cubs" training.[79]

Raqqawi, and Gallagher,[80] explain that ISIS has filled a void, seducing children and their families with the prospect of a free education in a setting where there is no existing system of education.[81] While ISIS does not force parents to send their children to ISIS-sponsored schools,[82] by providing the only alternative, its "curriculum" represents de-facto recruitment.[83] Still, mixed reports exist on whether participation in ISIS camps can ever be considered voluntary. In Raqqa, Birke[84] and Berlinger[85] suggest that ISIS has adopted a carrot and stick approach ranging from forcing parents to surrender their boys to the group, luring the children with parties, to outright kidnapping. In all likelihood, all of the above takes place at any one time.

Birke explains that in many cases pre-ISIS teachers are allowed remain on and teach (provided they repent), but only a curriculum "in which subjects such as chemistry and French have been removed and Islamic studies added."[86] Typically, this involves children being taught: "Salafi-jihadist ideology, Qur'an memorization and extremist interpretations of the Qur'an."[87] Female teachers and students alike are required to wear veils, with male teachers and students "forced to wear Afghani-style attire."[88]

ISIS appears to consider what constitutes age-appropriate involvement. "Abu Mosa," an ISIS press officer interviewed by *Vice News* on the structure of children's education and why some children are selected for training at militant camps while others are not, says: "Those under 15 go to a sharia camp to learn about their creed and religion. Those over 16, they can attend the military camp."[89] Children under 13, it is claimed, do not participate in the training camps, but are "still being put to work as spies, being paid $100 per month to inform on family, friends and neighbors."[90] It is within these settings that ISIS selects the few outstanding candidates who will eventually become fighters.[91] ISIS is far from consistent in its implementation of this policy, however—six pre-adolescent children were eulogized as suicide bombers, special operations operatives, and regular foot-soldiers between 2015 and 2016. Furthermore, an age does not preclude organizational seniority—prior to the formal declaration of the Caliphate in June 2014, ISIS had appointed a 16-year-old Syrian boy as its security *emir* in Azaz.[92]

The characteristically hierarchical and disciplined structure of ISIS is felt at all levels of the organization, including for children.[93] Conformity, compliance and blind obedience are the hallmarks of the child's progression from regular schooling to fully fledged training. In one case, where ISIS leadership figures at a camp asked children to sign a "volunteer list" for martyrdom operations, one boy "eventually signed the list because he felt social pressure to do so" (ibid.). In a manner highly reminiscent of child soldier recruitment in Africa, the process post-selection is characterized by subjugation and corporal punishments; physical separation from the family is a key element to the intense and brutal training of the boys (ibid.). A former child militant recalled how for an entire month, he and about one hundred other children were "kept isolated" and "not allowed even to see or speak to their families."[94] When the father of a boy protested against his son's induction to a training camp, ISIS members threatened to behead him.[95]

The constant threat of violence permeates the children's progression from their schooling through fully fledged Cub training. Neurink[96] interviewed a young Kurdish boy, "Habib," in 2015 that explained, "The teacher made us repeat every word. If we did not do well he would beat us with a stick. … It was too difficult and in Arabic, and we only know Kurdish. All we wanted to do was sleep." Another boy, from Raqqa, aged 13 (in 2015) described his time in a camp,[97] "For 30 days we woke up and jogged, had breakfast, then learned the Quran and the Hadith of the Prophet. … Then we took courses on weapons, Kalashnikovs and other light military stuff." A different boy, again aged 15 (in 2014), explained:

> We used to crawl under webbing. There was fire above it, and we would be firing our weapons. We would jump through large metal rings and the trainers would be firing at our feet and telling us if we stop we will be shot…I was very careful not to stop running, I didn't stop, even if I was exhausted, out of breath, I didn't stop.[98]

Throughout the month-long military training, the conditions would be appalling. One child recalled to a journalist: "We all had fleas and everybody was smelling so badly."[99]

Children regularly witness punishment: "We saw a young man who did not fast for Ramadan, so they crucified him for three days, and … a woman being stoned because she committed adultery."[100] Another boy described being unable to eat for two days after seeing a beheading for the first time.[101] The socialization of children to routine violence is evident from social media sources in particular—regular exposure to beheadings guarantees that the children "get accustomed to it."[102] In almost every photo report or video depicting the implementation of *hudud* punishments—amputations, stonings, or beheadings—children are present in large numbers in surrounding crowds,[103] and the most abhorrent execution videos are displayed to children and adolescents at media kiosks throughout the ISIS heartlands in Iraq and Syria:

> The children have been shown videos of beheadings and told by their trainers that they would perform one someday. First, they had to practice technique. The more than 120 boys were each given a doll and a sword and told, cut off its head. A 14-year-old who was among the boys, all abducted from Iraq's Yazidi religious minority, said he couldn't cut it right. He chopped once, twice, three times. Then they taught me how to hold the sword, and they told me how to hit. They told me it was the head of the infidels.[104]

Despite the horror of these experiences, socialization to violence may provide a sense of reward. Some children may emerge from ISIS camps feeling "proud, strong and filled with a

sense of purpose."[105] Just like military boot camp experiences for adults, the boys develop a camaraderie and "laugh, joke and talk about their training."[106] A medical student at the University of Damascus describes encountering children injured by artillery shrapnel or bullets: "Some of [them] seemed happy with their injuries and saw them as proof of 'jihad.' Some talked of death and martyrdom as if it [was] a picnic in a public or amusement park."[107]

The varying length of training supports the argument that different children may have different experiences depending on where they are sent as well as what the prevailing climate dictates. Raqqawi[108] points to two types of program: "slow" and "speedy," the operations of which appear to be determined by whether or not ISIS is involved in "major battles." Slow training entails a 45-day-long military boot camp experience involving the routine indoctrination and "brainwashing,"[109] which is subsequently followed by a 3-month period of "intensive weapon training." The accelerated option, Raqqawi says, only exists if ISIS anticipates or is already engaged in a "large-scale battle … where new fighters are always required." In this instance, indoctrination and socialization lasts approximately 3 weeks, followed by a month of military-style boot camp experience. After this, Raqqawi claims, children "get pushed immediately into battle." Upon completion of either training track, segregation is "decided by their mentors." Once "the mentor" decides which specialization (or role) is appropriate, children may be stationed with one of several groups. This may entail being stationed in a group responsible for manufacturing explosives, "foot-soldier" fighting, suicide-bomber raids, propaganda (i.e., filming battle, taking photos), collecting intelligence, or used for recruitment. Children's roles run the gamut from support to combat; from preparing and cooking food, delivering messages and medical supplies, filming or photographing battle, helping wounded fighters to evacuate the front lines, donating blood to the injured, spying, replenishing weapons and ammunitions, and whipping prisoners.[110] ISIS's stylized execution videos routinely feature children killing alleged spies by shooting them, distributing knives to adults for beheadings, or conducting the actual beheadings.

ISIS has deployed dozens of children as suicide bombers[111]; however, some wearing a suicide vest are not necessarily intended to be suicide bombers or blown up in battle. In accounts obtained by CNN's Arwa Damon,[112] children's roles overlap, and donning a suicide vest may be part of guard duty. Others are chosen to engage specifically in *inghimasi* suicide operations, in which a mixed group of adults and adolescents attacks soft military targets (e.g., a mess hall or barracks) with light automatic weapons before each detonates their suicide belt.

Singer notes that "brutality and abuses of the worst kind underscore each stage" (p. 57) of child soldiering. ISIS begins with a softer touch, similar to other militant groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who build playgrounds for children as an enticement for recruitment (p. 69). At later stages, however, similarities emerge. Peer pressure, brutality, and the fact that children "end up creating the same cycle for other children" (p. 64) are evident. ISIS uses children to entice and recruit more children, parading them at "*da'wa* caravan" events and featuring them as aspirational figures in its training videos. In many respects, young people are effective recruiters because children might be less suspicious of their peers and more inclined to trust people their own age.

We inductively summarize children's socialization into ISIS as comprising six stages: *Seduction, Schooling, Selection, Subjugation, Specialization*, and *Stationing*.

Seduction: Initial exposure to ISIS ideas, norms and practices through propaganda, peripheral participation in public events, and indirect access to personnel.

Schooling: Routine, direct exposure to personnel, accompanied by intensive indoctrination.

Selection: Focused attention from recruiters, screening for aptitude and grooming for military training or other roles (e.g., spying).

Subjugation: Physical and psychological brutalization through intensive training, isolation from family, wearing a uniform, and deepening of commitment through acts of loyalty, sacrifice, and discipline; emergence of solidarity via shared hardship.

Specialization: Fostering expertise and exposure to specialized training.

Stationing: Role assignment and deployment; including participation in public events to recruit additional members.

Child Socialization as a Community of Practice

How best to understand the socialization process and its qualities? While studies of learning in terrorist organizations are abundant,[113] Kenney suggests "many … researchers gloss over how … terrorists … actually *learn*, in the sense of acquiring, analyzing, and applying knowledge and experience."[114] Instead, he argues, we should explore the variety of ways in which learning unfolds by closely looking at how terrorist groups promote "informal apprenticeships, on-the-job training, communities of practice, and combat" (p. 145). Kenney's recommendations have not been ignored, and increasingly scholars offer insights into the inner-workings of terrorist organizations to see how they manage (and learn from) the challenges, threats, and stresses faced by any large organization.[115] We know, more than ever before, what kinds of documents and training materials are used by terrorists. But the specific issue of communities of practice raised by Kenney remains unexplored. There are some exceptions (e.g., Kenney's own work, and that of others who have explored COP's relevance for disengagement from terrorism[116]), but the critical question of *how* people, in this case, children in ISIS, progress from peripheral actors to fully fledged militants remains unanswered.

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner[117] define communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). The term was originally coined by Lave and Wenger[118] when exploring "apprenticeship as a learning model" (p. 4). The key differences they found between typical "master–apprentice" models and detailed studies of apprenticeship were revealed in a "more complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place" (p. 4). They stress that not every community is a community of practice, nevertheless:

> … communities of practice are everywhere. They are a familiar experience, so familiar perhaps that it often escapes our attention. Yet when it is given a name and brought into focus, it becomes a perspective that can help us understand our world better. In particular, it allows us to see past more obvious formal structures such as organizations, classrooms, or nations, and perceive the structures defined by engagement in practice and the informal learning that comes with it. (p. 3)

Lave and Wenger describe "legitimate peripheral participation" as a process by which "newcomers become part of a community of practice."[119] They describe how an apprentice legitimately passes through stages from periphery to center to become 'a full member'—basically, an insider with high status in the group. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner emphasize the socialized nature of learning in communities of practice. In other words,

communities of practice do not always require formal apprenticeship systems, and are rather "dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone."[120]

Despite the emphasis on the social context to learning, Hundeide[121] argues that even Community of Practice models do not quite "catch" more than a mere "empty and abstract description of what is going on" (p. 121). Hundeide asserts that a theory of "legitimate peripheral participation" misses:

- The significance of expressive style as markers of identity and belonging;
- The "deep commitment" aspects of sacrifices and committing actions;
- The emotional communion aspects of belonging in a community;
- Alternative reality construction or legitimation with (i) new values that are "worth living for"—a new existential dimension—and (ii) strict internal loyalty/solidarity and internal discipline as a way of life; and
- The role of the charismatic guide into the new reality.

Hundeide critiques the earlier work, saying that their emphasis is about primarily understanding how *skill acquisition* emerges through informal social learning. The problem, he argues, is that: "The emotive commitment aspect and the expressive stylistic aspect are clearly missing [in the earlier theory], and this gives it a slightly dry rationalistic-cognitive twist that reduces its potential as a general theoretical model of human involvement in communities of practice" (p. 122). Of particular interest to Hundeide are groups involving conversion to a new "life," not just how one is taken to develop a particular set of new skills. Included in this, he notes, are communities of "terror" (p. 122). Hundeide details the stages involved in "deep commitment" characteristic of becoming involved in counterculture groups:

- Positive rewarding contact with leading charismatic members of the group;
- The new entrants join as "peripheral apprentices," adopting the style and the identity markers of the group. Being accepted as a member of the family is sometimes marked in a ceremony of initiation. Typical identity marks involve adopting style, uniform etc. that clearly identifies a "full" member;
- A process of redefining the past (which also sometimes sees a destruction of past values) and introduction to new values, styles, and of course, fighting the enemy;
- A stage of further commitment mandating sacrifice, hardship, isolation, and dissociation from previous contacts and previous life; also associated with requests for demonstrations of loyalty;
- Loyal participation in daily collective practices and rituals; internal discipline, morality, and loyalty are all directed toward acquiring the standards and mentality of the insider.
- A final test of loyalty, which include committing extreme actions that make a return to one's previous contacts and way of life very difficult;
- Finally, achieving new status and a role/identity of respect inside the new community; the former apprentice is now a full "core" member.

(adapted and abridged from Hundeide[122])

Each of these stages is consistent with how a child becomes involved in, and remains committed to, life as an ISIS militant. Hundeide illustrated his argument with examples from Bjorgo's research on neo-Nazi groups and his own interviews with child soldiers from Sierra Leone and Angola (p. 116), but based on what we already know about ISIS's use of children, we can appreciate its applicability here. We do not yet have the necessary data to begin to understand (with competing viewpoints and the data necessary for hypothesis

testing) *why* children become involved in ISIS—but we can begin to explore how they do. Children come to ISIS from diverse backgrounds, through at least five distinct pathways. The socialization process, to an extent, flattens out individual differences that might exist and begins with peripheral participation by seducing the child. What follows throughout the child's progressive socialization into ISIS is clearly consistent with Hundeide's process for characterizing "deep" commitment, from the initial, peripheral contact with ISIS personnel, through more focused, consistent engagement and being accepted as an apprentice, redefining the past, introduction to new values (via schooling and selection), to hardship, isolation, dissociation, and ritual (subjugation), right through to final tests of loyalty (inherent in specialization and stationing). There are tangible benefits associated with that deepening of commitment (i.e., clothing, food, shelter, protection) and the child may receive significant social and psychological rewards in the form of status, identity and respect in addition to addressing his (or her) basic needs.

Conclusion

We do not attempt to offer an overarching explanation of ISIS's exploitation of children. Our objective is to describe the mechanisms through which ISIS involves and engages children and to offer one way of understanding the transformation of children from passive bystanders to fully fledged, active members of the movement. Our proposed six stages, inductively developed from what we currently know, embody a gradual learning process with which the child engages, in both formal and informal ways, the organization. Furthermore, we propose that the six stages are consistent with the deepening of commitment associated with Hundeide's model. The value of the Community of Practice concept, as Hundeide explored its relevance for child soldiers, is that it offers a useful way of conceptualizing the social learning that takes place, and enables other concepts (such as notions of "affordance"—perceived or actual properties of an object or environment that enable an individual to perform certain actions[123]) to be embraced within a broad conceptual framework. To reiterate, the concept does not exist outside of the day-to-day challenges of normal life. As Wenger explains: "It is a perspective that locates learning, not in the head or outside it, but in the relationship between the person and the world."[124]

There remains much that we do not know. We are only now uncovering data about the quality of training children in ISIS receive, but we still do not have complete details about the range of their battlefield activities. Despite these limitations, it is not too early to prepare for the challenge of response. Though the structures and environment under ISIS authority suggest rigid control, accounts of former Cubs are emerging, from children who ran away from the group, or who are pulled out by their parents.

Two major issues, identified by Wessells, are relevant here, although they remain outside the scope of this article—preventing initial involvement, and easing the transition back into civilian life.[125] The lessons and practices associated with Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs are well established, but for child soldiers. Wessells identifies the critical aspect of any such program is to recognize how children have distinctive needs (p. 179). Viewing the challenge primarily as one of child protection, Wessells identifies access to quality education, vocational and life skills training (to prepare them for employment), as well as the use of Interim Care Centers to assist with the reintegration process.

Crucially, he says, a failure to improve on existing efforts stems from a recurring failure to include children's voices and perspectives in all aspects of the DDR process (p. 180).

Echoing Wessells, reunification with families will be less than viable in cases where family involvement characterized children's socialization into ISIS in the first place and where parents have given the terrorist group unfettered access to their children. Additionally, he suggests that reintegration efforts struggle, unsurprisingly, to take root in areas where conflicts continue. However, this has not prevented the development of innovative child-centered programs elsewhere. The Sabaoon project in Pakistan's Swat Valley is currently the only child-centered reintegration program in the world. To reduce the risk of what Wessells calls "re-recruitment," Sabaoon focuses efforts on significant post-release monitoring and ongoing support of children.

For now, we must rely on the concept of Community of Practice. On child soldiers, Singer lamented the fact that in the absence of a thorough understanding of the problem, any response is doomed to be at best merely advocacy, and at worst "either lacking or counterproductive" (p.x). We might expect a similar dynamic to surround forthcoming discussions about how to respond to the children associated with ISIS, but given the unfolding spectacle of a potential future generation of fighters, understanding this phenomenon represents a pressing challenge.

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