

Adam Smith

Nelson Institute Undergraduate Conference on Global Affairs

### **Children of the Caliphate:**

#### The Threat Posed by the Islamic State School System

Since emerging onto the global stage almost a year ago, few groups have commanded as much media coverage as the terrorist organization ISIS. Alternatively known as the Islamic State (IS), or ISIL, this group conquered large swathes of territory in war-torn Syria and Iraq and earned international condemnation through its brutal tactics, executions of Westerners, and abundance of propaganda. After the group's leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared his territory a Caliphate this summer it became the first terrorist organization that could realistically claim statehood. This notoriety has served as a double-edged sword as ISIS has recruited thousands of foreign fighters to join its ranks, but after the executions of 6 foreigners and the capture of Iraq's second city Mosul, ISIS spurred an international coalition to commence a widespread bombing campaign to counter ISIS territorial gains.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the spotlight shone upon ISIS for its very public beheadings, or the international coalition's debates over tactics and limits of force, little to no attention has been paid to one key fact about IS, it is in the family business.

While an inordinate amount of attention is paid to the young men who travel to the region to join ISIS, young women and entire families also take part in the immigration to the self-proclaimed "Caliphate". ISIS is seeking not only fighters but clerics, workers, and intellectuals

---

<sup>1</sup> Rafizadeh, Majid. "Will America's Anti-ISIS Bombing Campaign Succeed?" Al Arabiya. N.p., 23 Sept. 2014. Web. 11 Mar. 2015.

as well; a perfect example of the variety of Islamic State immigrants is Siddhartha Dhar an outspoken jihadist and U.K. citizen, who in November 2014 left to Syria to join the Islamic State despite British attempts to capture him.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Dhar served as an avid spokesperson for Islamism while in the U.K. but after being charged with terrorism-related offenses he fled with his four children and his wife to ISIS. After arriving in Syria he proudly tweeted a picture of his fifth son born in ISIS held territory with the hashtag #GeneratonKhilifa or generation of the caliphate. Mr. Dhar represents the rarely spoken of nonmilitant immigrant community of the Islamic State that according to U.N. estimates is in the range of 15,000 in under a year.<sup>3</sup> This influx of immigrants as well as the sheer number of families that had previously lived in the areas conquered by ISIS gives the Islamic State a population shockingly in the millions. Not since the Taliban controlled Afghanistan before the U.S. invasion has an area of such size and population been controlled by such a radical Islamic group. In 2001 the Taliban exercised control over nearly all of Afghanistan's 21 million residents; however, despite the substantially smaller population of the new Islamic State it poses a far greater threat to the West than the Taliban could ever aspire to.<sup>4</sup> This threat does not come from the military capabilities of ISIS which has faced stiff resistance from Kurdish, Iraqi, and Iranian forces in recent months. Instead the most potent threat to the West is due to the organizations youngest residents, the so-called "Cubs of the Caliphate".<sup>5</sup> ISIS has direct control over hundreds of thousands of young impressionable

---

<sup>2</sup> Malik, Shiv, and Josh Halliday. "Terror Suspect on Run Appears to Taunt 'shoddy' UK Security Services on Twitter." *The Guardian*. N.p., 26 Nov. 2014. Web.

<sup>3</sup> Ackerman, Spencer. "Foreign Jihadists Flocking to Iraq and Syria on 'unprecedented Scale' – UN." *The Guardian*, 30 Oct. 2014. Web.

<sup>4</sup> "World Factbook-Afghanistan." *CIA-World Factbook*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Mar. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> "ISIS Recruiting Kids to Be 'cubs of the Caliphate' - CNN Video." *CNN*. Cable News Network, n.d. Web. 11 Mar. 2015.

boys and teens who they are rapidly transitioning into their newest generation of jihadists through their absolute control over the school system. Media outlets have run several stories about the educational and psychological effects these schools could have on the young students few if any have recognized the significant strategic threat these schools pose Western counterterror plans for the future. With children under the age of 10 being actively indoctrinated into radical ideologies ISIS has laid groundwork to turn its struggle against the west a multi-generational conflict. Despite the Pentagon's rosy predictions that the fight against ISIS could take 2 years to win, such schools, if left unchecked, could easily turn the conflict against ISIS into one of decades instead of years.

### Introduction

The use of child soldiers has long been a tactic of rebel forces, radical groups, third world militaries and terrorist organizations, as of 2014 there are an estimated 250,000 child soldiers all over the world.<sup>6</sup> However, ISIS' use of child soldiers and propaganda filled schools creates a far larger problem than the traditional issue of child soldiers. ISIS is not indoctrinating these children to simply fight in a revolution or to defend their homes, instead ISIS sees itself as bringing up the first generation of a new totalitarian state that not only dehumanizes its citizens but demands that all obey its incredibly strict and violent interpretation of Islam. This difference is cause for great concern not only because the use of child soldiers is in violation of international law, but also because these children will not cease in their mission once ISIS is defeated militarily. These young brainwashed fighters would form one of the largest human rights failures in modern history as thousands of brainwashed Islamist children will be left in a

---

<sup>6</sup> "Child Soldiers." War Child. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2015.

warzone, likely orphaned. If left uncared for they will have no choice but to rely on their ISIS education which has taught them to hate all who do not agree with them, to commit war crimes, and to continue the unfinished fight against the infidels. If the West does not find a way to properly combat the educational program of the Islamic State and prepare a comprehensive rehabilitation program for those who are rescued from or escape the schools of the Islamic State, it will be faced with a strong resurgent ISIS movement led by the children of the Caliphate even if it manages to defeat them militarily.

### Case Study: The Taliban

The last time such large scale indoctrination and brainwashing of a young population occurred was along the Afghan border following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. In order to counter the Soviet invaders and their puppet regime, the U.S., Pakistan, and Persian Gulf countries began a program of arming and supplying Mujahedeen fighters to fight the Soviets.<sup>7</sup> As part of this program the refugee camps along the borders of Pakistan were supplied with school books and Qurans from Saudi Arabia; these books all corresponded to the extremely conservative Salafist sect of Islam that both Saudi Arabia and ISIS claim to be part of. Just two Saudi foundations founded almost 5,000 madrassas (schools) and supplied over 13 million books.<sup>8</sup> In the refugee camps these books were the only learning materials available to many children. After the Soviets were expelled the refugees returned home and several years later the

---

<sup>7</sup> "The Afghan War." Cold War Museum. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Mar. 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Bell, Paul. "Pakistan's Madrassas Weapons of Mass Instruction?" NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL (2007): n. pag. Web.

radical Salafist group the Taliban emerged onto the scene in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> Within two years they had established themselves as the government of Afghanistan and began instituting the Salafist ideals that were ingrained into their camp education. But these Salafist ideologies were foreign to Afghanistan, and many people resented the bans on music, dancing, and strict enforcement of garb that originated in Saudi Arabia.<sup>10</sup> While the Taliban were an Afghan organization the ideas that they began pushing upon the Afghan population after they gained power were far from traditional Afghan values. The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan shows the true potential for dangerous change associated with Islamist indoctrination in Syria and Iraq. There a determined force of extremists with ideas learned in schools once they were young that are not native to the region, manage to form a cohesive military force and conquer a country that had for years resisted conquest by the Soviet war machine. This comparison to the Taliban is exactly the reason the West should be deeply concerned about combatting the educational agenda of ISIS. If the Taliban were formed from a group of young children who simply had a common fundamentalist education imagine the incredibly dangerous and potent force these children of the Caliphate could form.

While the situations of ISIS and the Taliban are unique in their own light it is important to look at the different methods that organizations have used in the past to determine some likely outcomes of ISIS' school system. Therefore this paper will evaluate indoctrination methods used

---

<sup>9</sup> Laub, Zachary. "The Taliban in Afghanistan." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, 4 July 2014. Web. 26 Feb. 2015.

<sup>10</sup> "The Taliban's War Against Women." The State Department. State.gov, 17 Nov. 2001. Web.

by both the Taliban and militant groups in Africa to determine a potential prediction for the effects an Islamic State education could have on the children of the Middle East.

### Indoctrination: The Madrassa

After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 there were a number of studies done by private ventures and government groups to determine how the Taliban became so radicalized. They all came to the same incontrovertible conclusion: The Madrassa's of Pakistan. These schools, previously alluded to in this paper, served as the training ground for the young men who later became the leaders of the Taliban. Because these schools served as the only educational option for poor Afghan refugee children, they took everything learned in their religious schools as fact. Paul Bell of the Naval Postgraduate School performed an in-depth study of the curriculum of these Madrassa's and came to some disturbing conclusions. Bell determined that contrary to the militant education given many indoctrinated youths in Africa these Madrassas portrayed themselves as fairly harmless religious schools which focused heavily on ideology.<sup>11</sup> That is rather than teaching the children how to shoot a gun; their teachers gave the students a reason to want to, and in many cases glorified the life of a jihadist and a martyr. Bell notes that even subjects seemingly unrelated to jihad were utilized in this process of indoctrination, such as this disturbing math question listed in a Madrassa textbook.

---

<sup>11</sup> Bell, Paul. "Pakistan's Madrassas Weapons of Mass Instruction?" NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL (2007): n. pag. Web.

“The speed of a Kalashnikov bullet is 800 meters per second. . . . If a Russian is at a distance of 3,200 meters from a mujahid, and that mujahid aims at the Russian’s head, calculate how many seconds it will take for the bullet to strike the Russian in the forehead.”<sup>12</sup>

Such questions leave little doubt as to the goals of the Madrassa education.

The rise of the Taliban would seem to be evidence enough of the effectiveness of the indoctrination carried out by Salafists in Pakistan, but Bell’s study also shows even further the effect such teaching has on young minds. Bell’s work displays that students attending madrassas were far more likely to have extreme views on issues regarding, the disputed region of Kashmir as well as the issue of equal rights for Christians and women. Bell’s studies show that under 20% of students in such religious schools supported equal rights for women and minority religious groups compared to well over 60% in mainstream Pakistani schools.<sup>13</sup> These findings combined with the military effectiveness of the Taliban army that they birthed clearly displays the time-delayed effectiveness of an Islamist indoctrination, even if it focuses on ideological issues rather than military.

#### Indoctrination: Africa

The Islamic State is not strictly following the madrassa model of indoctrination however. Instead they are pairing that proven method with another more violent form of indoctrination utilized by warlords and militaries throughout Africa, a militant method of indoctrination. While this report does not focus on any specific armed group in Africa, tactics they used are often times

---

<sup>12</sup> Bell, Paul. "Pakistan's Madrassas Weapons of Mass Instruction?" NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL (2007): n. pag. Web.

<sup>13</sup> IBID

commonplace and therefore imitable for ISIS.<sup>14</sup> Instead of focusing heavily on why their child soldiers should choose to fight, armed groups in Africa focus their indoctrination efforts instead on ensuring obedience and violence from their recruits. Human Rights Watch and the U.N. have reported that beyond traditional military training such armed groups regularly force children to participate in extrajudicial killings, violence, and other human rights abuses in order to instill fear and desensitize child soldiers. There have been countless cases of child soldiers, usually drugged up with amphetamines or cocaine, being forced to execute prisoners through incredibly disturbing means such as beheadings or various forms of torture. By forcing the children to commit such atrocities armed groups ensure that their child soldiers no longer see any actions taken by the group as extreme or morally wrong and further bind the child's loyalty to the group. While few studies have been done on the effectiveness of this form of indoctrination the incredible number of child soldiers present in Africa displays for itself the distressing ability of warlords to brainwash impressionable children into soldiers well before their times.

#### Analysis: Indoctrination by ISIS

As previously mentioned ISIS has not been using a strictly Taliban or African method of indoctrination. They have instead begun using a hybrid system in which strong ideological education is paired with militant training and exposure to atrocities to give the Islamic State education system a dangerous combination. In these schools, named after previous leaders of jihad such as Bin Laden or Al-Zawahiri, students are instilled with a deep ideological attachment

---

<sup>14</sup> "Coercion and Intimidation of Child Soldiers to Participate in Violence." Human Rights Watch. HRW, 16 Apr. 2008. Web. 09 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2008/04/16/coercion-and-intimidation-child-soldiers-participate-violence>>.

to the vicious creed and stated goals of the Islamic State. When described by the late PR officer of the Caliphate Abu Musa this system sounds relatively mild<sup>15</sup> “Those under 15 go to Sharia camp to learn about their creed and religion. Those over 16 they can attend the military camp...and can participate in military operations.”<sup>16</sup> While still against international law the training of 16 year olds for military service is far from shocking. But Abu Musa’s simplistic explanation did little to truly explain the horrors forced upon children attending even just the Sharia camp for those under 15. Numerous reports have come to light documenting children as young as 10 being trained to behead “infidel” captive Syrian soldiers as training for their eventual rise to militancy.<sup>17</sup> Even more demonstrative of ISIS’s adherence to African indoctrination techniques is the video released this week which shows the execution of a Palestinian man accused of spying for Israel allegedly by a 10 year old boy.<sup>18</sup> While this is only the latest in a string of ISIS videos which show children committing atrocities it serves as a clear example of the dangerous effects this hybrid indoctrination system ISIS has created.

Between the reports of use of child soldiers and the criminal usage of the education system within the Islamic State it becomes clear that the issue of child’s welfare inside the Islamic State is one of extreme importance, not only for moral reasons but also for strategic

---

<sup>15</sup> Thornhill, Ted. "ISIS Press Officer Who Said Jihadists Would 'raise the Flag of Allah in the White House' Reported Dead in Syria Airstrike ." Mail Online. Associated Newspapers, 22 Aug. 2014. Web. 11 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2730929/ISIS-press-officer-said-jihadists-raise-flag-Allah-White-House-reported-dead-Syria-airstrike.html>>.

<sup>16</sup> "The Islamic State (Full Length) | VICE News." VICE News RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Mar. 2015. <<https://news.vice.com/video/the-islamic-state-full-length>>.

<sup>17</sup> AbiHabib, Maria. "The Child Soldiers Who Escaped Islamic State." WSJ. Wall Street Journal, 26 Dec. 2014. Web. 11 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-child-soldiers-who-escaped-islamic-state-1419628277>>.

<sup>18</sup> Press, Associated. "Man, Boy in ISIS Execution Video ID'd as French Citizens." New York Post. N.p., 11 Mar. 2015. Web. 11 Mar. 2015. <<http://nypost.com/2015/03/11/man-boy-in-isis-execution-video-idd-as-french-citizens/>>.

military planning. As demonstrated in this paper indoctrination of children does not only present a short term military issue, instead ISIS has been utilizing ideological tactics to turn the children of the Caliphate into a long term threat. Therefore it becomes clear that a specialized western method must be created in order to remedy this potential disaster. After reviewing the tactics utilized by ISIS as well as organizations in the past I advise a two step solution to ISIS' indoctrination campaign. First I recommend that the West reinvigorate its ongoing social media campaign aimed at preventing more immigrants to ISIS. It stands to reason that the fewer people that are allowed to join the terrorist organization the fewer the U.N. and the West will have to deal with if and when they are able to defeat the Islamic State. Finally after ISIS is subdued the West should work with its pre-established coalition to fund and operate a rehabilitation program for the children who were abused by the inhuman education system in the Islamic State. UNICEF and other human rights organizations have already displayed their ability to rehabilitate child soldiers from African conflicts, and similar programs could be utilized to assimilate children victimized by the Islamic State. If the West fails to follow through on a thorough program of reintegration for these troubled youths they will face not only a human rights disaster but also a strategic risk to the incredibly fragile Middle East.

## Works cited

- Bell, Paul. "Pakistan's Madrassas Weapons of Mass Instruction?" NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL (2007): n. pag. Web.
- "The Afghan War." Cold War Museum. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Mar. 2015.
- "Child Soldiers." War Child. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2015.
- Malik, Shiv, and Josh Halliday. "Terror Suspect on Run Appears to Taunt 'shoddy' UK Security Services on Twitter." The Guardian. N.p., 26 Nov. 2014. Web.
- Ackerman, Spencer. "Foreign Jihadists Flocking to Iraq and Syria on 'unprecedented Scale' – UN." The Guardian, 30 Oct. 2014. Web.
- "World Factbook-Afghanistan." CIA-World Factbook. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Mar. 2015.
- "ISIS Recruiting Kids to Be 'cubs of the Caliphate' - CNN Video." CNN. Cable News Network, n.d. Web. 11 Mar. 2015.
- Rafizadeh, Majid. "Will America's Anti-ISIS Bombing Campaign Succeed?" Al Arabiya. N.p., 23 Sept. 2014. Web. 11 Mar. 2015.
- Laub, Zachary. "The Taliban in Afghanistan." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, 4 July 2014. Web. 26 Feb. 2015.
- "The Taliban's War Against Women." The State Department. State.gov, 17 Nov. 2001. Web.
- "Coercion and Intimidation of Child Soldiers to Participate in Violence." Human Rights Watch. HRW, 16 Apr. 2008. Web. 09 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2008/04/16/coercion-and-intimidation-child-soldiers-participate-violence>>.
- Thornhill, Ted. "ISIS Press Officer Who Said Jihadists Would 'raise the Flag of Allah in the White House' Reported Dead in Syria Airstrike ." Mail Online. Associated Newspapers, 22 Aug. 2014. Web. 11 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2730929/ISIS-press-officer-said-jihadists-raise-flag-Allah-White-House-reported-dead-Syria-airstrike.html>>.
- "The Islamic State (Full Length) | VICE News." VICE News RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Mar. 2015. <<https://news.vice.com/video/the-islamic-state-full-length>>.
- AbiHabib, Maria. "The Child Soldiers Who Escaped Islamic State." WSJ. Wall Street Journal, 26 Dec. 2014. Web. 11 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-child-soldiers-who-escaped-islamic-state-1419628277>>.

Press, Associated. "Man, Boy in ISIS Execution Video ID'd as French Citizens."New York Post. N.p., 11 Mar. 2015. Web. 11 Mar. 2015. <<http://nypost.com/2015/03/11/man-boy-in-isis-execution-video-idd-as-french-citizens/>>.