



The Children of ISIS

The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory

A joint publication by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) and the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD)



Introduction

Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria and rise of jihadist militant groups in Syria and Iraq, images of war crimes committed by the various parties involved in the ongoing conflict have emerged. The terrorist organisation 'Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham' (ISIS) in particular employs the strategy to commit crimes against humanity and propagate them, in order to instil fear in friend and foe. For this terrorist group, the end justifies the use of any means. This is also true for the treatment and use of minors¹ in ISIS-held territory.

This publication sheds light on the indoctrination process of minors by ISIS and their use in committing acts of violence. It must be emphasised that the point is not to stigmatise these children or to foster fear. The goal is to render a realistic picture of what minors in ISIS-held territory go through. This is important because the so-called 'caliphate' that ISIS declared in June 2014 as 'a perfect Islamic state' not only has attracted Dutch young men as fighters but has also prompted Dutch (or Netherlands-based) families, women and children to travel to Syria or Iraq.

Knowledge of the extent of indoctrination, exposure to violence and living conditions of minors in ISIS-held territory is required in order to be able to accurately estimate what is needed in the event children from the 'caliphate' return to or enter the Netherlands. This could involve the supervision that they may need in order to process their experiences and to be able to reintegrate or integrate in Dutch society. Furthermore, the knowledge in this publication also contributes to assessing the potential threat posed by some of these minors.

ISIS regards minors as an essential component of the continued existence of the 'caliphate'. Minors are comprehensively indoctrinated with the ISIS ideology from a young age onward. This involves not only indoctrination through education and training camps but also by family members. There are signs that some of the boys in ISIS-held territory are actively participating in violent acts in the name of ISIS from an increasingly young age. Living in a conflict zone means that children are frequently confronted with violence and death, which can be traumatic for them.

Exposure to and possible involvement in violence can present risks to children upon returning to the Netherlands,² for example if they experience physical or mental effects of their life in the 'caliphate'. In addition, re-entry poses potential risks to Dutch society because some of the minors may be more willing to engage in violence and have possibly acquired combat experience or have been inured to atrocities. There is no reason to assume that ISIS will show restraint in using minors to carry out acts of terrorism in Europe.

¹ Definition according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: a minor is any human being below the age of 18 years.

² This refers to a return to the Netherlands as well as travel to the Netherlands.

In recent months, ISIS has been under increasing military pressure in Syria and Iraq, causing the group to lose ground, leaders, manpower and supply routes. If the ISIS 'caliphate' is defeated militarily or collapses, the number of returnees is expected to rise. Although it is difficult to predict how the situation will develop, a slow gradual rise of returnees is expected, rather than large numbers at the same time. The returnees are likely to include minors. Governments and authorities must be aware of the care needed for these children while simultaneously be alert to the risks posed by this group. At the same time, from the perspective of children's rights, these minors should in particular be regarded and treated as victims of ISIS.

This publication describes the life of minors who have spent time in ISIS-held territory and either might return to the Netherlands in the future or have returned in the meantime. These could be children who were taken by Dutch parents to the 'caliphate', children of one or more Dutch parents who were born in ISIS-held territory, or minors who travelled on their own to Syria or Iraq. Furthermore, there is the possibility that children with a different nationality, such as Syrian or Iraqi, who lived in ISIS-held territory, travel to the Netherlands.

The role of minors in other jihadist militant groups in Syria and Iraq, such as the Al Qa'ida-affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, previously Jabhat al-Nusra) is not included in this publication. The Syrian Arab Army and Kurdish YPG have also used minors in battle. The level of indoctrination in these groups is lower than with ISIS. However, children who have been in these organisations likewise may have suffered traumas or be prepared to commit violence. In other words, care and vigilance is advised with respect to the return of these minors, too.

This publication provides insight into the place and role of children in the totalitarian ISIS ideology, the way in which minors are used, the structure of education, the possible roles of minors in the organisation and how minors are used for combat and propaganda purposes. Lastly, the potential risks associated with the return and reintegration of minors in the Netherlands are described.

ISIS ideology in education and propaganda

Minors in the ISIS totalitarian state system

ISIS differs from other terrorist organisations and militant groups that use child soldiers by ideologically justifying child-rearing in its propaganda. Children are one of the cornerstones on which the 'caliphate' is built. ISIS has broadly-based ambitions for realising a high-functioning Islamic state according to Islamic law or sharia. The interpretation of sharia upheld by ISIS is very specific and strict. In order to put it into practice, a totalitarian state apparatus has been established, which includes a ministry of education (Diwan al-Ta'aleem).

Minors and families are a crucial component of this totalitarian system. After all, the continued existence and future of the 'caliphate' to a large extent lies in the hands of the next generation. This generation is deliberately prepared, both ideologically and physically, to become tomorrow's fighters. In ISIS propaganda, these children are referred to as 'cubs' (ashbal) that must grow to become 'lions' (usud). They can be sent to battle from the onset of puberty (ranging from nine to fifteen years old). These children form a supply of potential fighters for ISIS and are easy to mould, especially because minors are often susceptible to indoctrination by people whom they love or are entirely dependent on: their family.

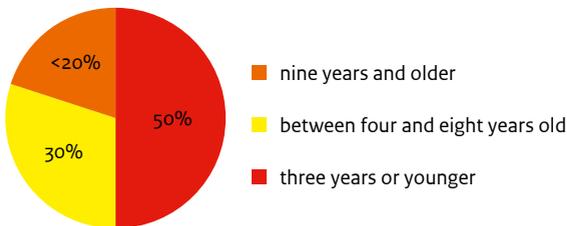
ISIS regards these minors as potential better versions of the current fighters. They are blank slates that can be precisely shaped according to the ideal ISIS image. This certainly applies to young children: they are brought up with the extreme values of ISIS and therefore do not require conversion or re-education. Minors in the 'caliphate' are taught from a young age that anyone who does not observe the correct interpretation of Islam is a 'kafir' (unbeliever) and must be killed.

Over the years, minors have been used as soldiers in various conflict zones by armies that have no qualms about using children and adolescents to wage war. Child soldiers have been used in African conflicts in countries including Rwanda, Sierra Leone and the Central African Republic. In terrorist propaganda we are seeing an increase in children who are being trained and used in war. Groups such as al-Qa'ida and Boko Haram are known to have shown children in training videos or used children for suicide attacks.

Numbers

It is difficult to estimate the precise number of minors in ISIS-held territory. There are children of foreign fighters, born in or brought to the ‘caliphate’ and children of local ISIS fighters or residents forced to live under ISIS rule.

Currently, there are at least 80 children with a Dutch connection³ living in the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq, both with ISIS and other jihadist militant groups. Approximately half of them are boys. The majority of children are with ISIS. Approximately half of the Dutch children were brought to the conflict zone by one or both parents. The others were born there. Fewer than 20 percent of the Dutch children are nine years of age or older and therefore, given their age, could have undergone jihadist training. Thirty percent of the Dutch children are between four and eight years old and 50 percent are three years or younger.



The actual number of children with a Dutch connection in Syria or Iraq is most likely higher than the above-mentioned 80. Many Dutch women or non-Dutch women married to a Dutchman become pregnant in Syria or Iraq. It is difficult however to verify how many children subsequently have been born there. Children of Dutch foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) born in the conflict zone are not officially recognised by Dutch authorities. In the event they return to the Netherlands they will have to submit to a DNA test in order to ascertain family relationships and accordingly obtain Dutch citizenship.⁴

ISIS encourages having as many children as possible. The enemy can be outnumbered this way. In January 2017, the propaganda magazine 'Rumiyah' reported that Western countries have unlawful restrictions with regard to marrying at a young age. According to tradition, marrying young is honourable. The prophet Mohammed married Aisha when she was six years old and the marriage was consummated when she was nine. The same article furthermore describes contraception as a 'disease' introduced in the Muslim community by the (infidel) enemy.⁵

³ The definition of ‘with a Dutch connection’ is: having one of two parents with the Dutch nationality or parents who lived in the Netherlands for an extended period of time.

⁴ Documents from ISIS-held territory are not officially recognised. Consequently, DNA testing will always be required.

⁵ Historians believe that the prophet Mohammed married the young Aisha for political reasons. The future caliph Abu Bakr, Aisha’s father, would gain status through this marriage. Aisha’s exact age at the moment of consummation is a subject of heated debate in the Islamic world.

Education

ISIS propaganda reveals the crucial role assigned to education in the 'caliphate'. This is reflected in the establishment of the 'ministry of education' which made education mandatory for boys between the ages of 6 and 18 and girls between the ages of 6 and 15.⁶ Despite this requirement, it is unlikely that all children in ISIS-held territory actually attend school. A considerable part of the local population and possibly some foreign terrorist fighters likely keep their children at home. In addition, the worsened security situation means there are fewer and fewer properly functioning schools. Some schools have been forced to close – temporarily or otherwise – on account of a lack of employees.



An ISIS school as portrayed in propaganda

Boys and girls attend mixed school classes until the age of six. From that age onwards, they are taught separately in different rooms. Teachers who worked in existing schools are required to follow a sharia course. Anyone who refuses to teach according to the changes in the curriculum risks being executed.

Education in the existing schools has been drastically adapted under ISIS rule. Religious education has been assigned a much more prominent role than was customary in these regions. A strict interpretation of Islam is taught (salafi-jihadism), and everything that deviates from it is forbidden. During class, children memorise and recite passages from the Koran in a group. ISIS acts are legitimised according to the Koran passages that best suit their extremist interpretation of Islam.

From an interview with an 8-year-old Syrian boy: 'Taim remembered how his new teachers gave special emphasis to a particular story from the life of the prophet Mohammed. In it, Islam's founder punishes a group of camel thieves by plucking out their eyes and chopping off their limbs. For Raqqa youths, the lesson about harsh justice appeared to serve as both a warning and a justification for the cruel punishments the militants were beginning to inflict on the city's residents for violations from suspecting spying to smoking cigarettes' (Washington Post, October 2016).

⁶ It is not likely that girls who are married are still in school.

The structure and content of subjects changed, too. For example, history is focused exclusively on the life of the prophet Mohammed, and subjects such as philosophy and French have been eliminated from the curriculum. Children who travelled with their parents from Western countries receive extra Arabic lessons. In addition, there are schools that offer instruction in English, geared specifically to the children of Western fighters, and there are special classes for Uighur children and children from the Caucasus.

Textbooks, such as the primary education textbook 'I Am Muslim', substantiate a world view in which ISIS beliefs are true and all others are false. Course materials are illustrated with pictures of hand grenades, tanks and battle positions to link education with the ISIS military strategy. Furthermore, children receive theory lessons on topics related to battle, such as identifying different types of weapons and the situations to which these are best suited. A key focus of the curriculum is on reinforcing the sense of us-versus-them. The 'Crusader coalition' (of which the Netherlands is a part) is the enemy here that must be wiped out.⁷ Anyone who does not speak out against the coalition is labelled an infidel or, in the case of Muslims, an apostate. This means that according to ISIS he or she can be killed.



Page from an ISIS textbook about the deployment and use of weapons

Physical education has been changed under ISIS. During class, children perform exercises focused on endurance, obedience and cooperation designed as play. This is a direct, non-military training, yet it establishes the necessary foundation in terms of both physical training and instilling loyalty to ISIS. The instructions in a teacher's manual include that children can sing the ba'yah - the pledge of allegiance to the 'caliph' of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – during physical education.

Furthermore, attention is paid at schools to getting children accustomed to violence. Deliberate subjection to violence and atrocities such as public executions is designed to desensitise children to such manifestations of violence. They learn that such deeds are part of everyday life. Indeed, children are encouraged to join their parents in attending public displays in which corporal punishment and executions are performed.

⁷ The 'Crusader coalition' refers to the 68 countries that make up the anti-ISIS coalition, including the United States, France, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands. See <http://theglobalcoalition.org/partners/>.

The indoctrination of children starts at a young age. The app Huroof (alphabet), intended for the youngest, teaches them violent concepts or jihadist words such as ‘dababa’ (tank) in a playful way. There are also apps that provide a game setting in which children can attack coalition countries, for example by firing rockets at Western fighter jets or the Eiffel Tower.



Apps for young children

To make the moulding of children complete, ISIS has developed manuals to support families in raising their children in alignment with ISIS ideology outside of school. Parents can read aloud stories about martyrdom to their children, for example. It is difficult to determine the extent to which these types of apps and manuals are used.

Living conditions and trauma

For children, life in ISIS-controlled territory can be difficult and traumatising. Children in particular who have been brought to the ‘caliphate’ from the Netherlands or any other Western country may have difficulty adjusting to their new surroundings. Being subjected to daily air strikes is a proven stressful experience for children. In addition, minors are confronted with death and destruction more than their peers in many Western countries, for example when family members or friends die in battle. Children may also run the risk of being injured or killed themselves.

Propaganda and image-driven war

ISIS uses the Internet as a tool to spread propaganda to support its terrorist activities. This propaganda exceeds the traditional approach of influencing public opinion and winning supporters: it is a war in the form of images. Portraying young children in propaganda videos and photo reports is designed to strike a sensitive chord amongst ISIS supporters as well as enemies.

Children are depicted as fighters, as happy and free in the ‘caliphate’ or as victims of coalition air strikes.

The propaganda reveals a great deal about the role that ISIS assigns children and how the group attempts to recruit children and their families. It also shows the extent to which ISIS is prepared to provoke and enforce absolute power. Images of lifeless children are used to arouse moral outrage amongst supporters and to legitimise ISIS’ violent response in the form of terrorist attacks. Combat-hungry children in turn should shock the opponent or instil fear.

ISIS actively disseminates its propaganda in the ‘caliphate’, for example through mobile media kiosks. The media channels strive to make the videos with news value and action, which are released on a regular basis, as attractive to children as possible. Children in ISIS-held territory are thus systematically exposed to propaganda that informs them of their role in the ‘caliphate’ at every opportunity. This propaganda is also widely distributed outside ISIS-held territory via social media.

Legitimising the use of children

Photo reports and videos showing under-age victims of air strikes are meant to provoke a sense of moral outrage in the viewer. Countries deemed responsible for these victims - Russia, Turkey, the Syrian regime and the anti-ISIS coalition - must be punished. The emphasis on ISIS’ role as a victim facing the hostile outside world is a crucial factor in legitimising ISIS terrorist acts, especially in Europe. In framing ISIS attacks in coalition countries, the concept of ‘forward defence’ takes centre stage: the idea to force the countries to halt their bombing raids by committing terrorist attacks. This way, ISIS attacks are framed as purely ‘defensive’: a response to the killing of children in Syria and Iraq by the coalition. Images of under-age victims are included in videos that show children’s readiness to commit violence. For ISIS, it is a matter of ‘an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth’: ‘The West kills our children, so our cubs are coming to kill you’.

Discarding moral barriers: children as fighters in propaganda

The first official ISIS propaganda video in which a minor carried out a beheading was released in July 2015. It was a clear signal from ISIS: by openly endorsing the use of children for acts of violence, and by presenting it in graphic detail, ISIS showed that it is not interested in universal children’s rights. In addition, it was a message to the group’s supporters, making it clear that producing, raising and training a new generation is crucial for ISIS. The first European child was featured in official propaganda in early 2016: a 4-year-old British boy pressed the button to blow up a vehicle containing three prisoners.

Previously, from May 2013 onward, videos glorifying training camps for minors had already been released. Known videos such as ‘al-Farouq Institute for Cubs’ and ‘Cubs of the Caliphate’ from 2015 portrayed the professionalisation of these camps, where children look like miniature versions of adults. ISIS videos from 2016 largely reflected the development of using children for violent acts. They were shown as hardened soldiers who were going to infiltrate their country of origin. In these videos, French children openly threatened to commit attacks in Europe. Other videos showed minors acting as executioners and murdering prisoners on camera. Reality was often combined with video games through the method of filming from the perspective of the shooter. Extremely young children carried out executions on camera, too. In a video from January 2017, a pre-school child shot and killed a ‘PKK prisoner’ and watched as a slightly older boy beheaded another prisoner.



Image from propaganda video that imitates a video game

soldiers is covered up, ISIS is open about its use of children via the propaganda that glorifies the young martyrs. The group deliberately flaunts the use of minors. This is to shock the enemy on the one hand and to instil fear on the other. It is possible that ISIS will not show restraint in using children to commit attacks in Europe. After all, this is already happening in Syria and Iraq, as shown in the videos about under-age suicide terrorists.

The 'caliphate' as the ideal Islamic state

The rise of ISIS was accompanied by a tremendous amount of propaganda of a quality never before seen in a terrorist organisation. In 2014, a VICE documentary – Grooming Children for Jihad – offered a look into the newly established 'caliphate'. Among other things, it revealed that European parents saw a role reserved for their children in the 'caliphate'. In one video, a Belgian child, clearly still too young to understand the questions being asked, gave answers prompted by his father about ISIS and infidels.

The use of the next generation for the continued existence of the 'caliphate' plays a crucial role in the narrative presented by ISIS. This narrative centres on the 'caliphate' as the perfect Islamic state that welcomes all supporters: men, women and children. The same can be seen in the propaganda videos that specifically present this life in the 'caliphate'. Families play a leading role. These videos depict how great life is for children in the 'caliphate'. Children are shown laughing during typical children's activities such as a fair, a tug-of-war contest and a game of musical chairs. The role of ISIS as an organisation that takes excellent care of its members is given extensive coverage. Activities in which a father or the entire family is involved – such as listening to a sermon or watching a religious punishment – can persuade other families to travel to the 'caliphate'. These videos play a prominent role in supporting the ISIS narrative; however, they have seldom appeared within the past year.

Such videos tend to simultaneously convey the message to supporters that ISIS sets great store by even the youngest generation. A number of infants and toddlers are featured in a video from December 2016, 'My Father Told Me'. Their older brothers tell them stories about the good things in the 'caliphate'.

ISIS does not hesitate to use minors for suicide attacks in the conflict zone. Some of these perpetrators are praised in propaganda videos. Unlike other conflicts, where the use of child

Activities in ISIS-held territory

Roles and duties by age group

Some minors play a specific role within the ISIS organisation, ranging from housewife or informer to soldier or executioner. Children, both boys and girls, are pressured into reporting on family members, neighbours or friends who do not obey the rules of ISIS. In this sense, the 'caliphate' operates as a totalitarian state that wants to control its citizens. The use of children for such roles is customary in a totalitarian regime. When children have proven to be loyal to ISIS by competently fulfilling this role, they can advance to a role that comes with more responsibilities.



Underage preacher in propaganda video

Minors who have good communication skills and effectively convey the ISIS message can be used to spread this message. Minors who preach in public on behalf of the 'caliphate' can be highly effective because they often come across as more enthusiastic than adults on account of their youthfulness. This, in combination with their age, draws attention. The enthusiasm is stimulated at an early stage; for example, rewards can be earned by reading verses from the Koran in public. In addition, minors can prod their peers into joining jihadist groups.

Specifically for girls

Girls receive a religious education and additionally are prepared from a young age for domestic duties such as cooking, sewing and looking after children. They must become supportive wives to their fighters and mothers of a new generation of ISIS fighters. Girls are referred to as 'flowers and pearls of the caliphate' in the propaganda and are expected to obey special rules. They must be entirely veiled, remain hidden and preferably stay home as much as possible, except to go to school. In the past, adolescent girls were active on social media, producing and spreading propaganda. Recruiting other female travellers, often family members or friends, was considered an essential part of a young woman's life in the 'caliphate', according to ISIS. Restrictions on Internet use stemming from security awareness and loss of Internet due to air strikes have all but eliminated this practice from late 2015 onward.

As soon as they reach puberty, girls are expected to marry an ISIS fighter. Marriages tend to be arranged by a local imam or through matchmaking agencies. Scant attention is paid to age differences between marital partners. Girls may also be personally approached by a man interested in marriage; a mutual acquaintance may introduce them, too. Life in the 'caliphate' can be extremely brutal for girls with arranged marriages and sexual violence.

Nevertheless, marrying an ISIS fighter holds romantic appeal for some under-age girls in Europe. The propaganda on social media paints a rosy picture of these relationships. Consequently, marrying a fighter was one of the reasons for some minors in Europe to travel to the 'caliphate' on their own. A number of girls from the Netherlands have either attempted this or done so.

Specifically for boys

In addition to the ideological education, under-age boys also undergo preparatory physical training at school from an early age. They can also attend jihadist training camps and be sent into battle. It is known that under-age boys have carried out executions. Forcing children to participate in executions further indoctrinates the minors. Children are taught that carrying out an execution is an honour and a privilege.

Under-age boys are increasingly being used for suicide operations. There are known instances of boys being put in vehicles outfitted with bombs tasked with detonating them on the site of the attack. In the deployment and glorification of suicide attackers, ISIS makes no distinction between adults and children with regard to either target choice or method of suicide attack. It is conceivable that the percentage of under-age suicide attackers in Syria and Iraq will rise as a result of increasing military pressure and shortage of regular manpower.

Recruitment and deployment of minors

Under-age boys are an easy target for military recruitment. They are relatively easy to manipulate and often too young to resist the violence to which they are exposed. The recruitment of children in the 'caliphate' occurs both under duress and voluntarily.

So far, girls are not being recruited for military deployment or to commit suicide attacks. A small number of them are possibly being taught how to use weapons, however. They may only use this knowledge if the 'caliphate' is under threat; the so-called 'defensive jihad'. These instructions apply to adult women, too. For the time being, ISIS has not issued any official legal directive (fatwa) in which the organisation allows women to participate in battle or can use women for other acts of violence.



Example of ISIS propaganda

Coercion

Various studies show that ISIS has kidnapped or involuntarily recruited large numbers of children in both Syria and Iraq. This particularly concerns children from mainly non-Islamic groups such as Yazidis, but also Shia Muslims. Orphans, too, are conscripted and trained. Children who refuse to follow ISIS orders are beaten, tortured or raped. Furthermore, ISIS is known to use scare tactics. Public persecution of 'dissidents' ensures that children feel forced to join the group out of fear.

'Voluntary'

Staying in the 'caliphate' for an extended period of time can lead to children becoming indoctrinated to the point where they 'voluntarily' join ISIS. The fact that children can receive a salary from ISIS can be an additional, economic, motivating factor to join. Parents receive a monthly stipend when they send their children to an ISIS school. This is one of the push factors especially for local residents, both children and adults. The appeal of the jihadist ideology can also serve as a stimulus. It is particularly interesting for young people who want to prove themselves. Peer pressure or seeing children their age enjoying privileges can also play a crucial role.

The message of success that ISIS conveys guarantees to a significant degree that minors will feel drawn to the group. Propaganda about prosperity, military victory and the rewards it can bring make it tempting to join the group. This idea is reinforced through public gatherings during which ISIS hands out candy or toys and children have the opportunity to hold a weapon or an ISIS flag.

Within ISIS territory parents or other family members play an important role in the recruitment of children. This deviates from many other conflicts in which child soldiers are used. They tend to be kidnapped or otherwise detached from their family. European families that travelled with their children to the region often did so with the idea that their children are the ISIS fighters of the future, a message that is widely communicated in the ISIS propaganda. There are Dutch families known to

have deliberately travelled to the 'caliphate' in order to raise their children in a state that they believe complies with the laws of sharia. There are also a number of minors who travelled on their own accord to join ISIS.

Training camps

Boys can be selected by ISIS to join a training camp where they can practice skills and receive training in the use of firearms and bladed weapons. These training camps are separate from education at schools. ISIS criteria when selecting boys include conformity with the group, following the rules and unquestioning obedience. Boys may also be brought to a camp by their parents, or decide on their own to sign up. These camps are modelled on the jihadi training camps for adults. Boys may be able to participate when they are as young as 9, and are assigned to specialised programmes for fighters, attackers, bomb makers and snipers. The programme comprises ideological and military education. For example, a typical day in a training camp includes Koran lessons, physical training and learning tactics such as using a dummy to practise beheading.



Image from a propaganda video on training camps for children

Restricted diet and strenuous physical exercise are used to toughen up the boys. If the instructors are dissatisfied, their pupils receive a beating. One of the goals of a training camp is to detach the under-age child from the family and to cultivate a sense of belonging to a group as opposed to an individual identity. This makes it easier to mould the child to ISIS values and practices. Part of this is making the children follow the example of adult fighters as much as

possible. This includes everything from appearance such as wearing the same camouflage uniforms to firing automatic weapons. Conditions in a camp can be extremely difficult both physically and mentally for the under-age boys.

A 15-year-old boy describes how one of his peers in the training camp had to behead someone: 'Some of the boys felt uncomfortable about it but no one dared to say anything. Whenever there was an execution, everyone pretended to be happy and we shouted Allahu Akbar! We couldn't say that it upset us. I was upset'. In the series of interviews, another boy explained how an element of play was incorporated in the training: 'The guys in the camp participated in competitions. The prize? The opportunity to become a suicide terrorist'. (International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 5 July 2016)

Return to or arrival in the Netherlands

Risks to society

Life for minors in ISIS-held territory has many risks for the children themselves. For various reasons, they, too, can pose a risk upon return to their country of origin. The fact that a number of the minors residing in ISIS-held territory is from the Netherlands is relevant to the threat facing the Netherlands. There is a risk that they could return at any time. Minors are indoctrinated with the idea that the Netherlands (and the West as a whole) is the enemy. Indoctrinating minors with ideas about the role of women, homosexuals, and people of other faiths or beliefs is part of the deliberate and systematic shaping of children that starts at an extremely young age. The effectiveness of this is reinforced by the role of the families, not least by taking the children to ISIS-held territory. The most significant threat for Dutch society is posed by children who have received combat training in a jihadi training camp or have gained first-hand combat experience. These minors have undergone a programme of deliberate desensitisation to atrocities and may be traumatised. As a result, these minors may be more willing to engage in violence.

ISIS is a learning and opportunistic organisation that is continuously searching for new possibilities for attacks. The use of minors for facilitating or committing terrorist attacks in Europe is conceivable, especially because of the potential tactical advantage offered. Children tend to be judged as less dangerous and are less likely to be searched or detained during checks.

Minors as victims

Life in a conflict zone such as the area controlled by ISIS implies that children, regardless of their activities, are exposed to violence and death, which can be traumatic for them. This combination of exposure to and involvement in violence can present risks to the child upon returning to the Netherlands. For example, they may experience physical or mental consequences of their life in the 'caliphate'. Consequently, minors first and foremost should be regarded and treated as victims of ISIS. Research by 'Save the Children' on the impact of the Syrian war on children shows that minors from the conflict zone show severe forms of stress and trauma. This can manifest in various ways, such as the sudden loss of speech, aggression, intense fears and signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. The experience of living in a conflict zone can affect the child's development both mentally and physically for a long time.

No detailed information is available about the background and degree of indoctrination of the various children from ISIS-held territory who have a Dutch connection. However, in light of the priority that ISIS assigns to educating and training children, and the fact that the group is likely able to establish its own system of education in the area it occupies, it is conceivable that a (large) number of the minors from ISIS-held territory received this type of education. Letting go of ideas that minors were exposed to at a young age, not least by their own relatives, can be problematic. The attitude adopted by parents upon returning significantly influences how the minor re-integrates into society. In addition, children may have been radicalised separately from their parents. Furthermore, children and/or their families may have become disillusioned precisely because the idealised picture of the 'caliphate' did not correspond to reality.

Radicalisation of minors in Europe

Minors who have spent time in the 'caliphate' are not the only ones who can be influenced by ISIS. Children who have never travelled to or spent time in ISIS-held territory can also pose a potential risk to Dutch society. Over the past year it has emerged that several minors took inspiration from ISIS propaganda or followed instructions from ISIS fighters in Syria, for example through social media. Internet access in Europe makes it easy for minors to come in contact with ISIS propaganda at an increasingly young age. Consequently, it is cause for alarm that ISIS is providing more and more specific directions on the modus operandi of committing a terrorist attack.

For example, a 12-year-old German-Iraqi boy attempted to detonate a nail bomb on a Christmas market in Germany at the end of December 2016. Later it was disclosed that he had been in contact with ISIS recruiters via Telegram. He had been put into care after he had attempted to travel to Syria the previous summer to join ISIS. In early December, two adolescents aged 15 and 17 who had been planning an attack were arrested in Mannheim. ISIS propaganda was found in their house. The boys had never been in the 'caliphate'.

There are also known cases of under-age girls who were in contact with ISIS members. A 16-year old German girl attacked a police officer in Hanover in February 2016. Allegedly, her actions were motivated by the combination of her frustration over a failed trip to Syria and online contact with ISIS fighters. In France, four girls ages 14 to 18 were arrested at the end of February 2017 for having been in contact with members of a terrorist network in Syria using social media. Presumably, they used the Telegram application to communicate with Frenchman Rachid Kassim, an ISIS fighter based in Syria who most likely acted as a 'coach' for ISIS fighters or sympathisers abroad until his suspected death in February 2017. Earlier, a 16-year-old girl had been arrested in France in August 2016 on account of posting online her intention to carry out a terrorist act in the name of ISIS.

Conclusion

The way in which ISIS attempts to radicalise, indoctrinate and actively use minors for the group's agenda demands a great deal of concern, vigilance and in some cases action if the children return to or settle in the Netherlands. It should be clearly kept in mind that minors are chiefly victims of ISIS, without ignoring the potential risks for society.

Policy principles

Upon arrival in the Netherlands, minors returning from ISIS-held territory will be individually assessed to determine the appropriate care, security measures and interventions required. Just like with adults, there is no one size fits all approach. Although no two minors are the same or have been through the same, we must assume that life there can have serious consequences for the development of these minors. The Council for Child Protection (Raad voor de Kinderbescherming - RvdK) determines whether aid is already being provided to the minor and if necessary decides to open a council inquiry. At the same time, care and safety partners draw up a treatment plan in a multidisciplinary case consultation that ensures the safe development of the child and tackles any possible security risks. A nationally operating multidisciplinary advisory team supports the local case consultation in these situations. The team includes specialist care providers who can offer appropriate help if necessary. The NCTV works with partners to shape policy as effectively as possible with respect to minors.

More information at www.nctv.nl



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