

# THE CARTER CENTER

*The Children in Daesh:*

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## **Executive Summary**

The outreach and recruitment strategies of Daesh

involvement in armed conflicts. It concludes with a series of recommendations, including a consideration of the elements necessary for practical approach to reintegrate returning children.

## **Rationale for Recruiting Children**

Daesh's elaborate infrastructure for systematic and institutionalized recruitment of children suggests that it sees immense tactical value in investing resources for the preparation of its younger generation. Based on the depiction of children in its propaganda videos and literature, this seems to be the case for a variety of reasons, as explained below.

Children are a vital propaganda tool in Daesh's recruitment phenomenon. They have been used as supporting objects to substantiate a whole range of its narratives. For instance, visuals of children suffering as a result of western aggression are overwhelmingly shown to evoke feelings of anger and disgust. This, in turn, increases the emotional appeal of one of Daesh's predominant narratives, i.e. the humiliation and disgrace inflicted upon the Muslim *Ummah* (community) by the "tyrant" West. Similarly, to advance its narrative of a utopian "Islamic state" that offers the only path to righteousness, Daesh portrays children as the more fortunate beneficiaries of those blessings, because, unlike adults, they have not been severely contaminated by the vices of the West. In fact, of the videos analyzed for this report, almost 80% had children being used as key props to further such recruitment narratives.

Admittedly, however, Daesh's employment of children goes far beyond simply using them as propaganda instruments. They are, in fact, regarded as an important asset for the growth and long-term survival of the "caliphate." Recruiting and training children in large numbers not only allows Daesh to build its physical strength, it creates a strong safeguard against potential leadership deficit. Moreover, with unparalleled rate of child enrollment, the organization's ultimate purpose is to engender, validate, and solidify an intergenerational culture of violence and religious extremism.<sup>2</sup> This is fundamental to Daesh's long-term pragmatism, as it aims to prepare ideology-blinded acolytes who could outlive any political-territorial loss.

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Children, whose suggestibility renders them vulnerable to ideological conditioning, are an ideal target. Having less developed ideological and moral foundations, children are seen as subjects who can easily be manipulated into accepting violent messages without question. Daesh's propaganda videos frequently provide glimpses of children internalizing its doctrinal positions. Children, in these videos, are asked to recite selective verses from the Quran that emphasize the notion of military Jihad.<sup>3</sup> They are shown pledging "to hear and obey" the authority of the imam with "selflessness" and an unquestioning attitude.<sup>4</sup> Relatedly, children are encouraged to speak against and send warnings to the Kuffar (infidels): "I will be the one who slaughters you, O Kuffar. I will

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<sup>2</sup> The Guardian, "The Horrific World of ISIS Child Soldiers", 03/10/2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/10/horror-of-isis-child-soldiers-state-of-terror>

<sup>3</sup> Al Raqqah Media Center, *Die in Your Rage*, 05/27/2016

<sup>4</sup> Al Hayat Media Center, *Eid Greetings From the Land of the Khilafah*, 07/20/2014

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be a mujahid, insh'Allah," proclaimed Abdullah, aged 12, in an interview video.<sup>5</sup> This illustrates how Daesh methodically exploits the innocence and malleability of young children to shape them in its mold and, in turn, lay the foundation for its long-term survival.

Lastly, the visual symbolism of having an organized army of young soldiers serves as a crucial element in Daesh's psychological warfare. The organization's frequent references to its young combatants as "the cubs of the caliphate," "tomorrow's mujahedeen," "the next generation," and "the future flag bearers" are meant to send a strong message to its adversaries that it is well-equipped and has an unmatched capacity. This is manifestly clear in a recent propaganda video, which shows young soldiers vehemently training as the following words are being sung in French in the background: "Beware, we have what we need to defend ourselves, well-armed soldiers are ready to kill you."<sup>6</sup> This trend of dedicating entire propaganda videos to emphasize Daesh's resolute preparedness seems to have noticeably, although unsurprisingly, escalated in the wake of its recent territory losses. 62% of the 25 children-centered videos in TCC's database collected since the beginning of 2016 have portrayal of preparedness, both ideological as well as



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drilling, the trainees are assigned to special units, allowing them to focus on specific skillsets.<sup>19</sup> Successful completion of these training programs is regarded as a rite of passage for young boys who are seen as having finally transitioned into manhood. In sum, these camps are used to romanticize the notion of armed jihad, normalize violence and synonymize it with masculinity, and engrain a sense of loyalty and pride in fighting for the “caliphate.”

#### Role of Children in the ‘Caliphate:’ From Auxiliary Support to Full-fledged Militancy

Given their physical-mental strength and specific individual skills, children are assigned different tasks ranging from routine support activities to full-fledged participation as frontline combatants.

*Support Functions:* Children work as spies who are instructed to report on anyone whom they suspect violating the laws of the “*Khilafah*.”<sup>20</sup> Escapee accounts further reveal that Daesh sends its children to join “sleeper cells” in government-controlled areas to gather information on the government’s strategies and operations.<sup>21</sup> Other support functions include guarding checkpoints, transferring weapons, and performing various administrative duties in Daesh-controlled hospitals, courts, schools, and other social facilities.

*Spokeschildren:* Several propaganda videos depict children, both girls and boys, participating in public rallies and religious lectures, where they present speeches and songs eulogizing Daesh’s ideas and practices.<sup>22</sup> Capitalizing on the emotional appeal children are able to generate, Daesh uses its most charismatic and well-versed children as preachers and recruiters.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, these spokeschildren are used as examples to guilt-recruit older men. The idea is to parade the courage and audacity of these kids to make the point that if young children can so selflessly and valiantly devote their lives to the cause of Allah, what are adults so scared of?

*Left:* a young girl is reciting nasheeds in praise of Daesh; *Right:* a young boy is preaching at a local mosque

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<sup>19</sup> Al Raqqah, *Institute for the Cubs*, 02/22/2015

<sup>20</sup> Foreign Affairs, *Cubs of the Caliphate: The Children of ISIS*, 07/21/2015  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-07-21/cubs-caliphate>

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die” Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria, 06/22/2014 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/22/maybe-we-live-and-maybe-we-die/recruitment-and-use-children-armed-groups-syria>, pg. 20-25

<sup>22</sup> Al Khayr Media Center, *Holiday Cheer in the State of Unification*, 07/23/2015

<sup>23</sup> Al Furat Media Center,

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militants have been raised almost purely on the tenets of warfare and have zero to minimal perception of a world devoid of violence. This is especially true, as shown above, in the case of