

**Illusions of Childhood in IS Paradise: Exploring the 'Cubs of the Caliphate'**

**A Graduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the  
Degree in Master of Arts in International Relations**

**Leiden University  
Supervisor: Professor Isabelle Duyvesteyn  
Student: Ayooshee Dookhee (s1686186)  
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## Introduction

'The life of jihad is not possible until you pack and move to the Khilāfah [Caliphate]', declares *Dabiq*<sup>1</sup>, the Islamic State's<sup>2</sup> local magazine. This message is not confined to men and women, yearning to go on a historic and heroic journey to jihad. Significantly children too, feature prominently in this debacle. Whilst recruitment of children in armed conflict is not new, one cannot neglect the laudable organizational capacity of the group, which has opened two child recruitment offices in the Syrian cities of al-Mayadin and al-Bokamal (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 2015). Literature on child soldiering is abundant, however, the emergence of IS opens a new site of investigation. Researchers find themselves in a paradoxical state when the child occupies this debate; who is a child soldier? To what extent can a child be the perpetrator of violence? Do rebel groups employ children due their delicate makeup? Are children conflict stakeholders? These questions often circulate debates on child soldiering and its despicability in modern warfare. The thesis is the first to put notions of childhood at the core of the examination of recruitment strategies; it seeks to delineate perceptions of childhood, not from the international sphere, but from the recruiting organization. It hypothesizes that notions of childhood are illusory, and within the Islamic State universalized conceptions of childhood are being heavily challenged and overturned. A key concern is thus personhood, not childhood and not adulthood.

The thesis will proceed as follows: The first section considers the existing literature on the recruitment of children in armed conflict. The second section deconstructs the precepts of childhood, in an attempt to unveil how ISIS is different to other armed groups. The third section ensues an analysis and discussion of three recruitment tactics by engaging in a comparative deductive analysis with experiences from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The fourth and final section presents a conclusion and avenues for further research.

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1 'A Call to Hijrah,' *Dabiq*, Issue 2, p. 31 available at: <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/09-2014/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-3-the-call-to-hijrah.pdf>

2 Several terms circulate literature but this thesis will interchangeably use Islamic State (IS) and Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

## **Sources and Methodology**

This study is grounded in the child/victim relationship emanating from the child soldier literature. It envisages IS as a new site of investigation to prompt a renewed debate in light of current perceptions of childhood. This study begins by engaging in a theoretical discussion of constructs of childhood, borrowing from legal and cultural tenures. It tries to perform a robust testing on the question: Does ISIS distinguish between child and adult? In doing so, it engages in a study of three recruitment tactics employed by the group: the normalisation of violence, socialization and military training. These tactics serve as sites of examinations for how notions of childhood play out. From the deduced findings, the thesis then entails a comparative case analysis with the LRA. The tactics have been selected on the basis of their perceived success in attracting recruits; this does not imply that other tactics are not being used.

The LRA is an ideal case for several reasons. It has temporal variation; the group has been able to successfully recruit for over 20 years. As such, a number of qualitative and quantitative findings are available. Both IS and the LRA use religion as existential anchoring; both groups are cultic in their portrayals and both have used and abused children. However, certain nuances do set them apart; and this will be explored throughout this thesis.

The results of this research are equally the product of extensive tracking and archiving of ISIS propaganda and analyses of a corpus of newspaper articles. Given the evolving nature of IS, and serious government crackdowns on jihadi propaganda, some archived materials may no longer be available.

## ***A Review of the Literature***

The child soldier phenomenon is as old as war itself. A plethora of literature contributes to the explanation of child recruitment, yet very few provide insights for answering questions regarding the sustainability and management of such tactics. A number of studies have investigated the causes and motivations for child soldiering (see Gurr 1970 & Gates 2002). Whilst recruitment of children into armed conflict highlights the profanity of humankind, not all children are coerced into joining, some join voluntarily (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 1997: 23-30). Children and guns have come to symbolize the phenomenon of child soldiers, however, the 1996 Machel report illustrates the deplorable reality of child soldiers; some of them are used as messengers, cooks, guards and spies rather than active combatants (Machel, 1996: 10-12).

Analysis on child soldiering reveals two trends. On the one hand, scholars and humanitarians alike seek to increase awareness around the growing child soldier phenomenon, argued to be a violation of human rights. On the other, research and analysis have sought to perpetuate solutions-driven, policy frameworks to curb the phenomenon. From this standpoint, the literature can be divided into three interconnected branches that propagate discussions on children in armed conflict.

There is a particular trend in child soldier studies that reveals a certain affiliation with the human rights framework. NGO-sponsored reports recount the horrible reality of children in armed conflict and frequently adopt 'legal and political agendas' without truly engaging in 'complex local understandings of children and childhood found in anthropological research' (Rosen, 2007: 296). From a humanitarian approach, literature on child soldiers suffers from a Western myopia with regards to definitions of childhood. NGOs such as Amnesty International and Save the Children have released materials that have greatly influenced the 'shaping' of international legal treaties (297). Such standpoints, however, assume that children are not participants in society, and thus are almost always seen as victims not perpetrators.

The field of International Relations (IR) has come to study children as worthy research subjects quite late perhaps due to the field's limited central tenets of discussions in the name of power, sovereignty and security. Nevertheless, IR has come to acknowledge the need to attribute agency to children in armed conflict. Sukanya Podder (2011) argues that agency should not be devoid of the heterogeneous cultures and the local contexts in which these children and their recruiters experience their realities (141-58).

Psychology and sociological studies have also contributed immensely to the literature. Child soldiering can be perplexing, which creates prolific ground for psychologists who are interested in the rationale behind voluntary participation of child soldiers and equally the rationale of recruiters. Both actions have unfortunate repercussions on the mental wellbeing of children, and sometimes the adults involved too. Patterns of recruitment, if identified correctly, can significantly help analysts and advocates in their exercise to eliminate the phenomenon of child soldiering.

Despite the vast and varying literature, very few works address in particular the recruitment strategy of a certain group and what makes a particular strategy sustainable. That said, literature that produces a representative overview of recruitment patterns and methods do exist. Particularly insightful is Beber and Blattman (2012) *The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion*, in which abduction is used by the Lord's Resistance Army as the popular tactic of recruitment. They state 'the LRA would begin training abductees as fighters within a few weeks of abduction, including firearms training' (85). The main instruments of recruitment and retention were 'violence and the threat of punishment' (85).

In addition to fear and brutality, rebel groups use economic prospects as a recruitment tool. However, especially in Africa, some rebel groups have emerged in environments lacking the 'economic base around which to organise' (Weinstein, 2005: 599). As such, they have to employ other means such as 'appeals to ethnic or class solidarity, national sentiments, and local community ties to identify recruits' (599).

Other patterns of recruitment include 'quota systems', in which, 'families are forced to supply one member for the "cause"' Becker (2009:109). Focusing her study

on the Asian countries, such as Burma, Nepal and Sri Lanka, Becker argues, 'child recruitment by these groups is marked by a strong element of political indoctrination', elucidating an 'endeavour to convince children that it is their duty to join the armed struggle' (109). The Maoists in Nepal, for example, conducted 'short-term abduction for indoctrination sessions' (110).

Jacobson (2008) provides a compelling insight into the recruitment of Saddam's 'Lion Cubs'. Recruitment of children involved being 'forced out of their schools', and Saddam Hussein 'developed the *Ashbal Saddam*', where they would receive 'training in the use of small arms and light infantry tactics' (163). Another tactic to perpetuate recruitment was to threaten families 'with the loss of food ration cards if they refused to enrol their children in the course' (164). Lastly, 'authorities reportedly withheld school examination results from children unless they registered with the military training camps' (164).

A review of the literature brings forward two points of contention: a focus on world trends is not beneficial to researchers because significant variations exist geographically and second, recruitment patterns far surpass the tactics themselves, researchers ought to pinpoint the psychology behind the use of certain tactics. Here, how one perceives childhood is of utmost importance.

### ***'The Caliphate'***

Research on the Islamic State remains scattered and incomplete given its recent emergence. Some authors have contributed key articles and reports on the matter in the last year, revealing recruitment patterns (see Bloom and Horgan, 2015, Benotman & Malik, 2016) and the assigned roles of children within IS confines (Bloom, 2015). If the media has not popularised it already, Mia Bloom's piece truncates the severe veracity of the 'Cubs of the Caliphate' puzzle to one agonizing reality: 'To ISIS, children are not just valuable propaganda, they are fully-fledged militants who can kill' (2). Research on the subject however is meagre, particularly when it concerns the recruitment of local fighters. This is due to logistics; IS confines are dangerous for field researchers. In light of that, several analyses of the IS

phenomenon vis-à-vis children seem to focus on the issue of foreign fighters since data is more accessible.

European foreign fighters under the age of 18 regarded as minors (and in some parlance, youth) have been sites of in-depth investigation (see De Guttery et al., 2016). However, these investigations, whilst incredibly illuminating and necessary, have not been able to delineate the living realities of local fighters who are children and are being subjected to life in IS confines. There is a clear dearth in current and emerging literature concerning a discussion of local fighters recruited (voluntarily and/or forcibly) by IS. Data on foreign fighters can be imprecise too, especially when estimates are made on children (or youths under 18) who travel to Iraq and Syria. Often these children are not 'fighters' per se, but are the offspring of women who 'follow their husband' to the Caliphate (Schmid, 2015: 5). It is only after they enter the Islamic State that these children become 'child combatants' or are assigned other roles. Further to that, it is important to note that local fighters can be produced from women (or prospective jihadi brides) who travel to IS territory but are subsequently subjugated to a life of subservience, which can include forced (or voluntary) pregnancy, bearing life to what becomes the 'Cubs of the Caliphate'.

The lines between local and foreign are noticeably blurred and there are large discrepancies surrounding the exact number of children who now belong to the Islamic State. For this reason, it becomes difficult to study IS' recruitment strategy in isolation. This thesis therefore endeavours to explore the trajectory of a child (soldier or otherwise) from the moments leading to and of recruitment. A salubrious understanding and exploration of the Islamic State's recruitment of children necessitates a clearer definition of the child. Current academic and journalistic contributions offer reductionist assumptions about children as agented beings. In light of such assumptions, children and childhood are seen as 'stages of still – 'becoming' or 'incomplete' personhood' (Beier, 2015: 3). In particular reference to IS, it is currently the media who owns the monopoly over distribution of information on children recruited by the group, followed by NGO-sponsored materials, representing mostly a political outcry as opposed to strategic analysis. The media's dissemination of such information has also played a key role in how the public currently views the child soldier.



### ***Constructs of Childhood: Who is a child soldier?***

A child soldier is an oxymoron. Most academic literature focusing on children in armed conflict makes for rather bleak reading when it concerns the specificities of the constitution of the child and thereafter a child soldier. Western notions of childhood surfaced only in the seventeenth century, outlined in Rousseau's *Emile* (1979), which attributed to childhood an aura of innocence and a limited capacity to reason. With this in mind, much of our understanding on childhood and children in armed conflict is through a diminutive gaze. Child soldiers are painted with a universalizing brush of victimhood by dint of their age. Such a reading can also be seen as a 'powerful political expedient' (Beier, 2015: 8). To go deeper into a discussion of the development of moral agency is unfortunately restricted, however, the point remains that the roots of childhood and subsequent connotations developed largely in Europe and later through periods of colonisation throughout the world. Childhood and child soldiering are not monolithic concepts. This study seeks to deviate from previous conceptions of childhood in relation to armed conflict; it seeks to view childhood vis-à-vis a nuanced understanding of the notion as part of a transformative process. This will be further contextually explored through the prism of the Islamic State. First, it is useful to look at the limitations of existing definitions as prescribed by the International Law sphere and further, local spheres of influence.

### ***The parameters of International Law***

Legal standards surrounding children in armed conflict are weak. Mark Drumbl argues that the 'international legal imagination' needs to 'shift gears' (2012: 209). Currently, legal and policy frameworks are invested in categorical and universal age demarcations. The UN Convention on the Rights of the child (UNCRC) defines childhood as beginning at birth and ending at the age of 18. However, Article 38 uses the lower age of 15 as the minimum for recruitment or participation in armed conflict. Within the International Humanitarian Law diktat, several treaties governing

children such as the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the Protocols Additional I and II of 1977, and portions of the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) all have particular relevance for child soldiers. The issue with such universal principles on the definition of childhood by age is that they tend to neglect the notion that there is no 'universal experience or understanding of childhood' (Rosen, 207: 297). Further, one can argue that international law 'has developed as set of rules and practices that override and restrict local understandings' (297). Whilst universal legislation such as the Rome Statute of the ICC offers all-encompassing statements placing bans on the most egregious crimes, multi-lateral treaties such as the Paris Principles established in 2007 emphasises the 'lesser' known participation of children such as cooks, messengers and sexual partners as crimes in themselves if performed by a child under 18. One should equally note how the child is protected within Islam and Islamic law. Damad (2003) asserts, 'the Islamic concept of humanitarian law sets special protection measures for some civilian groups such as children, women, the elderly, and the sick'. Whilst the Quran is not a legal treatise, Muslims believe it to be 'the governing rules for all social interactions', and therefore, 'supersedes all other sources of law' (Elahi, 1988: 266). Childhood is not explicitly defined; however, a note on age indicates that individuals obtain social responsibilities upon puberty, often at the age of fifteen (Zahra, 1955). Laws governing children are inherently conflicted by geography, culture and religion.

### ***Global North vs. Global South***

The field of child soldier research can be divided into three neat spectrums within which, definitions of the child vary enormously. Each tenet- the international community, the local settings, and the children themselves - can be seen as emerging sites of articulation as to what exactly constitutes the phenomenon of child soldiering. Definitions pertaining to the Global North portray childhood as 'normal' in comparison to an 'alien construction of childhood' in, for example, Africa or the Middle East (Beazley et al., 2009, 367).

Premised on the recognition of childhood as 'a time of physical vulnerability and of irrationality' (Macmillan, 2009: 38), representations of childhood in the

European social imaginary have been able to create hegemonic constructs of childhood. Based on such constructions, the lexicon surrounding childhood developed to include words such as 'protection' and 'rights'. Child soldiers expose a similar trend, where one finds the 'reduction of childhood to a state of innocent victimhood...' (39). However, analyses of child soldiering in differing contextual and temporal periods have illustrated an opposite trend, which exposes a different reality: voluntary participation to violence and armed conflict. It thus becomes extremely delicate to 1) define the child through the Western trope of age demarcation and 2) to assign to a child eternal and undisrupted innocence. Vanessa Pupavac (2001: 102) writes, 'The perception of stolen childhoods ignores the continuing reality that the experiences of children cannot be separated from the conditions in society in general', which gives a glimpse into the Global South. This is not to say that the recruitment of children by the Islamic State is noble by any means. It serves to illustrate that one cannot study the recruitment of children by IS from the prism of a Western-centric view of the child.

### ***When is a child not a child? A glance into Islam and the Islamic State***

Islamic discourse points to the 'adult-centred power relations' that 'tends to disempower children' Rajabi-Ardeshiri (2011: 691). This can be read against some discourses belonging to the Global North whereby children are not social and moral agents. The notion of 'adult-centred' power relations is perhaps a point of further investigation, especially when one takes into consideration the recruitment of children through parents. The innocence of children is not solely a perception of the West, a Taliban fighter during the 1994 civil war in Afghanistan stated, 'Children are innocent, so they are the best tools against dark forces' (in Singer, 2005). Worthy of mention is the response towards the use of children in the Iraq-Iran war. The Iranian representation to the United Nations conceded, 'It was an honour for my country that those young people had become sufficiently mature to understand the seriousness of their country's situation. [...] Every Muslim [has] a religious duty to defend human honour and dignity against aggression' (United Nations Economic and

Social Council, 1984: 4-5). Clearly, children are perceived by weight of duty rather than age.

Placing childhood within the Islamic State is somewhat complex. Whilst their use of children is transparent for the world to see through propagandistic measures, it leaves several questions unanswered and these answers could unravel new ways to study their recruitment tactics. One such question is: Does ISIS see children as distinct from adults? IS' perception of the child can be argued to stem from the term 'Futuwwa', under which Saddam Hussein trained an army of young recruits. Futuwwa can be seen as a combination of 'youth' and 'chivalry'. Young recruits from the age of 5 to 7 would then be enrolled in 'Saddam's cubs' and remain members until the age of 15 and 17 (McNair, 2010: 43).

IS has waged global jihad<sup>3</sup>, and this context should not be ignored when discussing the child. Every Muslim has a religious obligation to participate in jihad. The participation of child nevertheless remains ambiguous. Strictly adhering to the Quran and the Sunnah, it follows that the 'age requirement for participating in jihad is fifteen, contingent upon the further manifestation of maturity' (Elahi, 1988: 274). It transpires therefore that ISIS recruitment of children below the age of fifteen is in contravention of the fundamental rules of Islamic Law.<sup>4</sup>

The extent to which IS perceives children as 'innocent' is questionable. It is plausible to argue the contrary, given the systematic recruitment of children thus far. Such an argument is currently underplayed in literature. To deconstruct and decipher IS' perception of the child would be to operate somewhat in the dark. Nonetheless, one can recognise that the group's vision of the child and its capacity is not disparate from grown-up adults. On this basis, this thesis proposes the hypothesis that IS does not perceive the child as lesser to the adult. This hypothesis will be tested throughout the analysis and discussion. Whilst it stands as an ambitious hypothesis, an examination of the notion of the intermingling perceptions of childhood, adulthood and personhood can do much to highlight the recruitment strategy of the

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<sup>3</sup> Meaning 'to struggle' but often used to refer to armed struggle

<sup>4</sup> A separate debate can be had on the religiosity of the Islamic State, though this thesis does not have the permissible space for this.

group. Departing from this, the next chapter seeks to dig deeper into the modes of recruitment that IS employs.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### ***Recruitment of Children: An Interplay of old and new tactics***

A video entitled 'Uncovering the Enemy Within' released on January 13 2015 revealed a young Kazakh boy executing two Russian spies.<sup>5</sup> Pinheiro (2015) argues, such '...videos illustrate an important shift in jihadi warfare' (11). This is indeed plausible when considered in light of previous use of children in early al-Qaeda groups. Children were trained and indoctrinated, however, Pinheiro highlights that children were hardly ever used in 'direct combat'. It has been argued that the recruitment of children and youth can point to IS' desperation and the group's 'dramatically dwindling ranks' of adult soldiers (RT News, March 2016). However, this is a simplistic reading of the group's fascination with children. This leads into the first discussion point of this section – the normalisation of violence and the extent to which it has become sustainable recruitment strategy.

### ***Self/Other practices and the normalisation of violence***

The Self/Other nexus in International Relations is a cornerstone of security (Campbell, 1992) and terrorism (Jackson, 2007) discussions. Whilst this thesis does not seek to address the issue of the Islamic State under the banner of terrorism studies, it borrows from the Self/Other considerations within the field to bolster deeper discussions on its implications on 'normalisation of violence' as a recruitment method. Benotman and Malik (2016: 18) argue, 'The largest amount of Islamic State media featuring children relates to violence'; this could be 'either children directly participating [to] violence, or being exposed and normalised to violence'. It is the

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5 'Uncovering the Enemy Within', *Al-Hayat Media Center*, 13 January 2015. Available at:

<http://jihadology.net/2015/01/13/al-hayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-uncovering-an-enemy-within/>

latter part that is particularly interesting as a site of further analysis. How are children, already within the confines of IS, being normalised to violence and how is this process proving successful for the group? Secondly, to what extent does this process find roots in other child soldiering recruitment practices elsewhere such as the West African context?

The official Islamic State al-Hayat Media Office has released videos in which, children are seen expressing sentiments along the lines of 'We will kill the *kuffar* [non-believers] over there'.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1: 'I will be the one who slaughters you, O Kuffar. I will be a mujahid, insha'allah'**

One can clearly see dynamics of Self/Other practices underlying IS's strategy as a whole, both in attracting adult (foreign/local) fighters and children to the Caliphate. The Self/Other framework employed by ISIS has a number of repercussions on how violence is normalised, especially when concerning children as little as 5 years old. The creation of 'us vs. them' by ISIS is laudable; it addresses a particular and significant part of its broader recruitment and survival strategy – the creation of an ideology that transcends spatial and temporal boundaries. These young recruits are

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<sup>6</sup> 'Race Towards Good', *Daily Mail Online*, November 2014. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-1138252/Race-Towards-Good-ISIS-chilling-video-kids-using-guns.html>

not converts to radical ideologies; instead, they are indoctrinated into and normalised to violence and extremism. Different groups in society (Hitler's Nazi, Khmer Rouge, Ku Klux Klan) have long used Self/Other mechanisms to create and consolidate identities. The Islamic State is no different.

### ***Playground for the creation of young jihadis: Conversion vs. Instillation***

Since the emergence of ISIS into quotidian parlance, academic and otherwise, the group has been analysed quite narrowly, employing a rationalist focus on power and interests. In the midst of reportages on the Islamic State, identity formation has been relegated to marginal importance. From the vantage point of the idea that identity is here to stay, one can decipher the quizzical yet transparent allure of IS. One can argue that the normalisation of violence premised on the Self/Other paradigm is indicative of the creation of a group identity, one that will turn the current 'generation of children' into the 'generation of the Caliphate' (Brannen, 2014). Violence is normalised and internalised through a number of avenues. The UN report (2014) *Rule of Terror: Living Under ISIS in Syria* revealed executions, the display of 'mutilated bodies' and 'lashing in public areas' to be common occurrences with the Islamic State. The 'Al-Hisbah morality police' remind the civilian population (including children) of the 'time and place of the executions' and they are 'urged to attend' (7). Such information highlights the symbolic presence of children as a 'vehicle for ensuring long-term loyalty, adherence to their [IS] ideology and a cadre of devoted fighters that will see violence as a way of life' (9-11).

Violence is not solely internalised in the streets through public executions, violence in the Islamic State is being simultaneously institutionalised. The latter is a major source of recruitment. A documentary released on *YouTube* by FRONTLINE PBS (November, 2015) uncovers the dangerous platform of education in the Islamic State. In the video, a young adult is seen to be teaching a group of children no older than 11 years old the meaning of jihad. The adult then points to a rifle and asks a young boy (Daoud), 'Why do we use this?', to which the boy replies, 'To defend the faith'. The adult then asks, 'And whose heads will we hit with this?' and the boy replies, 'Infidels'. This short documentary is poignant in revealing the undercurrent of

Self/Other dynamics at play. Children, from a young age, are taught to create the image of the Self in direct opposition to the Other (infidels). Juxtaposed with such indoctrination is the internalisation and institutionalisation of violence as a mechanism by which the Other is eradicated.

### ***Self/Other manifestations and Group Identity***

The use of normalisation of violence as a successful recruitment measure is undeniable. A more nuanced analysis of this tactic would be a study of its sustainability and the wider implications for the group moving forward. Here, the psychoanalytical scholarship on large group identity is noteworthy. Volkan (2009: 208) posits, 'the sharing of the large group's national, ethnic or religious elements begins in childhood. This applies also to those who are members of a political ideological group....'. One can examine IS and the group's recruitment of children along these lines. The subjective experience of a child's self-representation is particularly germane here and is usually connected to cultural amplifiers. Except cultural amplifiers within ISIS territories, such as language and representations of history and religion are endowed with violence and extremism. ISIS has assumed de-facto control over many schools in Syria and Iraq. As such, even school curriculums contain strong elements of ideological indoctrination marked by violence. Steed (2016: 68) argues that textbooks 'emphasize a strict Islamic interpretation and regularly discuss the glories of jihad in physical education, math and history.'

Benotman and Malik (2016: 33) assert that the indoctrination of children is 'highly effective' because 'children are in a heightened sense of vulnerability during times of war'. Intuitively this view makes sense, however, it can be contested too. The normalisation of violence through various acts of indoctrination is indeed quite a powerful recruitment measure, however, the assumed vulnerability of children by not only Benotman and Malik but other authors researching the child phenomenon, is problematic. Younniss and Yates (1999) have conducted research on how the young conduct meaning, and thereafter perceive their roles, bringing to life new understandings. Bloom (2015: 3) further contends that the experiences of children



under the normalcy of violence, 'foster a sense of camaraderie', developing 'close bonds' that eventually 'turn into deep pride for what they are doing'. IS' recruitment tactics according to Gaub (2015: 2) are 'averaging by cult standards' as the group has managed to 'double its membership since the summer of 2014 to around 40,000-50,000,' and she compares IS to Scientology (50,000 members), the Korean Unification Church (estimated 200,000) and the Ku Klux Klan (4 million members). Such an interpretation of ISIS is noteworthy. She argues, 'people join cults because they offer the prospects of friendship, connection, identity and an opportunity to make a difference' (2). Drawing on both Bloom's and Gaub's discussions, it is plausible to argue that IS' recruitment of children through the normalisation of violence speaks to the larger phenomenon of the creation of an identity. By employing this recruitment method, IS does not only create an identity for the children they recruit, they are simultaneously building their own.

### ***New trends? A Comparison with the LRA***

When contemplated in the context of the child soldiers in other conflicts, ISIS is not furtive at all. In fact, the group is unlike other rebel groups who have employed children in their missions; IS has been deliberately very transparent in its use and recruitment of children. Further, it is interesting to note the type of coercion involved in the Islamic State's method of recruitment. Unveiling this can do much to highlight the unique psychology behind the recruitment tactics employed by the group.

One of the defining features of literature on child soldiering has been the 'logic of coercion' (see Beber and Blattman, 2012). These authors confirm the discrepancy between adult and child soldiers, particularly concerning 'battlefield tasks, such as fights and raids' where they claim, 'the use of children is most puzzling' (71). They show child soldiering to be 'the result of the ease with which children can be indoctrinated by rebel leaders', illustrating that such indoctrination applies less successfully to adults. An opposing viewpoint stems from more current research on child soldiering, in direct reference to IS. Bloom et al. (2016: 4) show that children and youth 'are dying in the same circumstances as adults' suggesting that children do not have a comparable advantage to adults by mere disposition of being a child. The

adulthood/childhood nexus that forms child soldiering investigations becomes somewhat irrelevant. To illustrate this, let us delve into the endeavors of the LRA.

Virtually all LRA recruitment experiences have been forced. Around 60,000 to 80,000 youth have been abducted (Pham, Vinck & Stover, 2007). Children and youths are typically 'taken by roving groups of ten to twenty rebels during their night raids on rural homes' (Blattman and Annan, 2010: 883). Further, 54% of 'abductees were severely beaten...' and 'beatings or death was punishment for attempted escape...' (Beber and Blattman, 2012: 85). In slight contrast to IS, coercion is at the heart of the Ugandan rebel group's strategy, premised on the idea that children are more easily coerced. Whilst IS' strategy is centrally focused on normalizing violence within the confines that children are brought up as Mujahedeens, such normalization does not match that of the LRA. One can juxtapose the analysis of violence in the preceding segment to the type exercised by the LRA. A two-year old abductee described an event in the first weeks of his abduction: "during training we were told to beat a man to death. But after hitting him twice each, we were told to leave him... [...] we were told to pinch the ear of the dead man and skip over him" (86). Interestingly, in most cases, 'these victims were not strangers' (87), they were usually family members or a close friend. Here one can note a level of incongruence with IS. In the case of both IS and LRA, the desensitization of the child by breaking down psychological defenses is present; however, the rationale behind IS' normalization of violence is seen to be different. Through grotesque videos released by the group, one can view children as young jihadis espousing their agency. The normalization of violence thus becomes a bridge that connects young recruits to the notion of being on a heroic, ideological journey (see Dawes, 2003). Stemming from this, one can derive a more nuanced reading of the group's recruitment of children when examined vis-à-vis the LRA pertaining to the difference in tactic and strategy.

It can be contended that LRA's abduction and thereafter use of violence and punishment as retention played into the group's *tactic*, whereas, the Islamic State's normalization of violence, practices of Self/Other and the overarching identity creation builds into the group's *strategy*. This also has repercussions on how both groups view the child. Additional investigation into the LRA show fear to be a 'central strategy toward, and in the embodiment of, victory' (Vinci, 2005: 364). Fear is

inflicted upon the child abductees on their journeys to become soldiers. The group uses a 'process of initiation through traumatization' (372). This tactic conveniently makes control of children easier, navigating these children to a psychological state where feeling fear and instilling that fear in others becomes the norm. This reduces the chances of children escaping and returning to their villages, as they 'fear that they will be blamed for committing atrocities by their families and villages' (371). Within the LRA, age is a determining factor. For example, Beber and Blattman (2012: 92) argue, 'young children were nearly half as likely to have been given and allowed to keep guns...' and in addition, 'older adolescents and adults also received guns sooner than younger adolescents and children'. This presents us with an interpretative conclusion to suggest the group viewed children as less than adults, as the latter is difficult to manipulate.

ISIS, on the other hand, uses weaponry – guns and grenades – in much the same way towards adults and children. Though conclusive remarks are dangerous to make at this stage, it can be argued that, by allowing children to possess arms, it further normalizes the ritual of violence into their daily lives. Bloom et al. (2016: 3) report that a striking 53% of children (of 89 images collected, coded and analyzed) were holding weapons. The authors preliminarily conclude that 'it is equally striking that the Islamic State's children and youth operate in ways similar to adults' (3). Thus, they are not actors of last resort and are not merely filling ranks. Further, they are not performing duties for which adults are less 'effective' (Wessel, 2007: 71). One can determine that the way children are recruited, in this instance through the normalization of violence and the appropriation of arms, does not differ to that of adults – especially in the case of IS.

### ***Gradual Socialization – Candy Cane and Co-option***

Bearce (2007: 706) defines socialization as, 'a process by which actors acquire different identities, leading to new interests through regular and sustained interactions within broader social contexts and structures'. It has been noted that socialization is in itself a recruitment tactic (Bloom, 2015). IS employs a number of socialization mechanisms in its mission to recruit cubs. This includes direct (through schools, military camps) and indirect (through parents) socialization. Bloom (2015: 2) argues, 'ISIS initially lures children not through indoctrination, but by gradual socialization'. This can be done through public events 'aimed at raising awareness about the opportunities ISIS can offer' (2). Aside from Mia Bloom, no other author has looked into the phenomenon of socialization with respect to IS and its cubs. However, socialization is important to our understanding of recruitment. Some authors such as Lave (1988) point to the metaphor of apprenticeship as a way for children to advance their social and cognitive skills as they engage in social activity. Others, such as Rogoff (1991) point to the necessity of a social milieu that allows the child to form certain moral codes. IS has all these avenues in place. For example, ISIS attracts children at first by offering free toys and candy. Children who show up then are 'given the opportunity to wave the IS black flag' (Horgan and Bloom, 2015). This is not the only way to lure children. They also offer the daily necessities and luxuries, such as hairbrushes, a can of Pepsi and medication alongside propaganda leaflets (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Islamic State militant handing out daily necessities to a young girl whilst a crowd watches<sup>7</sup>**

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<sup>7</sup> Karam and Janssen, 'Under Islamic State, Children Trained To Behead At An Early Age' *Huffington Post*, 20 July 2015  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/isis-training-children-beheading-in-under-islamic-state-children-trained-to-behead-at-early-age\\_us\\_55ac2795e4b0d2ded39f45e9](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/isis-training-children-beheading-in-under-islamic-state-children-trained-to-behead-at-early-age_us_55ac2795e4b0d2ded39f45e9)





**Figure 3 Islamic State militant holds plastic bag full of stationery and other gifts as he distributes to Iraqi young students in a classroom in Mosul<sup>8</sup>**

One could argue that offering children toys and candy as a means of attraction to the Caliphate counters the hypothesized notion that children are not seen as less than adults by IS. It is indeed a plausible argument to make given the above evidence. However, such actions are immediately juxtaposed with the introduction of heavy weaponry, as children march the streets with rifles that look at least half their own size. ISIS seems to be in a paradoxical state of being. On the one hand, it seems the group does differentiate between a child and an adult by means of how it attracts children. On the other hand, however, this seems to be a one-time occurrence usually at the beginning of the attraction phase. To a large extent, toys and candy illustrate quick and effective bait. Once the attention of the child is caught, it seems the group ignores the child/adult distinction. Children are thus drawn into the alluring narrative of IS, encouraging them to make their choices. Unlike, the LRA analysis in the preceding segment, coercion at this stage looks to be minimal. Rather than being coerced, children are socialized into a mode of being – a lifestyle. In contrast with past conflicts, parents pay a significant role in this process. Parents are

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



offered pecuniary rewards for bringing their child to join IS, for example, reports cite between \$250 to \$350 per month per child (Hanoush, 2015).

Figure 4 'Lion cubs' hold rifles during a parade in Tal Afar, near Mosul, northern Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Co-option and The Role of Parents*



Mujahideen. The guidebook reads, 'Don't wait until they are seven to start, for it may be too late by then!'.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly women are handed a great deal of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

empowerment, leaving them in control of bringing up a child that will grow to contribute to the Islamic State.

The recruitment tactic of IS in this instance is extremely unique. A main preoccupation for rebel groups is their survival. One can argue that ISIS moves beyond this preoccupation. It is advancing towards the creation of a society-state, harnessing and bolstering family structures. Children are continuously involved in face-to-face interactions with familiar people (their own parents, Islamic State militants) in schools and at home. Boyden (2003: 352) makes an interesting point when he argues that children's morality 'arises from their membership in a moral community'. ISIS is creating such a community, and children are seen to attract other children to join the Caliphate. Children who are recruited locally become active participants in their social milieu. They have already been normalized to this milieu; they do not come with pre-dispositions. One can state that children are just persons, and beyond being persons, children are instruments that will carry forward the Islamic State. This reinforces that childhood is a social construct, and perhaps what we are witnessing is the social construction of childhood by IS standards. The notion at play is therefore not childhood but personhood.

### ***What did the LRA do?***

Vermeij (2011: 176) posits, 'socialization within rebel groups [...] play a significant role in the creation of allegiance'. It has proven to be an effective apparatus to engage children in the activities of the LRA, prompting children to 'become part of the group' and 'creating a sense of belonging' (176). Analysis into the LRA highlights two concomitant facts: first, socialization is highly embedded in a process of extreme brutalization and second, such brutalization is a way to decrease the prospects of abductees of returning home. The LRA employed both formal (military) and informal (initiation rituals) avenues of socialization. Particularly interesting is the shea butter ceremony, with which abductees are bathed and are not allowed to wash themselves

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10 'A Sister's Role in Jihad', October 2014,  
[https://archive.org/stream/SistersRoleInJihad/78644461-Sister-s-Role-in-Jihad\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/SistersRoleInJihad/78644461-Sister-s-Role-in-Jihad_djvu.txt)



for 3-4 days (Vermeij, 2011: 178). This implies a 'rebirth' as they become rebels. Vermeij further asserts that these rituals are symbolic of Acholi culture, whereby a baby is not taken to the outside world until they are three (boys) to four days (girls) old. The rituals themselves are emblematic of the culture surrounding the child. It could be argued thus that the LRA's perception of the child is brought to their activities as a rebel group.

The stages after the initial registration post abduction involve extreme violence. Children are regularly subjected to beatings and killings, especially to demonstrate that escape is not an option. A young abductee recounts: 'I was tortured a lot that time that [...] I was slapped with the blade of panga three times on my back and a whipped by a twisted rope several times [...] I had to resist the pain because I knew that if I screamed at that time the rebels would kill me' (in Preston, 2015: 437). Wood (2008: 546) reasons, 'among the psychological mechanisms possibly at work in these processes of socialization to group membership [...] are compliance, role adoption, internalization of group norms, [...], habituation to violence, [...], deindividuation and dehumanization of the victimized group'. In this sense, the LRA's recruitment and retention of children does resemble that of IS. As we have seen throughout this paper, ISIS' strategy relies heavily on 'role adoption', 'dehumanization' and also, in the creation of a group identity. A sticking point in the LRA's recruitment of children and thereafter their retention is the estrangement that LRA commanders instill in the abductees. They spend a 'significant portion of their time separating the children from their civilian lives [...] leaving only the rebel soldier' (Preston, 2015: 438). They are made to be an instrument of violence in such a way that it leaves the world pondering whether they are victims of that violence at all. There are certain levels of congruence here with IS, as argued previously, children are stripped of their childhood and raised as mujahedeens. In the LRA context, they are raised as rebels.

The LRA succeeded in creating a cognitive divide between the abductees' self-identification as a rebel and a civilian. It has been noted in studies of reintegration (see, for example, Veale and Stavrou, 2007) that lines are often blurred between civilian and aggressor. Self-identification thus becomes centrally located in participation to violence, often at odds with the norms and practices of the

abductees lives prior to their enlistment into the LRA. The abductees' estrangement is intimately linked to power structures within the group. In a similar way to ISIS, the LRA creates spaces of socialization, for example, in replicating family structures or in re-calibrating teacher-pupil relationships at school. Noticeably different to IS, the LRA completely rejects previous family structures, parents of abductees no longer feature in their lives. Their past community would be the 'enemy', somewhere they should never dream of returning.

Such an experience stands in contrast to what ISIS is currently doing. The segment on the role of parents demonstrate their pivotal position in IS' recruitment. Family units are important to the Islamic State, not simply as modes of socialization, but as tools that serve the betterment of the group in order to create an image of a sustainable (hierarchical) organization. It can be argued however that IS' aspirations to statehood is what prompts the group to involve parents. Here, one can benefit from Mancur Olson's (1993) concept of roving and stationary groups in conflict. It can be argued that the LRA provides an example of a group with 'significant roaming' (Beardsley et al., 2015) induced mainly by the group's inability to form strong local ties. For IS to involve parents becomes much easier and an accessible tool of recruitment, because in most cases parents are living with child recruits.

Whilst the organizational features of both groups play a key role in determining some elements belonging to their recruitment strategies, it does not quite speak to the broader implications on how children are perceived. Examining socialization of children by IS vis-à-vis the LRA shows us that perhaps child perceptions are not so disparately conceived. What we can learn from this analysis is that both methods of socialization – association (bolstering current family structures) and disassociation (isolation and assignment to new family structures), have gained and sustained recruits.

### ***Between adult and child***

It does not suffice to solely analyze the socialization of children. A parallel examination of socialization in adults must be conducted. This can reveal continuities or discontinuities as to how different perceptions of childhood play out in the

socialization process, and the extent to which this exacerbates recruitment. Socialization between adults and children can be distinguished in three ways: content, context and response (Mortimer and Simmons, 1978: 423-4). In the first instance, what is learnt is key, for example, in pre-adult socialization processes, the content of learning is said to involve 'new material' that 'may be more idealistic' whereas 'adult socialization is more realistic', 'involving the synthesis of what has been learned previously' (423). In terms of context, children assume the 'status of learner' whereas with adult socializees, much of their socialization has occurred after they have 'assumed full incumbency of the adult role' (424). Finally, response pertains to the notion that children may be more easily manipulated than the adult, 'since the adult has already been subject to considerable socialization experience, he may have more clearly defined expectations' (424). Child recruitment by IS has gripped the globe due to its shocking nature, however, the group is also known for its allure to adult (foreign) fighters, usually above 18 years of age. The question presents itself: does ISIS employ different socialization processes for each group?

Significant numbers of foreign fighters despite possessing the ideological motivation do not have military skills and are unfamiliar with harsh and brutal conditions (Mendelsohn, 2011). As such, they have to be socialized to their new environment and perceived/assigned roles. Within the Caliphate, it is of utmost importance that new adult recruits joining (whether indigenous or foreign) are psychologically and physically capable of fulfilling their roles. In this respect, they are not different to the child recruits. Some adult recruitment tactics in line with socialization include: online propaganda reinvigorating the Self/Other paradigm described earlier in this paper, continuous releases of videos on the media outlet, Al-Hayat Media Center, and most recently targeted videos at potential Central Asian recruits (Botobekov, 2016). Similar videos are shown to fresh child recruits too, in hope to increase membership. The content is not at all dissimilar. They all have the underlying premise of the utopia of the Caliphate, accompanied by the tagline 'we must kill the Infidels'. Further, the level and frequency of portrayed violence are the same as what is shown to children. Aligning these points to Mortimer and Simmons (1978) distinction on the differences between child and adult socialization, it seems in content, context and response, these differences are not so prominent. We should

expect such differences to be remarkable, but children and adult are learning the same ideology; they are put through similar training; normalized to the same violence; and finally, the response is both children and adults are fighting and dying for IS.

It serves therefore to now look at life in IS training camps, where children are taking on intense physical training with little regard to bracketed child/adult dichotomy. Unfortunately, a thorough elucidation of this particular tactic is impermissible due to scope, however, as we find out more about IS – research into their military camps can shed an illuminating perspective.

### ***Life in IS Training Camps***

By and large, training camps are the extension of the psychological training that children receive when they are normalized to violence and socialized to the lifestyle of the Caliphate. The camps are intensified training periods where children, anywhere between the ages of 10 and 15 are instructed in Sharia and are taught the skills they need in order to serve the Caliphate. IS has released several propaganda videos, in which they reveal the arduous training young recruits go through. Figure 5 and 6 illustrate the type of uniform that these recruits wear and the heavy arms they carry throughout the training.



**Figure 5 A group of young male recruits before military training<sup>11</sup>**



**Figure 6 An Islamic State militant shouts an order, the 'cubs' raise their guns<sup>12</sup>**

Military education and training has become a great tool for IS to gradually prepare the next generation of fighters. A former IS child fighter recounts, 'It was a very difficult camp. They gave us severe training. We would wake up, pray, after pray

11 The Islamic State - 'Cubs of the Caliphate Military Training Camps', Waliyat Khurasan, 28 January 2016, Available at: [https://ia801503.us.archive.org/14/items/Ashbal\\_201601](https://ia801503.us.archive.org/14/items/Ashbal_201601)

12 Ibid.

maybe around 9 a.m. we did exercises, then rest in the room, then Sharia courses, then military study ...' (Human Rights Watch, 2014 p.22). Another fighter describes to CNN, 'we used to crawl under webbing. There was fire above it, and we should be firing our weapons. We would jump through large metal rings and the trainers would be firing at our feet' (Damon, 2014).

These videos and statements reveal certain trends about the Islamic State. First, children are the core component of the group's strategy moving forward. Second, children are portrayed in much the same way as their adult counterparts. They support the same uniform attire and hold the same weapons. Bloom et al. (2015: 3) postulate, 'children are fighting *alongside*, rather than in lieu of, adult males and their respective patterns of involvement closely reflect one another'. They contend further, 'instead of hailing them as *young* heroes, the Islamic State media team celebrates them as heroes'. In light of this, it could be possible that we are witnessing a new trend in recruitment. Perhaps not new in the training itself but certainly new in the sense that IS sees its recruit as heroes in themselves, the next generation. Their military training, whilst having been reported as intense and at times brutal, have somehow instilled in these recruits a sense of routine, and an unparalleled safety in IS paradise. This portrayal merely serves to perpetuate more recruitment.

### ***LRA Boot Camps***

Measuring life in LRA military camps has proven to be difficult, as no concrete analysis have been conducted solely on the militarization of children. One can infer that the LRA's use of military training represents a step in its post-recruitment trajectory. Whereas, IS' use of military training serves two purposes: raising *and* attracting a generation of fighters. It could be determined that military training was a form of control. Vindevogel et al. (2011: 555) argue that '62% of child soldiers' underwent military training, of which most were older males. Emphasis should be placed on 'older males', illustrating a clear perception of agency by age (and gender). Another point to note is the correlation between the duration of captivity and the increased exposure to warfare associated with military training (560). The authors

argue, 'a plausible hypothesis is that somehow younger children are spared and can benefit from a certain protection within the rebel group, for example they are assigned rather supportive roles' (560). In terms of weapons, abductees would train using 'light weaponry, learning the different parts of a machine-gun, how to disassemble and assemble a weapon...' (Oloya, 2012: 93). Drumbl (2012: 484) adds to this by arguing that the portrayal of young children brandishing automatic weaponry is not true; he posits, 'most are adolescents, with many aged 15, 16 or 17.' LRA camps remain a mystery, since no precise data exists on the type of training and who received the training. This could, again, be due to its non-stationary nature. ISIS on the other hand documents what goes on in their camps and then releases the footages. The same cannot be accounted for the LRA. It can be inferred that age limitations are very much a feature of the military training children received. This does not appear to be the case for IS.

### ***Conclusions & Further Research***

Child soldiering embodies a colossal security issue. From employing a deductive approach to findings presented in this thesis, it is plausible to argue that notions of childhood *and* adulthood are both contested and changing. Yet, childhood seems to frame all debates concerning children in armed conflict. The discussion ensued demonstrates two points: children should be treated as conflict stakeholders and further research is needed on unveiling the ways in which children become political and military agents. ISIS' use of child stands as a strong statement of all that is irrational and profane in warfare. But when the blasphemy dies down, the child remains, dead or alive, he or she carries an immense insight into the minds of insurgents. A comparison with the LRA highlights a few points. First, children for the LRA are sources of immediate action, reflected in recruitment by abduction. Children were not seen as 'heroes' or the 'future generation' but merely instruments of immediate survival. It implies a short-term strategy, which could infer that the group had reservations about children's potential agency. The Islamic State in contrast, sees children are part of a long-term strategy of survival. Second, a child's agency within

the LRA is largely absent. Third, it reveals that the perception of the child within the LRA is embedded in universalized notions of childhood as a period of gullibility. The LRA relied very heavily on abduction and forced recruitment due to its inability to appeal to different groups in society. ISIS has a much broader appeal, locally and globally across different groups. In light of this, IS' perception of the child is no different to the adult it recruits. The point can be made that the group is simply recruiting, with the age of the recruit being an incidental fact.

The nature of IS may serve as potential limitations of this paper. The group is still evolving, its portrayed rhetoric and changing discourse are very much dependent on current strategies and successes and failures. The research would benefit from personal interviews with former and current cubs of the caliphate; such an insight could be intriguing yet could pose serious ethical limitations.

Recruitment of children does not precede the escalation of conflict; the type of war ISIS is fighting is a recruitment catalyst. The thesis brought to life the hypothesis that children are not mere victims to conflict; they are agented political and military actors. ISIS' systematic use of children could highlight that the group does not make binary distinctions between adult and child fighters, and its mere preoccupation is to sustain itself as a functioning society-state. Such an agenda can have severe repercussions on how the group recruits, whom it recruits and how recruits are treated and controlled. Further research in this field would benefit from an extended examination of other markers of personhood aside from age, such as, gender. Other avenues of research could include a cross-case analysis of how perceptions of childhood play out in other jihadi ventures, and extent to which it matches that of IS local counterparts.



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