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Tackling the exploitation of youth by terrorist organisations

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President Chair: Sebastian Mariner
Deputy Chair: Yulia-Maria Hammoud

Introduction

The youth in our world have been the victims of constant indoctrination and radicalisation by various terrorist groups for decades, representing one of the largest threats to human rights and global peace as a whole. In a report by UNICEF conducted between 2005 and 2022, over 105,000 children were confirmed to have been used in an armed conflict as child soldiers, which is around the same amount as the population of Seychelles. These children are subject to kidnapping, forceful drug intake, and forced labour, all of these being grave violations of international law. This urgently highlights the need for protection of these victimised children, especially considering how a singular child experiences all of these torments amongst a broader pattern of suffering shared by hundreds of thousands of others.

The abuse of these adolescents does not occur just by chance; it's an oppressive system exploited by most, if not all, prominent terrorist groups. Organisations such as Boko Haram, primarily based in Nigeria, the Islamic State operating in nations situated in the Middle East, Al-Shabaab, and other micro groups situated in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa are all infamous for using abduction tactics and online grooming to recruit children, using them as disposable fodder for their terrorist activities.

This exploitation, moreover, carries long-term consequences for the child's psyche. Children unwillingly participating in terrorist organisations are often diagnosed with PTSD, unsurprisingly, as they are subjected to witnessing countless atrocities, most carried out by their own hands.

Key Terms

Child Soldiers: Individuals who are below eighteen years of age and are enlisted or utilised by terrorist or armed organisations in any role, which encompasses direct involvement in combat, logistical assistance, intelligence collection, forced labour, or sexual exploitation, irrespective of whether the recruitment was voluntary or not.

Youth Exploitation: The organised exploitation and manipulation of children and adolescents by terrorist groups occurs through coercion, ideological indoctrination, forced labour, sexual violence, or involvement in criminal and violent activities. This often takes place in environments characterised by conflict, displacement, poverty, and diminished state protection.

Terrorism vs Insurgency: Often confused with one another, the two terms are vastly different. Terrorism involves violence deliberately targeting civilians to instil fear for ideological or political goals, whereas insurgency is a broader armed campaign aimed at challenging or overthrowing state authority, often combining guerrilla warfare, governance efforts, and terrorism.

Extremist Ideology: A framework of beliefs that validates the employment of violence against non-combatants and governmental entities as a permissible or essential method for attaining political, ideological, or religious objectives, frequently depicting such violence as ethically justified or mandatory.

Radicalisation: Radicalisation is a multifaceted process whereby individuals or groups begin to embrace progressively extreme political, social, or religious ideologies, which may ultimately drive them to endorse or participate in acts of violence or terrorism.

Suicide Terrorism: A type of terrorist violence where the attacker deliberately ends their own life during an assault to enhance physical devastation, psychological effects, and symbolic importance, with countless recorded instances involving pressured or indoctrinated youths.

Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF): Individuals who venture beyond their nation of citizenship or usual place of residence to engage in terrorist acts, training, or armed conflict, which also encompasses instances where minors are recruited or transported across borders by extremist groups.

General Overview

The manner in which terrorist organisations exploit young individuals has emerged as a significant aspect of contemporary terrorism and violent extremism, especially in areas or nations plagued by conflict, ineffective governance, and a poor economy. These organisations intentionally enlist child soldiers as a component of their overarching strategies in asymmetric warfare, perceiving children as cost-effective operatives who can be easily manipulated, indoctrinated, and utilised in both combat and support roles. By employing methods such as forced recruitment or abduction, extremist factions instil their ideologies within susceptible populations, often in rural towns or villages, thereby enabling them to sustain their network while eroding governmental authority and social unity.

The pathways for recruitment are influenced by radicalisation mechanisms that integrate ideological conditioning, psychological coercion, and compulsory indoctrination. These approaches are bolstered by terrorist propaganda and narratives of martyrdom that depict violence as noble and essential “for the cause”, enhancing youth involvement in suicide bombings and other significant attacks on the population. In numerous instances, the exploitation of young individuals extends beyond mere violence, encompassing forced labour and participation in criminal enterprises, which obscures the distinctions between terrorism, organised crime, and human trafficking. Such tactics empower terrorist organisations to maintain their operations while shifting the risks onto the children they exploit.

Terrorist organisations are increasingly employing a combination of recruitment techniques that merge offline coercion with continuous online manipulation within digital “safe spaces” on encrypted social media platforms or online forums. These environments are intentionally exploited to spread terrorist propaganda, which includes graphic videos, glorified representations of violence, and executions, all aimed at desensitising viewers and reinforcing extremist ideologies. Such content is frequently framed within the organisation's moral justifications for violence, portraying participation in terrorism as both acceptable and inevitable.

This digital landscape enables violent extremists to cross borders, facilitate the mobilisation of FTFs, and radicalise individuals who are distant from conventional conflict zones. The magnitude, velocity, and anonymity of these online environments empower terrorist groups to indoctrinate youth with minimal oversight, embedding extremist and harmful perspectives at an early age and bolstering the long-term resilience of these terrorist networks.

Major Parties Involved

Islamic State (ISIS): During its control over territories in Iraq and Syria, ISIS implemented a recruitment system for children through structured training initiatives, naming them the "Cubs of the Caliphate." Children were forcibly removed from their families, exposed to extreme violence, and conditioned to view executions, punishments, and participation in combat as commonplace. Youth were deployed in frontline combat, tasked with managing checkpoints, collecting intelligence, and executing suicide missions. Even after the organisation lost its territorial dominance, the effects of this systematic indoctrination continue to affect children who were raised under ISIS governance, particularly in contexts of displacement.

Al-Shabaab: The terrorist group known as Al-Shabaab, Arabic for "The Youth", mainly operates within Somalia; however, it also conducts sporadic assaults in neighbouring Kenya and across the wider Horn of Africa. The group relies significantly on the coercive recruitment of youth from areas with limited governmental authority, an increasingly easy task considering the everchanging unstable government. Al-Shabaab primarily utilises intimidation tactics, inflicting or threatening violence on relatives, and imposing rigorous ideological indoctrination to secure a steady influx of combatants and enforcers. The manipulation of young people is essential for Al-Shabaab to uphold its territorial dominance and carry out an extended insurgency.

Boko Haram: Boko Haram primarily functions in northeastern Nigeria; however, its influence extends across the broader Lake Chad Basin, encompassing Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. This organisation has established a notorious reputation for being among the most egregious violators in the exploitation of youth, employing mass abductions and intimidation tactics to procure children for their operations. They particularly focus on schools, villages, and displacement camps, which not only disrupt educational opportunities but also foster environments where children experience vulnerability to manipulation. Boys are frequently compelled into combat roles, surveillance tasks, and suicide missions, whereas girls are subjected to forced marriages, sexual violence, domestic servitude, and, at times, are utilised with explosives. The exploitation of young individuals is not merely a byproduct but a key component of Boko Haram's strategy, enabling them to sustain their ranks, instil fear within local populations, and perpetuate their insurgency through continuous violence and dominance over the regions in which they operate.

Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP): AQAP primarily operates in Yemen, a region afflicted by persistent conflict, state disintegration, and consistent humanitarian crisis, creating conditions that facilitate the exploitation of youth. The group has recruited children for diverse roles, mainly combat and checkpoint management, often drawing recruits from local communities grappling with displacement and poverty. These minors undergo similar ongoing ideological indoctrination and military-level training, which integrates them into prolonged terrorist efforts rather than merely short-term tasks.

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM): JNIM operates across the Sahel region, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where weak governance and ongoing insecurity create opportunities for the exploitation of youth. The organisation recruits children using societal influence, especially effective in nations in the Sahel with a traditional culture, assigning them to carry out physical attacks. Alongside this, numerous reports state that JNIM sexually exploits its female recruits, a trait not unique from other terrorist organisations.

Ansar Allah (Houthis): Houthis, known officially as Ansar Allah, are a Zaydi Shia Islamist extremist group, being the most prominent and dangerous military organisation situated in Yemen. Currently, they control the capital Sana'a and a majority of what used to be considered "North Yemen," before its unification with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1990. The Houthis have been fighting Yemen's government since 2004, being backed by Iran ever since the escalation of the Yemen civil war in 2014, with reports concluding that over 10,000 children have been recruited by them. Ansar Allah gained the Houthi nickname due to its founding family name being Houthi, specifically Abdulmalik al-Houthi and his father, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, who led early rebellions against Yemen's government.

Nigeria: The exploitation of the youth in Nigeria has been an issue plaguing the nation, even in the Biafran War, as children as young as 10 were used in reconnaissance missions, with Boko Haram being the key actor in youth exploitation nowadays. Armed groups in Nigeria recruit and utilise child soldiers due to various contributing factors. Financial incentives are attractive to members of a nation's population living below the poverty line, which makes recruitment especially easier in Nigeria. Moreover, the Almajiri system prevalent in Northern Nigeria places children outside of school, vulnerable to the influence of Boko Haram, an organisation closely aligned with the Almajiri system. Despite increasing security in Northern Nigeria, amongst other implemented security protocols, the issue persists. This remains true even with collaborative efforts between the United Nations and the Nigerian government to address the situation.

Somalia: Somalia's terrorist groups are infamous for their use of child-soldiers, with the nation having been reported to have used over 1.1k children for insurgency purposes, the number being believed to be much higher. Al-Shabaab is the main contributor to this grave violation of human rights, utilising child soldiers to fight against the Transitional Federal Government, a "war" that has been ongoing since the early 2000s.

Yemen: Yemen's prolonged civil war has brought countless children into the fray. The Human Rights Watch has reported that Houthi rebels have recruited minors as young as 13 into the terrorist organisation. Furthermore, ever since the start of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Houthis have begun exploiting the atrocities carried out by Israel by calling for people to be ready to "fight for Palestine." Recent reports by the UN have indicated that child soldier recruitment has increased exponentially since the attacks by Hamas on October 7th 2023, even though Houthis have utilised children in their groups since 2009.

Timeline of Key Events

1977-1979: The use of child soldiers gained international attention during conflicts in Southeast Asia and Africa, laying the groundwork for later recognition of child recruitment as a serious violation of international law.

1979: The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan contributed to the rise of jihadist movements, normalising the involvement of youth in armed struggle and setting a precedent for later extremist recruitment practices.

1988: Al-Qaeda is founded by Osama bin Laden, promoting a transnational jihadist ideology that would later influence the recruitment and indoctrination of young people across multiple conflict zones.

1996-2001: The Taliban consolidates control over much of Afghanistan, enforcing strict ideological rule and exposing children to militarisation, indoctrination, and participation in armed conflict.

2001: The September 11 attacks prompt the US-led War on Terror, leading to prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq that increase instability and expose children to exploitation by terrorist and insurgent groups.

2003: The US-led invasion of Iraq destabilised the region, creating conditions that allowed extremist groups to recruit youth amid violence, displacement, and weakened state institutions.

2009: Boko Haram intensifies its insurgency in northeastern Nigeria, increasingly relying on mass abductions and forced recruitment of children for combat, suicide attacks, and forced labour.

2011: The Arab Spring uprisings led to state collapse and prolonged conflict in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, significantly increasing the vulnerability of children to exploitation by terrorist and armed groups.

2014: ISIS captures Mosul and declares a caliphate in Iraq and Syria, institutionalising child recruitment through structured training programmes and publicly deploying children in combat and executions.

2015: Al-Shabaab carries out the Garissa University attack in Kenya, underscoring the group's regional reach and its sustained recruitment of youth to support long-term insurgency in the Horn of Africa.

2017: The United Nations adopts Security Council Resolution 2396, addressing returning and relocating foreign terrorist fighters, including concerns related to children associated with terrorist groups.

2019: The fall of Baghouz marks the territorial defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, though thousands of children formerly associated with the group remain displaced, detained, or exposed to continued exploitation.

2020: The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates poverty, school closures, and instability in fragile states, increasing children's vulnerability to recruitment and exploitation by terrorist organisations.

2021: The Taliban regains control of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of international forces, raising renewed concerns about youth exposure to militarisation and ideological indoctrination.

2023-2024: Terrorist groups increasingly rely on coercive recruitment, indoctrination, and exploitation of youth in conflict-affected regions, reinforcing the long-term security risks posed by child involvement in terrorism.

UN Involvement & Relevant Resolutions

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE): The UN emphasises addressing the root cause of extremism, such as poverty, inequality and lack of education, through its PVE programs.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Previous attempts to tackle the exploitation of young individuals by terrorist groups have predominantly been integrated into wider counterterrorism frameworks aimed at violent non-state entities. These strategies have included military actions, international partnerships, legislative changes, and humanitarian assistance; an example of these efforts is:

1. Military Interventions and Counterinsurgency Campaigns
 - a. The War on Terror, led by the United States and commenced in 2001 after the attacks on September 11, aimed at dismantling significant Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) like al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Although it achieved the disruption of critical leadership frameworks and recruitment channels, it also led to extended conflicts and considerable civilian losses, which in certain areas fostered increased animosity and further radicalisation among the youth.
 - b. France's Operation Barkhane in the Sahel region focused on extremist factions such as AQIM and ISGS through collaborative military initiatives with African countries. Despite some initial successes, the operation made limited long-term advancements, underscoring the enduring presence of VNSAs and their ongoing capacity to recruit young individuals in regions marked by instability.

2. International Coalitions and Partnerships
 - a. The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, which includes over eighty nations, has synchronised military actions, imposed financial sanctions, and launched counter-propaganda initiatives to eradicate ISIS's territorial dominance in Iraq and Syria. While the coalition succeeded in dismantling ISIS's physical caliphate, the organisation adapted by transitioning its recruitment efforts online, persistently targeting vulnerable youth worldwide.
 - b. Regional coalitions such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) have endeavoured to eradicate al-Shabaab, successfully reclaiming significant territories. Nevertheless, constraints in resources and ongoing instability have obstructed efforts to prevent the group from exploiting children and adolescents.

Possible solutions

To effectively address the exploitation of young individuals by terrorist organisations, solutions must extend beyond mere reactive military measures and emphasise long-term prevention strategies. The subsequent approaches enhance current international frameworks while specifically targeting the vulnerabilities that extremist groups take advantage of.

1. Education and Prevention Programmes

- a. Member States, in cooperation with UNESCO and UNICEF, should implement school-based programmes that promote critical thinking, media literacy, and awareness of extremist recruitment tactics. These initiatives help young people identify propaganda and resist radicalisation.
- b. Community-led youth forums and extracurricular programmes can provide safe spaces for dialogue, allowing young people to express grievances constructively rather than through violent extremism.

2. Socio-Economic Development and Youth Empowerment

- a. Governments, supported by international development agencies, should invest in youth employment schemes, vocational training, and access to education in high-risk regions. Reducing unemployment and poverty weakens the appeal of terrorist groups that promise income and purpose.
- b. Targeted development projects in conflict-affected and marginalised Communities can strengthen social inclusion and reduce the sense of alienation that extremist organisations exploit.

3. Online Safety and Counter-Radicalisation Measures

- a. Member States should cooperate with technology companies to remove extremist content rapidly and disrupt online recruitment networks, particularly on social media and encrypted platforms.
- b. The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism can coordinate global counter-narrative campaigns that promote peaceful alternatives and expose the realities of extremist involvement, using credible voices such as former extremists and community leaders.

4. Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Affected Youth

- a. States should establish deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes for children and adolescents who have been recruited or influenced by terrorist groups, combining psychological support, education, and family reunification.
- b. Treating exploited youth as victims rather than solely as security threats reduces stigma and lowers the risk of re-radicalisation, contributing to long-term stability.

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